Henry James, a critical study

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Author: Ford Ford Madox

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HENRY JAMES
A CRITICAL STUDY
BY
FORD MADOX HUEFFER

LONDON
MARTIN SECKER
XVII BUCKINGHAM STREET
ADELPHI
TO
MRS. EDWARD HERON ALLEN
WHO SO MUCH LIGHTENED THESE
LABOURS, THIS, WITH
AFFECTION

LOAN STACK

LONDON: MARTIN SECKER (LTD) 1918
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I

INTRODUCTION

Let me say at once that I regard the works of Mr. Henry James as those most worthy of attention by the critics—most worthy of attention of all the work that is to-day pouring from the groaning presses of continents. In saying this I conceal for the moment my private opinion—which doesn’t in the least matter to anyone, though it is an opinion that can hardly be called anything but mature—that Mr. James is the greatest of living writers and in consequence, for me, the greatest of living men.

I might, that is to say, have thought, as I have, that Mr. James is the greatest of living men without ever contemplating thus setting out to write a book about him. A man may be supremely great and offer no opportunity for comment of any kind. I cannot, that is to say, imagine any serious writer setting to work to say anything about Shakespeare, about Turgenieff, or for the matter of that about Nelson or Moltke. There are people who just “are,” consummate in various degrees, perfect
engines of providence. It is a little difficult, or at any rate it would call for a great number of words to explain exactly what I mean; but in order to avoid the danger of being considered paradoxical I will venture here and now upon a rough digest of that number of words so as to plan out the ground of this book.

Thus, when I say that no one can write much about Shakespeare or Turgenieff I say it because, thank God, we know nothing whatever about Shakespeare. He is personally nothing but a wise smile and a couple of anecdotes. And his work, considered from a literary point of view, is too consummate for any literary comment. You can annotate his words and his historic matter to an extent that has provided us with fifty libraries of pedagogic dullness or of anecdotal interest, as the case may be; but the beautiful spirit of the man you cannot in any way touch. So in a sense it is with Turgenieff whom Mr. James calls at one moment "my distinguished friend," at another "the amiable Russian"; but finally, being worthy of himself, he styles him "the beautiful genius."

And that is all that can be said about Turgenieff—he was "the beautiful genius." Again, thank God, we know as little of his personality as we know of Shakespeare's. I
do not mean to say that he is as tangibly indefinite a solar myth; we know enough about him to be able to say that he was not the late Mr. Pobiedonostieff, procurator of the Holy Synod, and to be certain that his work was not written by the late Count Tolstoy. Fragments of his personality are, in fact, recoverable here and there. These two eyes have seen him in a studio; a rather nasty Slav, Russian, or Pole has written a rather nasty book about him. In this he attempts to place "the beautiful genius" in an unfavourable light as sneering at his great French fellow-workers. To-day Young Russia sneers at him for not being a Collectivist, a Nihilist, a Marxist, a Syndicalist, or what you will. And Young England, which is always sycophantically at the bidding of any whining Intellectual, whether Celt or Slav, repeats the lament of Young Russia that Turgenieff was not a Collectivist, a Marxist, and all the rest of it. And against Turgenieff Young England erects the banner of Dostoievsky, as if the fame of that portentous writer of enormous detective stories, that sad man with the native Slav genius for telling immensely long and formless tales, must destroy the art, the poetry and the exquisiteness that are in the works of "the beautiful genius." ...
HENRY JAMES

At any rate, precious little is recoverable of the personality of Turgenieff. We know that he shot partridges which perhaps he shouldn't have done. We know also that he purchased cakes of scented soap for a mistress whom perhaps he shouldn't—or perhaps he should—have had. But the fact is that he lived partly amongst men of letters who could not find anything much to say about his work and partly amongst gentlefolk who did not want to say much about his personality. Therefore he remains, baffling and enticing, but practically, too, only a smile and a couple of anecdotes. About his work the critic can say no more than he can about that of Shakespeare. Its surface is too compact, is too polished; the critical pickaxe or geological hammer just cannot get up a little chunk of that marble for chemical analysis. It exists as the grass exists which the good God made to grow, and that is the end of the matter.

Similarly, as I have said, with Nelson and Field-Marshal von Moltke. These were "the beautiful geniuses" of embattled nations. Their genius probably consisted in their being ready to take chances. You may analyse the strategy of Nelson just as you may analyse that of Von Moltke, but you cannot say why God was on their side, and until you can say
that you cannot very well say much that is to the point. Nelson ought never to have fought the battle of Trafalgar; the chances, in that particular spot of the Bay of Biscay, were seven to one that such an unfavourable wind must there spring up as should frustrate the manœuvres ordered from the *Victory*. Similarly, Moltke should never have fought Gravelotte; the chances were twenty-seven to one that the Crown Prince of Saxony would not arrive in time; the chances were eleven to one in favour of the French rifle; there was practically no chance that the German troops would face that hill of death in the final charge and, in the event of any of these evil chances taking effect, final disaster was all that Germany could have expected.

Thus, once more there is very little to be said about these matters.

There is very little, in short, to be said about pure genius. It is just a thing that is. And there is nothing left for us, who are in the end but the stuff with which to fill graveyards, to say more than that marvellous are the ways of Providence that gives to a few so much and to the vast many nothing at all. But there remains a second—by no means secondary—order of great people into whose work it is possible, and very profitable, minutely to
enquire. For, if you can’t say much about Moltke you can discover pretty easily, and descent for long upon, the strategy of Marlborough; if you can’t say much about Shakespeare you might write several books about the craftsmanship of Goethe; if Johannes Sebastian Bach defies the pen as far as his peculiar magic is concerned, the pen can find endless objects for its activity in the music drama of Richard Wagner; or, if you can’t find out how Turgeneff did any single blessed thing you could write a volume about the wording of one paragraph by Flaubert. To this latter category belong the works of Mr. Henry James.

Mr. Henry James has of course his share of the talent which can’t be defined. He has, that is to say, plenty of personality. You could no more confound him, say, with Théophile Gautier than you could confound Homer with Dante or with Quintus Horatius Flaccus, but in addition to having—to being—a temperament Mr. James has a conscious craftsmanship. His temperament we may define clearly enough if Providence provides the words, though we couldn’t, any of us, say where in the world he got it from. But his craftsmanship, his conscious literary modifications, his changes of word for word, the