Journal: Essays in Criticism

Article id: cgs021

Article title: Henry James as a Comic Writer

First Author: Bernard Richards

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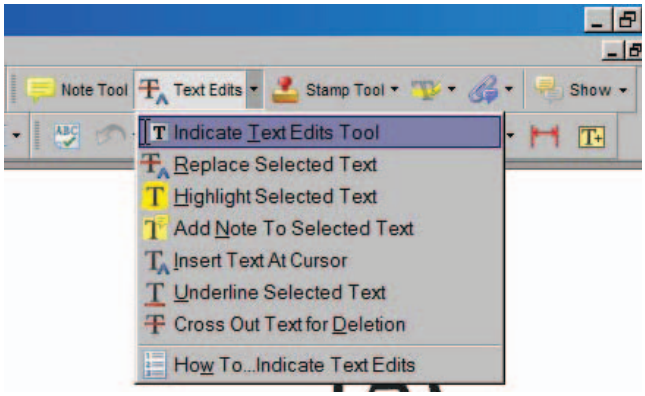

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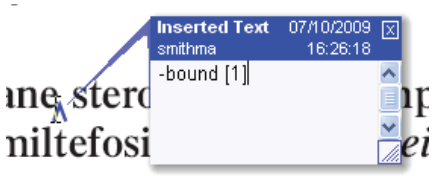

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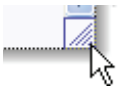

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Henry James as a Comic Writer

BERNARD RICHARDS Q1

A NUMBER OF TIMES STEPHEN WALL told me about his favourite bit in James. It is in *English Hours*, and describes a young man in Warwickshire talking to a girl:

> 'I suppose it's pretty big,' said the beautiful girl. 'Yes; it's pretty big,' said the handsome young man. 'It's nicer when they are big,' said his interlocutress. The young man looked at her, and at everything in general, with his slowly apprehending blue eye, and for some time no further remark was made. 'It draws ten feet of water,' he at last went on. 'How much water is there?' said the young girl. She spoke in a charming voice. 'There are thirty feet of water,' said the young man. 'Oh, that's enough,' rejoined the damsel. I had an idea they were flirting, and perhaps indeed that is the way it is done.[1]

Stephen's sense of timing as he told this story was memorable. It is, then, appropriate to write as a tribute to him an essay on James as a comic writer.

There have been a number of studies on James's comedy, but in their tendency to focus on comic shape often they do not pay sufficient attention to the local elements which make one laugh.[2] I should like to indicate, quite simply, James's capacity to make the ordinary reader laugh. Criticism of James neglects this aspect, and much of it conveys the misleading impression that James is nothing other than a solemn mandarin. Thomas Hardy is wildly wrong when he confides to his journal (14 May 1915) that James hasn't any humour: 'It is remarkable

Essays in Criticism Vol. 00 No. 00

doi: 10.1093/escrit/cgs021

that a writer who has no grain of poetry, or humour, or spontaneity in his productions can yet be a good novelist'. This leads one to suppose that in certain areas Hardy was the critical equivalent of tone deaf, as, when it comes to James, many modern critics also seem to be. James himself regarded the lack of a sense of humour as an artistic deficiency. Typical is his reaction to Zola: he has an 'extraordinary absence of humour, the dryness, the solemnity, the air of tension and effort'.[3] Absence of humour, in the end, compromises the air of reality. In *The Bostonians* there is a black mark against Olive Chancellor: 'she was a woman without laughter; exhilaration, if it ever visited her, was dumb' (i. 21).[4] In 'The Private Life' Clare Vawdrey is criticised because his mind is not flexible: 'he apparently never even reflected' (p. 195). The narrator 'never heard him utter a paradox, or express a shade, or play with an idea' (p. 196). To do so requires a sense of humour.

What I should like to do is to indicate those details which get overlooked or forgotten in the standardised critical discourse about James. (In the accepted notions of what 'The Beast in the Jungle' is all about, for example, this tart vignette at Weatherend disappears: 'There were persons to be observed, singly or in couples, bending toward objects in out-of-the-way corners with their hands on their knees and their heads nodding quite as with the emphasis of an excited sense of smell' (p. 55). The range of humour one finds in James is very wide. He is capable, as were many nineteenth century novelists, of writing like Dickens: of producing comic grotesques, with weird idiolects and nightmarishly distorted bodies and physiognomies. Mr Carteret in *The Tragic Muse* is a Dickensian character (but human too) with his over-sized tea-cups, door-handles, legs of mutton, lumps of coal, strawberries, and watch. His sister Urania Lendon is 'one of the solid conveniences that a comfortable house would have, but you couldn't talk with a mahogany sofa or a folding screen' (ii. 134). Not far off Twemlow and the added leaves to the Veneering dining-table in *Our Mutual Friend*. James is capable, as was Dickens, of looking at human beings as if no one had looked at them before, as if there were no agreed code as to how they should be described. There is the case of Mrs Luna's gloves in *The Bostonians*:

