Henry James on a Visit

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IT CAN BE said of Henry James that he was made both miserable and happy by the same thing, namely, that he was a mere spectator who barely participated in life, or, at least, not in its most striking and exciting aspects. On the other hand, he led for many years the most intense and demanding of social lives, so much so that in one season alone, 1878–79, he received (and accepted) precisely one hundred and forty dinner invitations. This was the era when no first night or party was blighted by his absence.

He spent the greater part of the last eighteen years of his life, however, at Lamb House, his country residence in Rye, not that he exactly lacked for company there either: to his four servants, gardener, and secretary were added numerous visitors throughout the seasons, albeit in orderly and unpromiscuous fashion, for he never had more than two guests at a time. Nearby lived a few fellow writers, such as Joseph Conrad and Ford Madox Ford, whose surname at the time was still Hueffer. James had little to do with the first of these, because, although he admired his work, he remained dissatisfied with the man, mainly because "at bottom" he was a Pole, a Roman Catholic, a Romantic, and a Slav pessimist. However, when they did meet, they spoke with great ceremony and admiration and always in French; every thirty seconds James would exclaim "*Mon cher confrère!*" to which Conrad would respond with equal frequency "*Mon cher maître!*" As for Ford or Hueffer, who was much younger than James, they saw each other almost constantly, according to the former, but this may have been rather more often than James wanted: there is objective evidence that, on one occasion, when out with his secretary, James jumped over a ditch in order to avoid an encounter on the road to Rye, where Hueffer used to wait for him to pass.

Henry James was a large man, verging on the obese, completely bald and with terrifying eyes, so penetrating and intelligent that the servants of some of the houses he visited would tremble when they opened the door to him, convinced that they were being pierced through to the very backbone. His bald head made him look like a theologian and his eyes like a wizard. And yet he was always highly circumspect and slightly humorous in his dealings with other people, as if he were deliberately imitating Pickwick. If something bothered him, though, he could be unbelievably cruel and momentarily vindictive, albeit only verbally. Those close to him remember that only rarely did his English become brutal and direct, but they never forgot those rare occasions. On the whole, he spoke as he wrote, which sometimes led him to exasperating extremes, exacerbated by his habit, during his final years, of dictating his novels. The simplest question addressed to a servant would take a minimum of three minutes to formulate, such was his linguistic punctiliousness and his horror of inexactitude and error. In his zeal for clarity, his speech became utterly oblique and obscure, and, on one occasion, when referring to a dog, and wishing to avoid the actual word, he ended up defining it as "something black, something canine." He found himself equally unable to declare that an actress was frankly ugly, and had to make do with saying that "one of the poor wantons had a certain cadaverous grace."

He spoke with so many interpolations and parentheses that this occasionally got him into difficulties. One afternoon, he went out for a walk along the Rye road, as was his custom, with Hueffer and another writer and with his dog Maximilian, who liked to chase sheep and who was, for this reason, kept on a very long lead to allow him considerable freedom of movement. At one point, in order to conclude one particularly immense sentence with due emphasis, James stopped and planted his walking stick firmly in the ground, and in that position held forth for a long time while his companions listened in reverential silence, and the dog Maximilian, running back and forth and about as the fancy took him, wound his lead around the walking stick and the gentlemen's legs, leaving them trapped. The Master finished his speech and wanted to continue on his way, but found himself immobilized. When he did, with some difficulty, extricate himself, he turned, eyes blazing, to Hueffer, reproachfully brandished his walking stick, and cried: "Hueffer! You are painfully young, but at no more than the age to which you have attained, the playing of such tricks is an imbecility! An im...be...cility!"

Apart from these rare fits of rage, James was a person who was renowned for his impeccable manners and for never putting a foot wrong. He spoke with the same urbanity and—always—in the same circumlocutory fashion to diplomats and chimney sweeps, and felt infinite curiosity about whatever happened to pass before his eyes. Perhaps that is why he invited confidence, and while in Rye he certainly never scorned village gossip. He listened ceaselessly and talked ceaselessly too: he even heard the confession of a murderer, and once gave a lecture on hats to Conrad's five-year-old son, who had, in all innocence, asked him about the unusual shape of the hat James himself was wearing.

