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Henry James the Reporter

By JOHN C. NEFF

Ever since Henry James died, more than a score of years ago, writers have been in doubt as to what position he occupies in modern literature. Is he a Victorian or has he a place with the so-called moderns? Does the fact that his books are seldom, if ever, read suggest that his influence has died? And does the realization that there is little chance of his ever becoming popular again inhibit us to the extent that we keep him and his real value from the popular eye? Surely it will be many years before the complete James is fully understood, but in the meantime we can add, bit by bit, details of his art that when added together will produce a final definition. This article proposes to show what has not yet been touched upon enough. And that, that Henry James was a reporter.

Since the depression, we have been interested in quick, brief fiction with a proletarian background and with heroes whose shoes we certainly would hate to be in. We read these books, swallow the blurbs about them, and put them down with the satisfying feeling of having gained a profound understanding of the trials and problems of strikers and workers everywhere. These modern writers, we say to ourselves, are becoming more like reporters every day. They give us the facts. That's what we want. The facts.

And yet, if Henry James' great novel, The Princess Casamassima, were published today with a different title and under a different name, if it were given wide spaces of advertising in our literary weeklies, it would undoubtedly be hailed "a great and profound study of the modern relation between worker and capitalist." Indeed, no book of our time has struck at the core of the matter with the intensity and understanding of James'. But, in spite of that, if you were told that James was a reporter as much as any contemporary novelist is a reporter, you would probably stick

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your tongue into your cheek and say, piffle! Henry James, you say, was a novelist who broke into the fields of inner experience and who used them, for the first time, in short fiction. Why, he was the father of our modern stream-of-consciousness. When you claim him as a reporter, you're forgetting yourself. You are forgetting that a reporter draws from actual experience, from real life, from truth! He forgets about the frills and fancy decorations that make for fiction. James was an artist, not a reporter. He was a great creative artist!

True. But wait, perhaps a few sidelights about James and his fiction will help you to understand why he is, besides being a creative genius, a reporter. Indeed, what will be said below may be regarded as a reiteration of what has been said, in other ways, so many times before. As for example—“Henry James never took anything as it came; the thing that happened to him was merely the point of departure for a deliberate, and as time went on a more and more masterly, creative energy, which could never leave a sight or sound of any kind until it had been looked at and listened to with absorbed attention, pondered in thought, linked with associations, and which did not spend itself until the remembrance had been crystallized in expression, so that it could be appropriated as a tangible object.”

But the above statement, taken from the introduction to James' Letters, is followed by no specific instances as to what sights and sounds experienced eventually found their separate ways into his writings. That, this article is attempting to do.

In February, 1935, Professor Edgar Goodspeed had published, in the Atlantic, a short essay called “A Footnote to Daisy Miller.” On reading the Diary of Julia Newberry, Goodspeed was immediately reminded of James' famous story, Daisy Miller. He presented what evidence there was available, and showed fairly conclusively that James actually did draw his fictional character from the rich young Julia Newberry who went with her parents to Europe to
expose herself to society there that she might retain, for her family at least, the remains of a fast-dying American aristocracy. "He was insatiable," Professor Goodspeed quotes, "for anything that others could give him from their own personal lives."

Three years ago, too, the Journal of Alice James, invalid sister of Henry, was published. If we are to believe the endearments cast her way in his letters, Alice was the apple of Henry's eye and was constantly in his thoughts. The Journal is indispensible for the serious student of James, and highly entertaining for the average reader. But beyond that, it is important because it suggests that Alice James was the prototype for Rosy Muniment of The Princess Casamassima.

The Princess Casamassima was published in 1886, three years before Alice James went to England to live her life out. The scene of the novel is laid in London. Thus the matter of chronology does not enter here. It is the characteristics of the two women that are important. Rosy and Alice were both invalids, both witty and sharp observers. Though they were not necessarily interested in the same subjects and were not equals in intellect, they, nevertheless, reacted similarly to their private misfortunes in life. A quick glance at each will make this clear.

Alice James was a vibrant woman who, in the course of time, learned to ignore her physical pains and to increase her determination to live, to observe, to be a part of the life that was so near and yet always so far. Hers was essentially a world of intellect and imagination. On June 13, 1889, she made the following entry in her journal: "Nurse says there are some people downstairs who drive everywhere and admire nothing. How grateful I am that I actually see, to my own consciousness, the quarter of an inch that my eyes fall upon; truly the subject is all that counts!" And again, "Not I, surely, from my sofa where I've learned such wondrous things."
Of her brother she said, "Henry, the Patient, I should call him. Five years, in November, I crossed the water and suspended myself like an old woman of the sea, round his neck, where, to all appearances, I shall remain for all time. I have given him an endless care and anxiety, but, notwithstanding this and the fantastic nature of my troubles, I have never seen an impatient look upon his face or heard an unsympathetic or misunderstanding sound cross his lips. He comes to me at my slightest sign, and 'hangs on' to whatever organ may be in eruption, and gives me calm and solace by assuring me that my nerves are his nerves, and my stomach his stomach—this last a pitch of brotherly devotion never before approached by the race. He has never remotely suggested that he expected me to be well at any given time . . ."