> Mrs. Luna was drawing on her gloves; Ransom had never seen any that were so long; they reminded him of stockings, and he wondered how she managed without garters above the elbow. (i. 7)

And in *The Tragic Muse*, Mr Carteret's nurses, 'who, with their black uniforms and fresh faces of business, suggested the barmaid emulating the nun' (ii. 135), and a simile for the electors of Harsh that anticipates the Martian poets: 'They looked like an enormous sofa, with the cheeks for the gathers and the eyes for the buttons' (i. 216). Such surrealistic observations are just the kind of the thing Dickens could have made. A key text here is *What Maisie Knew*, where the use of the child's perspective is very Dickensian (mediated, admittedly, through the consciousness of a canny adult narrator, which is what also happens in Dickens):

> The next moment she was on her mother's breast, where, amid a wilderness of trinkets, she felt as if she had suddenly been thrust into a jeweller's shop-front. (p. 120)

This whole essay could easily be taken up exclusively with a close study of this novel.

In James's early years in Europe the freshness of the scene observed through the eyes of an alien compelled comic reactions, and when after being away for six years he returned to America in October 1881 something similar happened, hence the vividness of so much of *The Bostonians*, where the ridiculous is brought into sharp focus. (There are times when his rhetorical stance is reminiscent of Mark Twain's innocents abroad, although James was reluctant to adopt the infuriating and fully fledged philistinism of his humorous compatriot.) But I am not sure that these examples take us to the centre of gravity, or rather levity, of James's humour. The real centre is probably stylistic. It arises from his detachment, from his fresh sense of foreignness, but also from his persistent reflexiveness on the nature of language. He was reluctant to use language in an unexamined mode, aware that it was a treacherous and inadequate instrument to realise all of its noble and functional aims, especially in highly

advanced societies, and capable of as much grotesque deformation and frustrated functionalism as the human grotesques in Dickens. James was as sympathetic as any civilised man to the necessity for pretences, evasions, and suppressions in the interests of maintaining order and smoothness, but he could not help alluding to them. He was sympathetic, overall, to the euphemistic impulse, but could not help mocking it, and making comic capital out of the disjunction between polite appearance and down-to-earth and banal reality. Like other humourists, he liked the comic interplay between concrete and abstract ideas, which one might normally expect to be kept apart and delimited. Mrs Tarrant's family 'gave her husband to understand that, much as they desired to remove the shackles from the slave, there were kinds of behaviour which struck them as too unfettered' (*Bostonians*, i. 85). There is a very witty play here between the concrete and the abstract. This is something we encounter often in James, as in the cross-purposes conversation in *The Ambassadors* when Strether speaks of a figurative scent, and Waymarsh assumes it is the smell of a woman they are talking about (i. 93). He is like one of those Americans in John Fowles's *Daniel Martin* who don't understand nuance, or like one of those people Madame Carré refers to for whom 'shades don't exist' (*Tragic Muse*, i. 171). There are plenty of funny cross-purpose moments in James: when Nick Dormer thinks Mrs Gresham is talking about the 'great unwritten' British constitution, but she is actually talking about Julia Dallow's constitution (*Tragic Muse*, i. 228). In 'The Great Good Place', Lady Mullet is 'so awfully bent'; and the butler asks, '"Is she – a – deformed sir?"' (p. 200). It turns out she is 'bent on coming'; and yet this bit of fun sits in a story which, at the end, brings tears to one's eyes.

He is fond of syllepsis, which exposes the slipperiness of language. In 'A London Life': 'the room was deluged with her [Selina Berrington's] repentance, her desolation, her confession, her vain vows and the articles of apparel detached from her and that might have been floating out to sea' (p. 332). That is comic and yet it occurs in a scene of high drama. A good deal of James's humour comes under the heading of 'foregrounding' – as elements in language are exposed in this way. In *The*

Bostonians Mrs Farrinder's project is outlined: 'the ends she laboured for were to give the ballot to every woman in the country and to take the flowing bowl from every man' (i. 35). Temperance and electoral reform are neatly and amusingly balanced between giving on the one hand and taking away on the other. 'The flowing bowl' does not have quotation marks round it, but in the reader's imagination it has them, as an example of the poetic and rhetorical cliché which James stands to one side of. James is very good at interrogating clichés, so that an issue identified by the political cant phrase 'burning question' can easily burn itself out (*Tragic Muse*, i. 75). The term 'foregrounding' did not exist in James's time, but when Gabriel Nash uses the phrase 'reflective expression' (i. 154) – which he believes goes back to Palaeolithic times – we see that he and his character entertain something like the concept.

Then there is the conceit, for which James is famous. In poetry the conceit is often associated with the cerebral and witty, and it is vulnerable to the danger that its operation might become autonomous, freed almost from the world to create mini-fantasy, often whimsical and amusing. There are many examples of this in James, as in the initial description of Miss Birdseye in *The Bostonians*: 'The waves of sympathy, of enthusiasm, had wrought upon [her features] in the same way in which the waves of time finally modify the surface of old marble busts, gradually washing away their sharpness, their details' (i. 31) Not a belly-laugh, but it does produce a smirk of wry recognition, and it is poetic, in the way that Yeats's shell 'washed by time's waters as they rose and fell' is poetic ('Adam's Curse'), even if in James the poeticality is qualified.

