

NEW BOOKS REVIEWED.

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“THE AMERICAN SCENE.”*

THERE are certain volumes in which the personal equation so frankly and agreeably obtrudes itself that they ought in fairness to be reviewed, not as separate and complete productions, but as links in the chain of an author's self-revelations, significant factors in the rounded sum of a lifetime's accomplishment. “The American Scene,” by Henry James, is essentially and peculiarly a book of this class, the more intimate charm of which must elude those readers who choose to regard it as an isolated volume of travel, and who fail to recognize the continuity of thought and mood which binds it with his novel, “The Ambassadors,” and his “Life of William Wetmore Story,” into a kind of strangely assorted trilogy. Indeed, one may venture to hazard the opinion that, when the time comes to draw up a final balance-sheet of the life achievement of Mr. James, these three works will prove to be that portion of his writings which his future biographer can least afford to neglect; because they reveal, from three several standpoints, the chief preoccupation of the author's mind, the dominant motive of his migrations and his habits, the recurrent burden of his literary product.

Mr. James has long been accredited with the invention of the International Episode. Yet “invention” is scarcely the correct word; since, before he had reduced it to a formula for fiction, he himself was, from deliberate choice, living and breathing the International Episode, studying, analyzing, vivisectioning it in the experiences of himself and of others, allowing it gradually to

* “The American Scene.” By Henry James. New York: Harper & Brothers.

dominate him like a strangely stimulating obsession, full of infinite and tantalizing suggestion. It was "Europe," to borrow his own words,

"that had, in very ancient days, held out to the yearning young American some likelihood of impressions more numerous and varied and of a higher intensity than those he might gather on the native scene; and it was doubtless in conformity with some such desire more finely and more frequently to vibrate that he had originally begun to consult the European oracle."

Such is Mr. James's characteristic way of explaining the impulse which led him to make his domicile "in the very precincts, as it were, of the temple"; and, through all the years which followed, the study of the racial, social and æsthetic relation of the American world to the European, seems never, for him, to have lost its original zest. The subtle note of the cosmopolitan spirit, in its finer sense, is what binds together his most divergent works, with the unmistakable tie of kinship. Viewed from this standpoint, his biography of the artist Story ceases to be merely the life of an individual. It becomes the solution of a problem which many a man with the inborn artistic temperament has had to confront; it is a luminous and fascinating interpretation of what Europe may mean to the expatriated American, the American who has strongly taken his life into his own hands, and chosen to live it out in the environment for which his nature has best fitted him. In one novel after another, from "Daisy Miller" onward, sometimes as the *Leitmotiv*, sometimes as mere side-issues, we find, in all its possible variations of form and degree, the insistent, recurrent, dominating question of what Europe "connotes" for the compatriots of Mr. James. And notably in "The Ambassadors," which one is tempted to single out as the author's supreme achievement in fiction, we have a picture drawn with infinite understanding and sympathy, of the type that forms the antithesis to the artist Story, the man of weaker nature, the "frustrated American" who has not had the courage to choose his own environment, and who realizes, when he has crossed the threshold of middle age, the golden opportunity that he sacrificed to heredity and convention. One conjectures that, in the character of Strether, Mr. James sees himself as he might now have been had he too crushed down the adventurous spirit

and consented to a lifetime in "Woolett" along the line of least resistance. And, lastly, comes "The American Scene," as a logical, inevitable sequel, a final summing up, for himself and for the world, of what America "connotes" for the "restored absentee." It is this connection of thought and mood which leads one to group these three widely divergent volumes into a strangely assorted, and yet intimately related, trilogy of *Expatriation*.

The first point, then, to insist upon is that "The American Scene" is from first to last intensely subjective. Yet this is no more than to say that, in writing impressions of travel, Mr. James follows the same method that he does in fiction, seeing the outside world strictly through the medium of some one temperament. For instance, in "What Maisie Knew," the field of vision is limited, in a manner which compels wonder, to the narrow segment of life that comes within Maisie's personal knowledge. Whenever the other characters pass beyond her ken, they disappear as completely from the reader's sight as the germs that wriggle from beneath the lens of a microscope. In "The Ambassadors," through all that amazing intricacy of human hopes and desires, all that we are allowed to know is what Strether himself knows—what he sees, what he thinks, what he is told that other people think. There are countless questions we long to solve, doors we would like to open, corners we would like to turn; but Mr. James will not permit it; he forces us to see life through the eyes of the none too alert Strether.