Now in the novel itself, Hyacinth Robinson, hero of the tale, is a close friend of Paul Muniment, Rosy's brother. As a result of the two men's frequent meeting in the girl's room, one gets to know exactly what she is like. "Hyacinth thought Miss Muniment very charming; he had begun to make her out better by this time, and he watched her small, wan, pointed face, framed on the pillow by thick black hair. She was a diminutive dark person, pale and wasted with a lifelong infirmity; Hyacinth thought her manner denoted high accomplishment—he judged it impossible to tell her age." And later, Rosy herself says, "Oh yes, I dare say we seem very curious. I think we're generally thought so; especially me, being so miserable and yet so lively." And Paul proudly acclaims his sister, saying, "It's very wonderful—she can describe things she has never seen. And they're just like the reality." "There's nothing I've never seen," Rosy declares. "That's the advantage of my lying here in such a manner. I see everything in the world . . ."

Later, Paul Muniment remarks, "You know a good deal, Rosy, but you don't know everything . . . your mind's too poetical . . . as full of sounding strings and silver cords as some old elegant harp . . ." (Alice James in an entry for
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June 18, 1889, says, "How little I shall ever know of life!"

Henry James himself, writing to his brother William from Rome, May, 1894, says, on reading her diary, that during Alice's life-time he was "tremendously conscious that the extraordinary intensity of her will and personality would have made the equal, the reciprocal, life of a 'well' person . . . in the usual world, almost impossible to her, so that her disastrous, her tragic health, was in a manner the only solution for her of the practical problem of life . . . I felt . . . that she simplified too much, shut up in her sick room, exercised her wondrous vigor of judgment on too small a scrap of what really surrounded her . . ."

And now, on reaching further back in James' career, we find that, in 1869, the Atlantic published his seventh story, Gabrielle de Bergerac. It is common knowledge that Rostand made, in 1897, the name De Bergerac famous, and it is also well known that the fame of that name was spread further by the great French actor, Constant Coquelin. But it is not generally known that the hero of James' early story Gabrielle de Bergerac, was also named Coquelin. The coincidence thereby established is, perhaps, plausible when we remember one or two simple facts about the early life of James. He was a great reader of French literature, and in his readings—it seems reasonable to believe—he undoubtedly chanced upon the name of Savinien-Cyrano De Bergerac, French dramatist of the Seventeenth Century. Such a name would, it appears, stick in a corner of the mind of young Henry James without effort.

That, for some, is, perhaps, a sufficient accounting for the title of James' story. At least it is enough to assume that the name had got, somehow, into James' head, where it was "looked at and listened to with absorbed attention, linked with associations and finally crystallized in expression." But what about the name of the hero, Coquelin, and what connection could it possible have with the actor Constant Coquelin? Well, the fact of the matter is, young Henry James one year attended a private school in Switzerland and
had as a classmate "a little snub-nosed boy who called himself Coquelin." The same Coquelin that was later to make famous Rostand's play!

But to bring to light the latest "coincidence," we must turn to page 8 and page 19 of the London and New York Times respectively, under date of August 12, 1937. For on those pages is printed the obituary of a man whose name was that of one of the most remarkable of Henry James' early short story characters. The Author of Beltraffio, first printed in the English Illustrated Magazine in 1884, is one of James' finest character stories and has as its main figure a man, a writer, whose name is Mark Ambient. The death notice referred to above was occasioned by the passing of the well-known dramatist, Mark Ambient!

The late Mark Ambient was born in 1860, which made him twenty-four when The Author of Beltraffio was created. Could James have heard his name, could he have seen it in the newspapers? Mark Ambient, the obituary notices tell us, early associated himself with the theater. But was not James always interested in the theater? Was he not always keen about drama? We can never really know the solution of this coincidence, but we can at least assume that James kept the name of Mark Ambient (like those of Coquelin and Bergerac) well tucked in the back of his head for future "crystallization."

It will be discouraging, as the years go on, revealing such facts as these, for those who have, heretofore, questioned the practicability of James' character-names to realize that persons with just such names actually did live and walk the earth the same years as James. But it will be more discouraging for those who continue to believe that James was no reporter. For this much has become clear: that Henry James did remember names and characters, that he did turn them over in his mind and study them with a curious eye, and that he did bring the most interesting of them to eventual expression and appropriate them as tangible objects. In a word, Henry James reported.