James likes the collision between violent and vulgar action and a measured, analytical way of describing it. This was a tradition going back a long way in English literature; eighteenth century novelists such as Fielding and Smollett relished it as a device. *The Princess Casamassima* provides a typical instance when Hyacinth in a theatre queue 'imagined himself more easily routing some hulking adversary by an exquisite application of the retort courteous than by flying at him with a pair of very small fists' (i. 165-6). (There is also a witty allusion to *As You Like It* here.)

Of all his novels, *The Europeans* contains the most easily accessible humour, demonstrating some of James's favourite comic devices. The action opens on 12 May in Boston, during a dull, moist snowfall. Felix and his sister are looking out of the window of their hotel:

> From time to time a strange vehicle drew near to the place where they stood – such a vehicle as the lady at the window, in spite of a considerable acquaintance with human inventions, had never seen before: a huge, low omnibus, painted in brilliant colours, and decorated apparently with jingling bells, attached to a species of groove in the pavement, through which it was dragged, with a great deal of rumbling, bouncing, and scratching, by a couple of remarkably small horses. When it reached a certain point the people in front of the grave-yard, of whom much the greater number were women, carrying satchels and parcels, projected themselves upon it in a compact body – a movement suggesting the scramble for places in a life-boat at sea – and were engulfed in its large interior. Then the life-boat – or the life-car, as the lady at the window of the hotel vaguely designated it – went bumping and jingling away upon its invisible wheels, with the helmsman (the man at the wheel) guiding its course incongruously from the prow. (pp. 2-3)

This is what one might call *Gulliver's Travels* or *Lettres Persanes* humour – the observer is put down in a strange land, and looks at a scene as a complete innocent, his eyes untainted by years of use. This capacity for fresh and innocent registering is something children also have, but of course they themselves are unable to recognise that they are being amusing: an adult consciousness needs to be standing by to register it. In this passage James enjoys a sort of stylistic *joie de vivre* in expanding the conceit of the lifeboat. There is also what may be called the humour of collision, where one world with its standards and manners bumps violently into another that is proceeding in a quite different way. Sometimes a third onlooker is needed to appreciate the comedy: often in James's case it is a kind of implied cosmopolite,

a dweller on a mythical island somewhere in the mid-Atlantic. Felix does a sketch of the scene as he sees it:

> It was a bold expressive sketch of a group of miserable people on the deck of a steamer, clinging together and clutching at each other, while the vessel lurched downward, at a terrific angle, into the hollow of a wave. It was extremely clever, and full of a sort of tragi-comical power. (p. 8)

He says, 'I shall call it – what is that line in Keats? – "Mid-May's Eldest Child!"'. The scene irritates and annoys the Baroness, but it appeals to Felix, whose presence in this novel is mainly responsible for generating the infectious and pervasive charm it has. He is one of the most attractive of the careless and lightweight figures who have ever strolled genially and appreciatively through a novel, a sort of happy Will Ladislaw. His appearance gives him away: 'fair-haired, clear-faced, witty-looking, with a delicate finish of feature and an expression at once urbane and not at all serious'. He does not take America hard: 'He had called it a comical country, and he went about laughing at everything he saw. You would have said that American civilization expressed itself to his sense in a tissue of capital jokes' (p. 11). One of the jokes is that snow should fall on 12 May. Another is that a road out in the country resembles 'one of the Alpine glaciers reproduced in mud' (p. 34). His pictorial sense of things makes him very tolerant, and his ability to produce a conceited comparison is most engaging. The narrative voice colludes with him, as in this instance where his view of the difference between European and American women is summarised:

> He had known, fortunately, many virtuous gentlewomen, but it now appeared to him that in his relations with them (especially when they were unmarried) he had been looking at pictures under glass. He perceived at present what a nuisance the glass had been – how it perverted and interfered, how it caught the reflexion of other objects and kept you walking from side to side. He had no need to ask himself whether Charlotte and Gertrude, and Lizzie

> Acton, were in the right light; they were always in the right light. (p. 34)

The Baroness too, when she wants, is capable of such amused appreciation. Only her maid, Augustine, insists on stubbornly maintaining a dour European view of things:

> Augustine, indeed, who had an unbounded faith in her mistress's wisdom and far-sightedness, was a great deal perplexed and depressed. She was always ready to take her cue when she understood it; but she liked to understand it, and on this occasion comprehension failed. What, indeed, was the Baroness doing *dans cette galère*? The game was evidently a deep one. Augustine could trust her, but the sense of walking in the dark betrayed itself in the physiognomy of this spare, sober, sallow, middle-aged person, who had nothing in common with Gertrude Wentworth's conception of a soubrette, by the most ironical scowl that had ever rested upon the unpretending tokens of the peace and plenty of the Wentworths. (p. 59)

There is a splendidly reproduced debate between Felix and Mr Wentworth on the subject of a portrait (pp. 72-3), and there is an excellent little drama of surprise when Felix and Mr Wentworth are discussing Clifford's vice (p. 107). Felix imagines they are speaking of sexual peccadilloes, but it turns out that Clifford drinks, a passage which actually makes many readers laugh out loud. What is nice about *The Europeans* is that James is not savage and angry and destructive; he is charmed and appreciative: the reader is invited to share in the generous openness of Felix faced with his new American cousins, who are living in a kind of prelapsarian Arcadia.