In "The American Scene" the method is the same, excepting that the temperament through which we behold places and people is that of the author himself. Moreover, it is a keenly self-conscious temperament, tremendously interested with its own sensations, and with finger constantly on pulse, to detect and record every momentary quickening. On every page one reads between the lines a tingling curiosity on the author's part to discover whether, among the emotions awakened by his "repatriation," there is a lurking regret, a single fleeting wave of nostalgia for the home of his early years. Without a full recognition of what the volume stands for in a personal way, its prime significance as an interpretation of a people will be largely missed. It is not enough to accept it as a minute and unflinching analysis by a trained psychologist, an acute observer of life and of places. More than that, it is written by one who long ago weighed America

in the balance and found it, for his own personal needs and desires, quite definitely wanting as an abiding-place, and who now, returning after long years, finds that his choice was wisely made. There have never been written subtler, keener, more luminous studies of the cities of America—but we see them through the medium of a temperament which, if not antagonistic, is at least aloof. To appreciate their marvellous delicacy of intuition, their sanity, their inherent justice, one must share in no small measure the broad, contentedly cosmopolitan spirit of the author himself. His Boston and his New York are never quite those of the complacent Bostonian and New-Yorker, any more than they are those of the critical foreigner. His observations, whether of censure or approval, are always those of the “restored absentee,” and equally removed from the exaggerations of patriotic pride and the depreciation of foreign jealousy.

A great deal of complacent folly has been written about the obscurity of Henry James's style. Granted that his tricks of speech, his curious little verbal twists, have grown to be mannerisms so pronounced as to seem at times to be little less than deliberate affectation; yet these alone would never make a single page of Mr. James obscure. It is the thought behind the words which is often difficult to grasp. Indeed, thought is too definite a word to apply to those elusive mental states that he so often tries to interpret. Mr. James is seldom content to analyze thoughts, and never less so than in “The American Scene.” He is continually reaching back to those obscurer, more complex phases of transition, vague, instinctive impressions, the forerunners of conscious thought. Many readers are apt to find the later chapters of this volume especially admirable, the chapters on the Southern cities of Baltimore, Richmond, Charleston, where, because they are practically an unexplored territory, his impressions are fresh, clear, definite. Far more difficult and more profound are his inimitable chapters on New York, where every new impression blends with old memories, until every page suggests a palimpsest, with the vague, time-obliterated records revealing themselves beneath the freshly written script. It is New York which makes the most potent appeal to old associations; it is New York which, at the same time, most violently antagonizes him with its typically American note of the power of money and the pervading sense of instability and transition; it is New York which convinces

him that "to make so much money that you won't, that you don't, 'mind,' don't mind anything, is absolutely the American formula," and that "your making no money—or so little that it passes for none—and being thereby distinctly reduced to minding, amounts to your being reduced to the knowledge that America is no place for you." In other words, it is New York, more than any other American city, that confirms Mr. James in the inherent wisdom of his own life, and enables him to return to the precincts of the temple, more than ever "contentedly cosmopolite." There is but one way in which to read "The American Scene": refuse to let it antagonize you, remember constantly that it is the utterance of a "restored absentee"; and, with every page, you will come more and more under the charm of his descriptions and the subtlety of his judgments.

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"MADAME DE TREYMES."*

NOT all readers of "The House of Mirth" were able, in following the first chapter or two of that popularly successful novel, to draw that long breath of satisfaction which an admirable writer's choice of a congenial theme elicits. It is on just this point, the choice of theme, that the opening pages of "Madame de Treymes" are reassuring. Mrs. Wharton's pleasant sentence or two about Paris, which she has chosen to present "in that moist spring bloom between showers, when the horse-chestnuts dome themselves in unreal green against a gauzy sky, and the very dust of the pavement seems the fragrance of lilac made visible"; the comment on Mme. de Malrive's acceptance of a silence which she might once have "packed with a random fluency; now she was content to let it widen slowly between them, like the spacious prospect opening at their feet"—such phrases as these suggest the drama of agreeable backgrounds, of sophisticated characters, of problems never squalidly affecting the material conditions of life, in which Mrs. Wharton has undoubtedly, so far, been most brilliantly successful. It is important to insist that the three protagonists of this story, Mme. de Treymes, Mme. de Malrive, even John Durham himself, somewhat indefinite symbol though he be, belong to a certain caste from which any

* "Madame de Treymes." By Edith Wharton. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons.