HENRY JAMES ON THE ROLE OF IMAGINATION IN CRITICISM

DONALD EMERSON
University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee

Henry James’s critical writing extended over a full fifty years from 1864 to 1914, and reached its high point in the Prefaces to the New York edition,¹ a unique body of self-analysis. The Prefaces, however, stand apart from the more conventional reviews and essays which reveal the evolution of James as a critic. Two factors are important: James’s changing conception of the nature of criticism and the duty of the critic, and his gradually evolving conception of the role of imagination in all creative work.

James was at first more the reviewer and critic than the writer of fiction, but the balance shifted and reviews gave place to extended critical essays. In his early reviewing, James announced positive principles. The critic, he held, was “opposed” to his author, bound to consider the work within the limitations of subject imposed on him, without reference to extraneous theory or critical dogma.² James distinguished between “great” criticism, which touched on philosophy in the fashion of Goethe, and “small” criticism, such as Sainte-Beuve’s. The critic’s duty falls somewhere between the philosopher’s and the historian’s; he is to “compare a work with itself, with its own concrete standard of truth,”³ and to rely on his reason rather than his feelings. Matthew Arnold, James felt, possessed “the science and the logic” of the good critic.⁴

This intellectual, judicial view did not mean that James was entirely content to “compare a work with itself.” From the first he considered imagination a universal standard. His earliest critical essay discussed George Eliot, and on principle James felt himself bound to seek in her work “some key to... method, some utterance of... literary convictions, some indication of... ruling theory.” He found it in George Eliot’s comprehensive concern for life and her realistic portrayal of average humanity; but he considered her

¹ Collected and edited as The Art of the Novel by R. P. Blackmur (New York, 1934).
² Notes and Reviews by Henry James, ed. Pierre de Chalignon la Rose (Cambridge, 1921), p. 102.
³ Ibid., p. 103.
⁴ Views and Reviews, ed. Le Roy Phillips (Boston, 1908), p. 87.

287
deficient in imagination, though in comparison with a writer like Trollope who was totally destitute of it she might be considered richly endowed. As compared with decidedly imaginative writers, George Eliot was "exclusively an observer."  

Since James somewhat later spoke admiringly of George Eliot's "rich imagination" and commended Anthony Trollope's "purity of imagination," some account must be taken of these striking reversals. In the early 1860's, James made a Coleridgean distinction between imagination and fancy. Imagination would enable the writer to present recognizably living figures, to whom the imaginative reader would respond. The merely fanciful writer could produce cheap and easy effects because he recognized no standard of truth or accuracy. "As in the writing of fiction there is no grander instrument than a potent imagination," James declared, "so there is no more pernicious dependence than an unbridled fancy."  

In default of acute observation, he noted, a gifted writer might find a standard of truth and accuracy in his moral consciousness. Fancy alone might convey the impression of physical surroundings; the reconstruction of feelings and ideas required imagination.

Within a very few years, James had notably modified his stand. He began by taking a sterner view of the function of imagination, which he now held should "hold itself responsible to certain uncompromising realities." After examining the practice of a number of writers, he concluded that the imagination must conform to facts, but must also provide a degree of sympathetic penetration into its subject to convey the very color of reality. He reassessed his estimate of Sainte-Beuve, whom he found to be a little of the poet, the moralist, the historian and the philosopher, with the littleness of each detectable in his "flagrant default of imagination, depth and sagacity." At the same time, Sainte-Beuve's passion for literature seemed to James "immeasurable, original and delightful."

By 1868 the dogmatic tone has disappeared, to be replaced by an earnest search for justness of characterization of the authors James discussed. His first remarks on George Sand, for example, discuss her "vast imaginative and descriptive powers." Her imagination seemed to him "an immortal imagination, indefatigable, inexhaustible; but restless, nervous, and capricious ... in short, the imagina-

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5Ibid., p. 35 f. "The Novels of George Eliot" appeared in the Atlantic, Oct., 1866. In reviewing Felix Holt for the Nation in August of 1866, James had commented that a myriad of George Eliot's "microscopic observations" failed to equal a single one of "those great sympathetic guesses with which a real master attacks the truth." Notes and Reviews, p. 207.

6Notes and Reviews, p. 32.

7"Novels by the author of Mary Powell," Nation, V (Aug. 15, 1867), 126.