The Europeans is a hospitable novel for comedy, but comedy is not excluded from a work as serious, almost tragic even, as *The Portrait of a Lady*. There is Lord Warburton's brother:

> Her host's brother, the Vicar, had come to luncheon, and Isabel had had five minutes' talk with him – time enough to institute a search for a rich ecclesiasticism and give it up

> as vain. The marks of the Vicar of Lockleigh were a big, athletic figure, a candid, natural countenance, a capacious appetite and a tendency to indiscriminate laughter. Isabel learned afterwards from her cousin that before taking orders he had been a mighty wrestler and that he was still, on occasion – in the privacy of the family circle as it were – quite capable of flooring his man. Isabel liked him – she was in the mood for liking everything; but imagination was a good deal taxed to think of him as a source of spiritual aid. (i. 96)

This is the first and last time we see him. He gives us a glimpse of an England in which a bishop, one of Kingsley's muscular Christians, might spend as much time in the gym as in the pulpit. One encounters Parisian expatriates, one of whom is Mr Luce:

> a tall, lean, grizzled, well-brushed gentleman who wore a gold eye-glass and carried his hat a little too much on the back of his head … Occasionally he dined with a friend or two at the Café Anglais, where his talent for ordering a dinner was a source of felicity to his companions and an object of admiration even to the head waiter of the establishment. (i. 267-8)

In one way this is James providing us (and his original American readers) with the rich textural density of the English scene. In another, he is showing the kind of society which Isabel might have to join if she married Lord Warburton. The narrative style here sums him up, though, in a more arch manner than Isabel Archer would be capable of at this point in her career. We cannot imagine her articulating, either to her private consciousness or to a friend, the sentiment: 'I don't quite see him as a source of spiritual aid'. How are we to view elements such as these? In some sense they are perhaps comic relief: James wants to vary the mood and does not want his novel to be solemn all the way through. But they also represent a point of view – an urbane, knowing approach to Europe which the narrative voice possesses, and which he expects his readers to come to share with him. This is the narrative voice which could, if it is

wished, be highly critical about Isabel, but it is held under control, since it emanates from a creator who was in love with the original person behind Isabel, and indeed is in love with Isabel too. The spirit of criticism has to be held in abeyance.

But the spirit of criticism is not suspended when he comes to treat Aunt Lydia. She is very nearly a comic grotesque. Gradually we begin to catch a glimpse of an alarming prospect: that actually this form of narrowing expatriation, which can turn people into monstrous grotesques, might lie in wait for Isabel if she is not careful. There is a telling moment when Daniel Touchett recognises that Isabel reminds him of the way his wife was when she was 'in her teens' (i. 65). When Isabel is set to stay up late at night talking to the men her aunt puts her right: '"Young girls here – in decent houses – don't sit alone with the gentlemen late at night." Isabel retorts: "I always want to know the things one shouldn't do." "So as to do them?" asked her aunt. "So as to choose" said Isabel' (i. 82). Here we are just about laughing *at* Isabel rather than *with* her: she has that innocent self-confidence, partly based on ignorance of the ways of the world, which is charming, and does invite appreciative and tender laughter rather than the critical and destructive kind.

The Reverberator (1888), not an especially well-known novel, contains no shortage of amusing touches. James has a good ear for grotesque speech, and reproduces it as accurately as Kingsley Amis. 'A person with a delicate ear might have suspected Mr. Dosson of a tendency to "setting"': 'sitting', that is (p. 5). He has his Americans, to the despair of the French, say 'Parus' for Paris. And he has a German waiter say, 'Oh, you'll be better there than in the zalon – they've villed it with their luccatch' (p. 187). As with Amis, it looks as funny on the page as it sounds. There's a running joke right the way through the novel that the Dossons are staying in a hotel called the Hôtel de l'Univers et de Cheltenham. There's a very good moment when Delia writes 'So sorry!' on a card 'almost with the legibility of print' (p. 107). Mr Probert maintains that 'England was a country with the straw down in all the thoroughfares of talk' (p. 89), an image so ingenious that it makes one smile. (Straw was typically put down in the streets outside the windows of invalids, so that they should not suffer from the noise of