When he was immersed in one of his novels, he could be very forgetful and it would entirely slip his mind that he had guests for lunch until they were there waiting for him, sitting round the table; but he was extremely careful and exacting when it came to the rules of hospitality, which is why, with him, the real danger lay not in being his guest, but in being his host, since, basing himself on the attentions he received or on the atmosphere of a house, he would draw definitive conclusions which his imagination would subsequently embellish. Thus, for example, while he admired Turgenev both as a writer and a man (he viewed him as little less than a prince), he always hated Flaubert for having once received himself and Turgenev in his dressing gown. It seems it was more like some sort of work garment, known in French at the time as a *chandail*, and this was probably Flaubert's way of honoring them and admitting them into the privacy of his home. For James, however, it was indubitably a dressing gown, and he never forgave him: indeed, Flaubert became for him a man who did *everything* in a dressing gown, and his books were consequently deemed to be failures, apart from *Madame Bovary*, which James conceded might have been written while Flaubert was wearing a waistcoat. Exactly the same mistake was made by the poet and painter Rossetti, who received him in his painting garb, which, for James, was tantamount to receiving him in a dressing gown. And to receive someone thus was a dishonor that revealed the soul of the perpetrator: this fact led James to infer that Rossetti had disgusting habits, never took baths, and was insupportably lecherous. He probably breakfasted on greasy ham and undercooked eggs. Equally lacking in cordiality was an encounter with Oscar Wilde, whom he met in America, where the aesthetic apostle was staying. When James happened to mention that he was missing London, Wilde looked at him scornfully and called him provincial, saying: "Really! You care for *places!*" And he added tritely: "The world is my home!" From then on, James referred to him variously as "an unclean beast," "a fatuous fool" or "a tenth-rate cad." On the other hand, his enthusiasm for Maupassant knew no bounds, again thanks to a single visit: the French short-story writer had received him for lunch in the society of a naked lady wearing a mask. This struck James as the height of refinement, especially when Maupassant informed him that she was no mere courtesan, prostitute, servant, or actress, but a *femme du monde*, which James was perfectly happy to believe.

As everyone knows, his relationships with women, for whatever reason, and several have been suggested, were wellnigh nonexistent. Sex, however, does not appear to have been a matter of complete indifference to him, even though there is almost no explicit reference to it in his books, for when alone with certain people, he thought nothing of enquiring shamelessly and without recourse to euphemism about the most tortuous of sexual aberrations. For many years, he made it clear that he would never marry: on the one hand, and despite having lived in England for forty years, he thought the idea of taking a British wife ridiculous; on the other hand, as he said to a friend when discussing marriage: "I am both happy and miserable enough, as it is, and don't wish to add to either side of the account." According to him, marriage was not a necessity, but the ultimate and most expensive of luxuries. Women had, it seems, given him a few griefs and heartaches. On one occasion, he described to a friend, in serious and enigmatic fashion, how, in his youth, in a foreign city, he had stood for hours in the rain keeping watch on a window, waiting for a figure to appear, or perhaps a face left unlit by the lamp that gleamed for a second and was then extinguished forever. "That was the end...," said James, and broke off. And when Hueffer announced that he was going to America and would be visiting Newport, Rhode Island, he asked him to take a stroll to a particular cliff and there render homage, on his behalf, to the place where he had seen for the last time and bade farewell to his now dead cousin whom, when he was a very young man, he should have married.

Those who knew him remember him as a bright, alert man, restless, nervous, gesticulating and, at the same time, slow and deliberate. In whatever he did or said he was prudent but not cautious; that is, he found it hard to resolve to do something, but once he did—for example, when he was writing—he was unstoppable. While he was dictating his books, he would pace up and down, and when he ate alone, he would often leave the table and pace the dining room as he chewed his food. He very much liked being driven in a car and erroneously believed that he both knew the area well and was blessed with an excellent sense of direction, which led him and the indulgent owners of various cars to arrive late and exhausted at their destinations, having taken endless and unnecessary detours under the guidance of Henry James. He almost never spoke about his own works, but lavished great care on his library, which he himself dusted with a silk handkerchief. He did not understand why his books did not sell better than they did, although *Daisy Miller* was very nearly a best-seller. His friend Edith Wharton once asked their joint publisher to pay her far larger royalties into James's account. James never found out.

Henry James died on the evening of 28 February 1916, at the age of seventy-two, after a long illness during which he suffered attacks of delirium: one day he dictated two letters as if he were Napoleon, one of them addressed to his brother Joseph Bonaparte, urging him to accept the throne of Spain. Months before, after the first such attack, he was able, on recovering, to describe how, when he fell to the floor believing he was dying, he had heard in the room a voice not his own saying: "So it has come at last—the Distinguished Thing!" □

(Translated from the Spanish by Margaret Jull Costa)

Editor's Note: Through a combination of chance and will, we are publishing three articles on Henry James in three successive issues. Sven Birkerts wrote about him for the Summer 2004 issue; Javier Marías writes about him here; and Cynthia Ozick will write about him in the next issue. It is chance that has led three such noteworthy and disparate writers to send us pieces about James within the same year, but it is will—if not, as some might say, willfulness—that causes us to publish all three in a row, with no particular reason or occasion except our undying affection for the works of Henry James.