8Review of C. A. Sainte-Beuve's Portraits of Celebrated Women, Nation, VI (June 4, 1868), 455.
tion of a woman.” Justness of characterization, it is clear, depended for James upon proper appreciation of George Sand’s powers of imagination. When he shortly afterward discussed the role of the critic once more, he ignored his more youthful distinctions and declared that the day of critical dogmatism was over, and with it “the ancient infallibility and tyranny of the critic.” It now seemed to him his duty to detach from a work under discussion “ideas and principles appreciable and available to the cultivated public judgment.”

He proceeded to attack didacticism and sentimentalism in the novel on the grounds that life is too serious for spurious and repulsive solemnity. On the other hand, levity in the novelist is deplorable, for the reader’s imagination is likely to be more in earnest than the author’s. The imagination James speaks of by 1870, however, includes the notion of artistic arrangement of material, and its working is connected with questions of both realism and morality; “analytic imagination,” presenting a scene with “hard material integrity,” can leave behind “a certain moral deposit.”

In the early 1870’s James began the criticism of painting, with interesting results. The use of terms from painting in his general criticism is less important than the extended discussion of imagination which accompanied his observations. His premises for the arts of painting and of writing were so similar that he at times spoke of books as though they were pictures and of pictures as though they were books. He kept his old distinctions between imagination and fancy, but more and more spoke in terms of the artist’s purpose. For he now declared that the fanciful artist who recognizes no standard of truth or accuracy does so in pursuit of effect; the man of imagination, on the other hand, deals in the recognizably real and true, bathed in the light of his own great faculty. On the one hand there is “skill . . . invention . . . force . . . [and] insincerity,” on the other, “something closely akin to deep-welling spiritual emotion. Imagination is the common name for it.” He discovered at about the same time that the composition of a work of art could in itself be a work of imagination, as when, examining a canvas of Tintoretto’s, he found that the scene had “defined itself to his imagination with an intensity, an amplitude, and individuality of expression, which makes one’s observation of his picture seem less an operation of the mind than a kind of supplementary experience of life.” To contrast this artist with Titian was for James to measure the distance between imagination and observation. Tintoretto

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seemed to James to have "felt, pictorially, the great beautiful, terrible spectacle of human life very much as Shakespeare felt it poetically."14

The imagination, then, had come to be for James at once the power to conceive greatly and to feel greatly, to organize irreproachably the work of art of whatever kind, and to make it "a kind of supplementary experience of life." Without the quality of life there could be nothing, as he felt the paintings of Domenichino showed.

James's notion of the serious function of criticism was undergoing a gradual change, one indication of which was his increased preference for the method of Sainte-Beuve over the supposed scientific method of Hippolyte Taine. Taine might attempt to knock loose chunks of truth with the blow of his critical hammer, Sainte-Beuve rather disengaged its diffused and imponderable essence by patient chemistry, by dissolving his attention in the sea of circumstances surrounding the object of his study. James found Sainte-Beuve's "frankly provisional empiricism more truly scientific than M. Taine's premature philosophy."15

He began to remake his own critical practice, and a sympathetic essay on Turgenev in 1874 reveals something of the critical empiricism he had praised in Sainte-Beuve. He found Turgenev a searching observer, but even more a man of imagination, universally sensitive; he could surpass the French realists in appreciation of sensuous impressions and at the same time appreciate impulses outside the realists' scope. Turgenev's view of human life seemed to James "more general, more impartial, more unreservedly intelligent" than those of other novelists.16 To express his sense of Turgenev's philosophy, James discussed Turgenev's imagination, which he found it impossible to praise too highly for its "intensity and fecundity." No novelist seemed to James to have created a greater number of living figures, to have had so masterly a touch in portraiture, or to have mingled "so much ideal beauty with so much unsparing reality."17

This essay coincides with James's revulsion from criticism as he had practised it. His examination of paintings in Italy had convinced him that the whole history of art was the "conscious experience of a single mysterious spirit." He felt he had worked off his juvenile impulse to partisanship, and he now perceived a certain human solidarity in all cultivated effort. "There comes a time,"

14 Transatlantic Sketches (Boston, 1875), p. 92.
15 Review of Taine's English Literature, Atlantic, XXIX (April, 1872), 469 f.
17 Ibid., p. 318.
he wrote, "when points of difference with friends and foes and au-
thors dwindle, and points of contact expand. We have a vision of
the vanity of remonstrance and of the idleness of criticism." 18
Within a year he was referring to criticism as "deep appreciation." 19