vehicles.) Another vivid image has Gaston Probert describe the hard American light as 'too much like the scratching of a slate-pencil' (p. 175). James does not go to excess in evoking the collision of cultures, but he presents any number of wry and sharp notes. There's a very amusing moment when the discussion of Charles Waterlow and Gaston Probert on the subject of Francie Dosson is described: 'You would have gathered from their conversation – though as regards much of it only perhaps with the aid of a grammar and dictionary – that the young lady had been endowed with plastic treasures, that is with physical graces, of the highest order, of which she was evidently quite unconscious' (p. 34). Often in James we smile at the stylistic adroitness with which he finds just the right degree of original wording to define something, such as, in 'A London Life', the epitaphs on the monuments in St Paul's 'that seemed to make the most of the defunct bores even in death' (p. 312), or, in the same novella, the way Lionel Berrington's being is suggestively and economically summed up in the phrase 'stable-stamped composition' (p. 257).

The range of humour in James is rich, and it is found in unlikely places. Many readers imagine that the stories of the 1890s about writers are serious affairs, in which James reflects on his craft. Indeed they are, but there is a wry comedy in them too. 'The Death of the Lion' shows James with a number of targets in his sights in a literary world riddled with pretentiousness, blindness, philistinism, greed, opportunism, ignorance, and sheer absurdity. A journalist appears: 'Mr. Morrow glared, agreeably, through his glasses: they suggested the electric headlights of some monstrous modern ship, and I felt as if Paraday and I were tossing terrified under his bows. I saw this momentum was irresistible' (p. 99). The conceit is vivid and pleasurable – even though it represents the dire forces of the modern age of exploitative publicity. The narrator is some kind of snob: he wants to protect Paraday from publicity and popularity. It is possible to see him as a slightly ridiculous, parasitic and even harmful figure, and at one point we wonder whether his language is not precious and self-indulgent: 'It had knocked down, I suppose, my little customary altar, my twinkling tapers and my flowers, and had reared itself into the likeness of a

temple vast and bare' (p. 98). We may laugh at him, but it is not clear that James intends to provoke this reaction: what we regard as slightly precious is, for James, the lingua franca with which he talks about art. We sympathise with his savage humour and the way in which he has the knack (reminding us of Matthew Arnold) of making a cant phrase such as 'the larger latitude' sound thoroughly ridiculous. An image in 'The Next Time' takes us to the edge of black comedy, when the effete Ralph Limbert's writing is 'as fine as the spray of a lawn-irrigator', but his sister-in-law ruefully observes that that's not much use if the 'lawn's as coarse as a turnipfield', and 'gutter-pipes and slop-buckets' would be more appropriate (p. 181). In 'The Author of "Beltraffio"' the American narrator, now distanced a little from the tragic weekend, considers the Aesthetic movement with a wry smile: 'People had endeavoured to sail nearer to "truth" in the cut of their sleeves and the shape of their sideboards' (p. 3).

James's critique of aesthetic positions is on view in *The Tragic Muse*, where, in spite of the title, there is no shortage of comedy.[5] Gabriel Nash is a great comic creation. If one were to perform his speech in the Palais de l'Industrie with a stutter one could almost be listening to Evelyn Waugh's Anthony Blanche: '"There are many gods and this is one of their temples. It's a house of strange idols – isn't it – and of some strange and unnatural sacrifices"' (i. 22). He thinks that pocket boroughs are '"boroughs that fill your pocket"' (i. 48), but then he does lives in Samarkand. He asks, '"What would you think of any other artist … whose governing forces should be the dinner and the suburban trains?"' (i. 59). James should have listened to his character before embarking a few years later on an attempt to woo the public with drama. Nash's facetiousness is catching, as when his friend Nick Dormer says '"Somehow Harsh is such a false note"' (i. 85). When after a gap Nash sees Nick's pictures and studio he says: '"It's very nice, it's very nice; yes, yes, I see"' (ii. 352). His response is not as negative as Antony Blanche's to Charles Ryder's pictures ('"We know, you and I, that this is all t-t-terrible t-t-tripe"'), but it is very lukewarm. Lady Agnes is a part just made for Dame Maggie Smith, and Nick's brother Percival, only ever seen as a sportsman, would offer someone a

splendid cameo role. That friend of Peter Sherringham who will 'commit *basseses*' (i. 281) to collect eighteenth century invitation cards anticipates Bridey and Mrs Muspratt with their match-box collections in *Brideshead Revisited*. James's good ear is present when the Mercury in buttons fails to receive his guerdon from Sherringham: '"Please sir, he told me he'd give me a shilling and he've forgot it"' (ii. 289).

One thinks perhaps of *The Ambassadors*, *The Golden Bowl*, and *The Wings of the Dove* as solemn and heavy products, but they exhibit the same kind of comic sense on show in the earlier works. Waymarsh, from *The Ambassadors*, is one of James's great comic characters, with his sacred rage, his constant resemblance to Sitting Bull and his perpetual discomfort in Europe. But Strether is not free from irony, sometimes at his own expense – such as that reflection that comes to him in Notre Dame:

> He had dropped upon a seat half-way down the nave and, again in the museum mood, was trying with head thrown back and eyes aloft to reconstitute a past, to reduce it in fact to the convenient terms of Victor Hugo, whom, a few days before, giving the rein for once in a way to the joy of life, he had purchased in seventy bound volumes, a miracle of cheapness, parted with, he was assured by the shopman, at the price of the red-and-gold alone. He looked, doubtless, while he played his eternal nippers over Gothic gloom, sufficiently rapt in reverence; but what his thought had finally bumped against was the question of where, among packed accumulations, so multiform a wedge would be able to enter. Were seventy volumes in red-and-gold to be perhaps what he should most substantially have to show at Woollett as the fruit of his mission? It was a possibility that held him a minute. (ii. 7)

Strether is able to register the slightly absurd aspect of his position – or, rather, the narrative voice is able to register it on his behalf: we never *quite* know whether he would be capable of reviewing his own case in a language as sceptical as the narrator's. The 'museum mood' in the cathedral is broken by this

comically disruptive moment, then it is broken again, this time more seriously, when Madame de Vionnet appears in the cathedral.

The topos might be called 'the violated museum', and it recurs in the famous riverside scene. Strether escapes into the countryside, as into a museum, hoping to find the charms of the Barbizon school and a French peasant in 'a stiff white blouse … a knitted nightcap and the genius of response … who would remind him … of Maupassant' (ii. 221-2). But what happens is that the escapist museum venture cannot be sustained. For one thing the rustics he meets turns out to be more 'a little more as men of the world than he had expected'.[6] The climax of this drama is reached when Chad and Madame De Vionnet turn up, first as picturesque notes of colour in an aesthetically distanced landscape, but then as people known to him, representing stark human passion and possibilities for acute embarrassment: 'It was suddenly as if these figures, or something like them, had been wanted in the picture, had been wanted more or less all day, and had now drifted into sight, with the slow current, on purpose to fill up the measure' (ii. 225). Elements of this episode in *The Ambassadors* were anticipated years before (1877) when James was in Italy at the disused gate of old city upon a mountain top:

> There was no one within sight but a young man who slowly trudged upward with his coat slung over his shoulder and his hat upon his ear in the manner of a cavalier in an opera. Like an operatic performer too he sang as he came; the spectacle, generally, was operatic, and as his vocal flourishes reached my ear I said to myself that in Italy accident was always romantic and that such a figure had been exactly what was wanted to set off the landscape. (*Italian Hours*, p. 165)

(That phrase 'exactly what was wanted' is very like the phrase used for the appearance of the boat on the river in *The Ambassadors*.) James gets talking to the young cavalier, and he turns out to be 'a brooding young radical and communist, filled with hatred of the present Italian government, raging with discontent

and crude political passion, professing a ridiculous hope that Italy would soon have, as France had had, her' "'89", and declaring that he for his part would willingly lend a hand to chop off the heads of the king and the royal family'. James concludes: 'This made it very absurd of me to have looked at him simply as a graceful ornament to the prospect, an harmonious little figure in the middle distance' (p. 166).

In *The Wings of the Dove* the dominant note is serious, and perhaps it borders on the edge of tragedy. But there is room for the comic note, modulating even into black comedy. There is a zest in the way in which Aunt Maud's apartment is described – although that ugly furniture exercises nevertheless a sinister and telling power. It is reminiscent of the comic delight the narrator in *The Spoils of Poynton* takes in drawing the graphically horrible picture of the house ugly, Waterbath. There is a larger-than-life quality about Aunt Maud, and a similarly Dickensian character intrudes itself into Milly's presence at Matcham, Lady Aldershaw's attendant: 'a high, but slightly stooping, shambling and wavering person, who represented urbanity by the liberal aid of certain prominent front teeth and whom Milly vaguely took for some sort of great man' (*Wings of the Dove*, i. 197). As indeed he might be. Who knows? James produces some wry humour when Milly visits Kate's sister Marian Condrip in Chelsea, 'the quarter of the famous Carlyle, the field of exercise of his ghost, his votaries, and the residence of "poor Marian", so often referred to and actually a somewhat incongruous spirit there' (i. 169). Placing her on the 'social map' is so complex that it needs an expertise in 'geography', and to drag Carlyle in just makes it all the more disconcerting and grotesque. Even in the Venetian episodes, which are serious and tormented, there is room for wry humour, as in the brisk evocation of the courier Eugenio:

> [Mrs Stringham] has judged him in advance, polyglot and universal, very dear and very deep – as probably but a swindler and finished to the finger-tips; for he was forever carrying one well-kept Italian hand to his heart and plunging the other straight into her pocket, which, as she

> had instantly observed him to recognise, fitted it like a glove. (ii. 120)

There is a witty negotiation here between the physical gesture of the hand on the heart, and the figurative hand filching the money. A sentence or two later he is described as like 'some famous tenor grown too old to make love, but with an art still to make money'. In the lightness of touch here we recognise a subtle sort of syllepsis, one which shades into black humour, since although Eugenio is exploiting Milly and her generosity of spirit means that she is prepared to be indulgently amused by him, others are exploiting her much more darkly.

The Golden Bowl has no shortage of comic moments which should not be seen as comic relief or as operating in a tonal register vastly different from the rest of the novel. They introduce a wry note that prevents the novel from becoming cloying and self-indulgent. They are actually a product of a highly efficient registering machine of consciousness. The most comic moments are when the reader is inveigled into collusion with the narrative voice, somewhat at the expense of the characters. Adam tends to be approached in this way from time to time, most particularly when he is being pursued, even unto the billiard room at Fawns, by Mrs Rance:

> Wouldn't she rather, as emphasising their communion, accept and in a manner exploit the anomaly, treat it perhaps as romantic or possibly even as comic? – show at least that they needn't mind even though the vast table, draped in brown holland, thrust itself between them as an expanse of desert sand. She couldn't cross the desert, but she could, and did, beautifully get round it: so that that for him to convert it into an obstacle he would have had to cause himself, as in some childish game or unbecoming romp, to be pursued, to be genially hunted. (i. 117)

Mrs Rance already *has* a husband, but in a remote American state that 'scarcely figured as a definite place at all; it showed somehow from afar, as so lost, so indistinct and illusory, in the great alkali desert of cheap Divorce' (i. 118). Note here that

witty and economical manner in which the American deserts are invoked both as physical residence for Mr Rance and material for narrative metaphor. And the image has been generated by the holland cloth covering the billiard table. We also spend a certain amount of time engaging in wry laughter at Fanny Assingham's expense, especially when she is planning to extricate herself with as much immunity she can manage from the tangled web of deceit she has woven. Her plight is made particularly comic by the obtuseness of her completely incompatible husband, who has none of the finesse of the super-subtle fry with which James crams his late work. Often we laugh *at* him, because of his stupidity and bluntness: he seems to have blundered into a James novel by mistake. But equally we laugh *with* him, since much of his bluntness and impatience with the fine-spun fabric of his wife's theories makes him into a kind of spokesman for those readers who feel that some of the elaboration Fanny *and* the narrative voice go in for is altogether too much. His bufferism is very engaging, especially in the context of this predominantly highfalutin work. It is the humour of incompatibles colliding:

> Fanny: [on the Prince and Charlotte at Matcham]: 'They may very possibly, for a demonstration – as I see them – not have come back.'
>
> Colonel: 'May have bolted somewhere together?' (i. 337)

And another example, of where humour is to be generated by two people attempting to converse, who actually are not speaking the same language. Fanny is speaking Jamesian and her husband is speaking the dialect of blimp:

> Colonel. 'What I can't for my life make out is your idea of the old boy' [he means Adam Verver].
>
> Fanny: 'Charlotte's too inconceivably funny husband? I *have* no idea.' (ii. 119)

It is that at this point that I have to register some misgivings. James, it seems to me, sails dangerously close to the wind,

by being so canny, so extremely self-conscious about language and style. Colonel Assingham and Fanny Assingham are not comic relief exactly. Despite being funny and sometimes pathetic they are somehow on the wavelength of the novel: their comic bafflement in the face of experience is not unlike that of the other characters, and Fanny is loading wilful paradigms onto a world she only imperfectly grasps with the confidence and absence of deeply self-conscious criticism that is not unlike the serious characters in the late works. Stylistically James is very much in control, and tends to give the impression that what we think about events or persons might easily be modified or conditioned by the stylistic manner in which we decide to approach them. It is very difficult, in reading James, to predict which way the stylistic cat will jump: it is capable of jumping either way, into comedy or tragedy. But if an author is really stylistically on top of things he will never modulate into real tragedy. It tends to make James a less haunted and disturbed writer than Dostoevsky say, or Conrad or Lawrence – which is not to say that he is absolutely free from disturbance. A criticism of this kind could be registered against *Great Expectations*, say, where there is a disconcerting combination of the desire to amuse and the desire to be seriously analytical. I referred a moment or two ago to James's tendency, in social situations, to engage in self-mockery, archly manneristic behaviour. That tendency can erupt at any time into his serious late novels, and there is one novel in which it erupts rather too much – *The Sacred Fount*, which probably explains why that novel was omitted from the New York Edition.

Comedy could lead James to be very critical. Some harsh things are said about the English aristocracy, a humour that begins in the letters and spreads to the novels. It is often for James a telling way of gently reminding us that English life is riddled with hypocrisy and blindness to its own faults. But he is reluctant to work himself up into a temper about it, since that would be to admit a kind of defeat, a kind of victory scored by a society that put him off balance. I think James got funnier as he got older, though in the later works there is less of that almost random spotting of local absurdity which reminds us that the younger James had a journalistic arrow in

his quiver. But certainly as he aged his amusing stylistic adroitness increased; and during the intense period of revision when he rewrote his work for the New York Edition he added, amongst other things, a considerable amount of humour.

