HENRY JAMES AND MR. VAN WYCK BROOKS

By Edna Kenton

BEFORE Mr. Brooks gave us his study of an expatriated American artist in "The Pilgrimage of Henry James", he had, in "The Ordeal of Mark Twain", pondered the problem of an American writer who stayed at home; and any attentive reader of that earlier book, still wondering why he ever published it, must approach this latest essay in criticism warily. For, beginning with the unstabilized premise that Mark Twain was "the born, predestined artist", he surrendered the premise, midway, to truth. At page 150, he admits his artist's "lack of any sense of proportion", his "rudimentary judgment", his "rudimentary cultural sense". "Quite on a par with his reckless juvenility of judgment was Mark Twain's æsthetic sense. . . . What did he like? In painting, Landseer . . . in music, the Jubilee Singers . . . in poetry, Kipling . . . and this general order of taste remained his to the end." Reflect on these lacks in a "born, predestined artist"; and reflect likewise on Mr. Brooks's lack of reflection. For he canceled neither beginning nor middle — he rounded his circle and published, seemingly without any awareness of what had happened in midstream to logic or to Mark Twain.

"The Pilgrimage of Henry James", by all the internal evidence, sprang not from a subject but a syllogism that lacked its middle term: "All expatriates are failures. —— was an expatriate. Therefore, —— was a failure." The list of American expatriate failures is long. Perhaps William Wetmore Story came to mind. But William Story's pilgrimage had been done — by Henry James. Henry James was an expatriate. Ergo. And Q. E. D.

Now, to start upon such a quest as that of Henry James's uncharted country with a theory strapped to one's feet instead of winged curiosity poised within the mind, is a very dangerous undertaking. Fatigue can blind the traveler to signposts, and after several years of search that failed to find, Mr. Brooks has given us a weary little book that can be best compared, as to method, with M. R. Werner's "Barnum". He has, that is, "rewritten" James; and if "The Pilgrimage" falls, as good rewriting, considerably below the level — whatever that may be — of the Werner-Barnum opus, the reason need not puzzle us. Mr. Werner was not baffled by his subject; and we picture him beside his shallow stream, fishing easily for little pearls. But Mr. Brooks, after a long period of attempted communion with his figure — and only one who has so attempted can feel due compassion for him — faced a mass of material — above all, terms — that no amount of logic could clarify. *Above all, terms.* He has simply not translated. Yet this is his "Foreword":

> Readers who are familiar with Henry James will observe that many phrases and even longer passages have been incorporated in the text of this book, usually without any indication of their source. The author has resorted to this expedient because he knows of no other means of conveying with strict accuracy at moments what he conceives to have been James's thoughts and feelings.

It is an expedient that carries with it a certain originality — compiling a serious thesis almost entirely from quotation and rewritten matter, without so much as a footnote for page and line. But if Mr. Brooks had cast about for disaster instead of expediency he could not have chosen a road strewn thicker with traps. To write about what one does not understand is safer than to paraphrase what one does not understand. In the first case, fortuitous accident may play; in the second, the original text settles the matter. It settles it, that is, if page and line can be found.

And just exactly here it is that this expedient seems less a means for strict accuracy than a royal road to laxity. Few readers — even the most devoted — of Henry James know his hundred odd volumes well enough — let pass the "incorporated" uncollected work — to check this method, as it should be checked, every step of the way. We are used to "Studies" that do not study; to "Lives" that do not live; but this is an aftermath of undocumented partial quotation and muddled paraphrasing the like of which has not happened before to a great and special case in letters. "The Pilgrimage of Henry James" adds a new terror to death.

In a spirit of real curiosity, fortified by a knowledge of sources that could check by the way, I have read this book. My copy is enriched with a wealth of marginal notations — the fruit of a leisurely day spent at the source — exactly volume and page for all but two of Mr. Brooks's quotations and re-renditions. It was worthwhile to go back; only the context can show the strength with which desire for proof has wrenched quotation out of context; and only the original text of the paraphrase can keep compassion lively for his bewildered state.

For example: At one point, pressing hard on the Puritan note in James, his concern for "morality" and "conscience", Mr. Brooks says: "Had he not summed up his admiration for George Eliot by saying that her touchstone is the word respectable?"

This is a question that deserves an answer, and it shall have it. James summed up his admiration for George Eliot in the preface to "The Princess Casamassima" (1908): the quintessence of nine essays on her and an abiding interest in her over a period of more than forty years. The paper from which Mr. Brooks raises his head inquiringly lies in "The Atlantic Monthly", October, 1866, several years before her two greatest novels appeared, forty two years before the Prefaces offered aid to critics, and when James himself was just twenty three years of age. And exactly what he said then was this:

"The word which sums up the common traits of our author's various groups is the word *respectable.*" After citing characters in confirmation, he went on: "They all share this fundamental trait — that in each of them passion proves itself feebler than conscience." And he concluded: "In morals her problems are still the old passive problems. . . . Unless in the case of Savonarola she has made no attempt to depict a conscience taking on itself great and novel responsibilities." Now I called that, when I first came on it — written by a Boston boy of twenty three, in 1866 — interesting, and a little clue to follow. But I do not know what to call Mr. Brooks's use of it, or his ignorance of the grounds on which James based his admiration of Eliot, unless I call this, too, interesting, and a little clue to follow.