At the same time he was enlarging his conception of the imagina-
tion. Flaubert in Madame Bovary revealed what the imagination
could accomplish under "the powerful impulse to mirror the unmiti-
gated realities of life." 20 Another writer's "cultivated imagination"
gave out in his work "a kind of constant murmur of appreciation—
a tremor of perception and reflection." 21 The "true imaginative
force" enabled Howells to give his readers not only the mechanical
structure of a dramatic situation, but also "its atmosphere, its
meaning, its poetry." 22

There were negative examples as well: Charles Kingsley's imagina-
tion died a natural death when the author turned didactic his-
torian; 23 Bayard Taylor's lacked warmth and could not kindle the
reader's. 24 Swinburne's was so completely for style that his criticism
was worthless. 25 After the Swinburne essay, James apparently real-
ized that he had at times used "imagination" as a term for the
making of poetic imagery. Thereafter he sometimes spoke of "the
larger sort of imagination" or "the higher imagination," to mark
his distinction.

When James discussed Balzac in detail for the first time in 1875,
his chief concern was the quality of Balzac's imagination, and in
later essays he returned to it again and again. It was for James the
great explanatory fact behind Balzac's reality, his vividness, and
his systematizing of the Comedie Humaine. Its deficiencies explained
Balzac's failures of portrayal whenever he attempted to touch the
moral life. He lacked moral depth, which James conceived as no
commitment to a specific moral code but simply respect for moral
questions and a moral ideal. 26

This sense of morality was henceforth inseparable from James's
thinking on the general role of the imagination. The absence of it
led to strictures on Charles de Bernard, Flaubert, and Baudelaire,
and to criticism of the French realists at large for being deficient
in simple understanding of human nature and human experience.
With all their gifts they left too much out of account, and actually
seemed inexpert whenever they attempted to touch the inner life.

18 Review of Victor Hugo's Quatrevingt-treize, Nation, XVIII (April 9, 1874), 288.
19 Views and Reviews, p. 55.
20 Nation, XVIII (June 4, 1874), 365.
21 Nation, XIX (July 28, 1874), 62. He was discussing Emile Montegut's Souvenirs de
Burgogne.
22 Review of A Foregone Conclusion, Nation, XX (Jan. 7, 1875), 12.
23 Nation, XX (Jan. 28, 1875), 81.
25 Views and Reviews, p. 59.
26 French Poets and Novelists, p. 114.
The *Hawthorne* of 1879 is James’s most considerable critical production, and in it he was guided by the practice of Sainte-Beuve: he established the background for his portrait of the man and interpreted the background through his central figure. Reviewing Sainte-Beuve’s correspondence this same year, he cited the Frenchman’s views with approval. “The critic, in his conception, was not the narrow lawgiver or the rigid censor that he is often assumed to be; he was the student, the inquirer, the observer, the interpreter, the active, indefatigable commentator, whose constant aim was to arrive at justness of characterization.”

He now termed Sainte-Beuve “a man of imagination.”

What he meant at this point appears in the discussion of Hawthorne, who was in most respects a man of fancy, but who could give glimpses into “the whole deep mystery of man’s soul and conscience” and deal with “something more than mere accidents and conventionalities, the surface occurrences of life. The fine thing in Hawthorne is that he cared for the deeper psychology, and . . . tried to become familiar with it.” The *House of The Seven Gables* seemed to James to be “pervaded with that vague hum, that indefinable echo, of the whole multitudinous life of man” which is the sign of a great work of fiction. This same extensiveness James now attributed to the interests of Sainte-Beuve. By 1884 he declared, “the measure of my enjoyment of a critic is the degree to which he resembles Sainte-Beuve.”