The humour of James springs from a wide knowledge of language, a great range of experience, and a geniality of spirit. But, as I have suggested, it also has it sources in a heightened awareness that all was not well with the world. He regards complacency, ignorance, provincialism, philistinism, and blind selfishness as, in the first place, laughable and in the second place harmful. His sense of humour coexisted with a sense of horror that very nearly matched Conrad's, but James seems to have avoided, for the most part, forcing the opposite sides of his genius into a kind of marriage, so there is not very much manic, black laughter, if indeed there is any. Had he brought these different components of his vision together he would have ended up writing a lot like Dickens, but perhaps what we get is Dickens lite. The Dickensian moments are fitful, and not for James a constant preoccupation with the crazy fabric of nightmare.

I have not relied here on a complex and involved methodology, mainly allowing the extracts to speak for themselves. But when they speak we need to listen – *literally* listen – to experience the maximum response. This is entirely in line with a very important criterion that James recommended; the criterion of the *audible* in literature. It has often been recognised in poetry, but it has not been recognised as much as it should have been where the novel is concerned, and the novel has traditionally been associated with silent reading. (Which is not to forget that there is a tradition in households of performing novels.) James was particularly alert to audibility in his later years, when he dictated his novels, and it could be that the inflections of the natural voice make his novels difficult on the silent page, but much more comprehensible when heard. Speed reading seems to do the novels a disservice: if you read at a speaking pace the narrative sections begin to sound very much more colloquial than one might have imagined, and what James is saying becomes altogether more accessible – and often more amusing. In the preface to *The Golden Bowl* James himself stressed the audibility of all literature (i. xxvii), and the narrator of 'The Death of the Lion'

urges the exposure of the listening ear to the 'full tone' of Neil Paraday's text read aloud (p. 106). One of James's earliest initiations into the novel was via a viva voce experience. This was another of Stephen Wall's favourite stories, often lovingly recalled:

> The whole question dwells for me in a single small reminiscence, though there are others still; that of my having been sent to bed one evening, in Fourteenth Street, as a very small boy, at an hour when, in the library under the lamp, one of the elder cousins from Albany, the youngest of an orphaned brood of four, of my grandmother's most extravagant adoption, had begun to read aloud to my mother the new, which must have been the first, instalment of *David Copperfield*. I had feigned to withdraw, but had only retreated to cover close at hand, the friendly shade of some screen or drooping table-cloth, folded up behind which and glued to the carpet, I held my breath and listened. I listened long and drank deep while the wondrous picture grew, but the tense cord at last snapped under the strain of the Murdstones and I broke into the sobs of sympathy that disclosed my subterfuge. I was this time effectively banished, but the ply then taken was ineffaceable.[7]

Of course this is funny, and the mature writer can afford to laugh at the child's expense, even when recalling a sorrowful and humiliating experience. It is made funny partly by the heavy style, a kind of amusement relatively common in autobiographical writing. But just before this anecdote James develops a conceit about the 'dusty chamber of youth' invaded by 'the intellectual air'. He writes: 'Happy the house of life in which such chambers still hold out, even with the draught of the intellect whistling through the passages'.[8] Some readers might see this as precious and meretricious, but I think there is a kind of amusement in it – not exactly like the amusement of contemplating the small boy under the table, more the witty pleasure taken in vividly bringing an image to life, with a touch of ruefulness about it.

Brasenose College Oxford

NOTES

[1] *English Hours*, ed. Alma Louise Lowe (1962), p. 130.

[2] The studies on James's comedy include Richard Poirier, *The Comic Sense of Henry James* (1960), Ellen Douglas Leyburn, *Strange Alloy: The Relation of Comedy to Tragedy in the Fiction of Henry James* (1968), Ronald Wallace, *Henry James and the Comic Form* (1975), and John Bruns, 'Baffling Doom: Dialogue, Laughter and Comic Perception in Henry James', *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, 47 (Spring 2005), 1-30.

[3] *The House of Fiction*, ed. Leon Edel (1957), p. 279.

[4] All references in the text are to volume and/or page number within the thirty-five-volume Macmillan edition: *The Novels and Stories of Henry James* (1921-3).

[5] See Chris Brown, 'Satire in *The Tragic Muse*', *Studies in American Fiction* (Spring 1995), 3-18.

[6] A splendid scene in this same topos is recorded by Mortimer Collins near Faringdon in Berkshire when some countrymen, who might at first glance seem like Hardyesque North Wessex yokels, know all about the infamous *Essays and Reviews* controversy and are beginning to suffer from, or enjoy, what Hardy called 'the ache of modernism'. *Pen Sketches by a Vanished Hand* (1879), p. 17. One also recalls Ruskin in Boulogne in 1861, regretting that the fishermen were *au fait* with J. A. Milsand's criticisms of his work in the smart *Revue des Deux-Mondes*.

[7] *Henry James Autobiography*, ed. Frederick W. Dupee (1956), pp. 68-9.

[8] Ibid., p. 68.