James’s extensive experience as a writer inevitably altered his criticism; he spoke more and more from his own authority and experience. “The Art of Fiction” (1884) was a thoughtful declaration of principles which in part points out that the novel is a direct impression of life and that its value depends upon the intensity of the impression. The writer must work from reality and experience, but reality has myriad forms, and experience is never complete; “. . . it is an immense sensibility . . . it is the very atmosphere of the mind; and when the mind is imaginative . . . it converts the very pulses of the air into revelations.” “Imagination assisting,” the artist can deal with anything. Experience is practically constituted of the gifts which are designated as imagination, “. . . the power to guess the unseen from the seen, to trace the implications of things, to judge the whole piece by the pattern, the condition of feeling life

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27 North American Review, CXXX (Jan., 1880), 56.
29 Ibid., p. 130.
30 “Matthew Arnold,” English Illustrated Magazine, I (Jan., 1884), 242. He held that Arnold resembled Sainte-Beuve, with a larger horizon on the side of religion. But he was on the whole “less complete, less inevitable.”
in general so completely that you are well on your way to knowing any particular corner of it."32

This declaration of principles explains why in James’s criticism the imagination is so emphasized, why it is the ground of so many of his discriminations, and why he insists upon a description of the artist’s imagination as part of the discussion of his work. And with his enlarging view of criticism as practised by Sainte-Beuve, James was shortly to remark that works of art grow more interesting as one studies their connections; indeed, the study of connections is a function of intelligent criticism.33

When he again defined the purpose of criticism (1891), he made everything depend upon the qualifications of the critic. “Curiosity and sympathy” form his equipment. “To lend himself, to project himself and steep himself, to feel and feel till he understands and to understand so well that he can say, to have perception at the pitch and passion and expression as embracing as the air, to be infinitely curious and incorrigibly patient, and yet plastic and inflammable and determinable . . . these are fine chances for an active mind.”34 This is complete reversal of the early stand, and James characterized himself when he spoke of “the critic . . . who has, a priori, no rule for a literary production but that it shall have genuine life.”35

The later critical essays frequently reconsider figures James had discussed. All of them emphasize the importance of the artist’s imaginative penetration of his subject in ways which parallel James’s view of the importance of a sympathetic, flexible approach in the critic. But the essays are now the technical criticism of “a man of the craft,” as James termed himself. Flaubert seemed to him now the artist “not only disinterested but absolutely dishumanised”; his failure was not that he went too far, but that he stopped short and refused to listen at the chamber of the soul.36 Yet James praised Madame Bovary as a triumph of the artist’s imagination; Flaubert had made the form of the novel interesting, without making the form obtrusive.37 James’s criticism of the erotic novels of Serao and d’Annunzio was not a quarrel with subject matter, but with artistic disproportion and incompleteness; they ignored too much of life. Zola was deficient when it came to private subjects; he could deal only with “the promiscuous and the collective.” The great lesson of Zola was that without taste, the imagination could it-

32 Ibid., p. 389.
34 Ibid., p. 276.
35 Views and Reviews, p. 227.
36 Essays in London, pp. 132, 156.
self break down, as in Zola’s later novels. Appeal to “science” seemed to James no mitigation of Zola’s folly; for the artist, “science” is his consciousness of life.38 In the best of his novels, Zola was saved by his immersion in his subject, not by his theory. But beyond a certain point, like Balzac, he failed; neither could deal effectively with the life of the mind, or with the “cultivated consciousness.”39

All the last critical essays bear a family resemblace; the artistic problem is always the general subject, as it was of the great series of Prefaces written between 1907 and 1909 for the New York edition of James’s own work. Nothing essentially new was added to the definitions of criticism or of the imagination until a final statement of the effect of criticism showed an entirely different concern. It was a plea for appreciation of method from the reader and an implied demand that the writer satisfy a cultivated interest in it, the final development of James’s concern for composition and dislike of everything loose and formless.

The effect, if not the prime office, of criticism, is to make our absorption and our enjoyment of the things that feed the mind as aware of itself as possible, since that awareness quickens the mental demand, which thus in turn wanders further and further for pasture. This action on the part of the mind practically amounts to a reaching out for the reasons of its interest, as only by its so ascertaining them can the interest grow more various. This is the very education of our imaginative life . . . we cease to be instinctive and at the mercy of chance.40

James’s criticism reveals the growth of an artistic mind of high quality, and the evolution of his standards explains the changed estimates of writers he repeatedly considered. This itself is sufficient ground of interest. But there is further enrichment in seeing the advocate of “science and logic” turning from judgment to “justness of characterization” and at last to “deep appreciation,” with a final word that the very education of the reader’s imaginative life must be a prime office of criticism.

38 Ibid., p. 54. James put the matter succinctly in his Prefaces. “With a relation not imaginative to his material the story-teller has nothing whatever to do.” The Art of the Novel, p. 106.
39 Notes on Novelists, p. 156f.
40 Ibid., p. 315.