Another example, more serious because the quotation is so "selected" from context, is his summing up of

James's opinion of Ibsen. To James, he says, "Ibsen was scarcely anything but a 'provincial of provincials . . . ugly, common, hard, prosaic, bottomlessly bourgeois'." James expressed himself on Ibsen in "Essays in London", in "Notes on Novelists", in an old periodical of 1897, and in the preface to "The Awkward Age" (XVIII-XXI). But Mr. Brooks took most of his seemingly direct quotation from another source, from a letter to Julian Sturgis in "The Letters of Henry James" (volume I, 212). This quotation calls for all the context:

My dear Julian:
I wish I had your gift of facile and fascinating rhyme, — I would turn it to account to thank you for your note and your sympathy. Yes, Ibsen is ugly, common, hard, prosaic, bottomlessly bourgeois — and with his distinction so far *in*, as it were, so behind doors and beyond vestibules, that one is excusable for not pushing one's way to it. And yet of his art he's a master — and I feel in him, to the pitch of almost intolerable boredom, the presence and the insistence of life. On the other hand, his mastery, so bare and lean as it is, would n't count nearly so much in any medium in which the genus was otherwise represented. In *our* sandy desert even this translated octopus (excuse the confusion of habitats!!!) sits alone, and isn't kept in his place by relativity.

Lacking one phrase, Mr. Brooks appears here to be caught red handed in the act of quoting James in the act of quoting Sturgis. The lacking phrase, "a provincial of provincials", he most untidily lifted from the Note on John Gabriel Borkman, in "Notes on Novelists" (page 425). The quotation here must be incomplete, but enough can be given to stir inquiry: did he read beyond the first line? or did he filch a phrase as a college boy might for a debate? or does he use Scripture like the Devil?

The author who, at the age of seventy, a provincial of provincials, turns out "John Gabriel", is frankly for me so much one of the peculiar pleasures of the day, one of the current strong sensations, that, erect as he still seems to stand, I deplore his extreme maturity, and, thinking of what shall happen, look round in vain for any other possible source of the same kind of emotion. . . .

If the spirit is a lamp within us, glowing through what the world and the flesh make of us as through a ground glass shade, then such pictures as Little Eyolf and John Gabriel are each a *chassez-croisez* of lamps burning, as in tasteless parlours, with the flame practically exposed. . . . The author nevertheless arrives at the dramatist's great goal — he arrives for all his meagreness at intensity. The meagreness, which is after all but an unconscious, an admirable economy, never interferes with that: it plays straight into the hands of his rare mastery of form. The contrast between this form — so difficult to have reached, so "evolved", so civilised — and the bareness and bleakness of his little northern democracy, is the source of half the frugal charm he puts forth. . . . Well in the very front of the scene lunges with extraordinary length of arm the Ego against the Ego and rocks in a rigour of passion the soul against the soul. . . . Down from that desolation the sturdy old symbolist comes this time with a supreme example of his method. It is high wonder and pleasure to welcome such splendid fruit from sap that might by now have shown something of the chill of age. Never has he juggled more gallantly with difficulty and danger than in this really prodigious "John Gabriel", in which a great span of tragedy is taken between three or four persons — a trio of the grim and grizzled — in the two or three hours of a winter's evening; in which the whole thing throbs with an actability that fairly shakes us as we read. . . .

It is one thing for a critic to be mistaken in his estimate of a writer; that is his own small affair. It is another thing for Mr. Brooks, "summing up", to be mistaken in Henry James's estimates of special cases; this is a larger affair and one not his own. When he speaks of James's "adored Thackeray", is it because he has never read or, reading, has not understood, "Winchelsea, Rye, and Denis Duval" — subtle, very; Jamesian, altogether; in camera, quite, but also in English: or even the mention of Thackeray, *plus context*, in the preface to "The Tragic Muse"? But, though a mention in James is as good as

a mile, you must have walked your mile with him first. Mr. Brooks is a poor pedestrian. When he essays "conveying with strict accuracy James's thoughts and feelings" — "If he had been able to read the universe into his own country as Balzac had read it into his France . . ." a sincere curiosity rises as to whether, if Mr. Brooks were locked up for a year and a day with everything James has written on Balzac — everything — he could emerge clear on just two things: first, that Balzac's great attempt, as repeatedly stated by James, had been to read the universe into his France; and, second, that Balzac's great failure, as repeatedly stated by James, was that he failed to do this. When he says: "To the end of his life James cherished for Zola a respect that, in him, we find almost inexplicable save as the result of some profound impression that he had received in his youth", there is, happily, recourse other than to childhood's unhappy hours and misapplied Freud: there is the text — the Zola essay in "Notes on Novelists", the introduction to the Vizetelly "Nana" of 1887, again the Prefaces, and any "mention". James *did* have a respect for Zola, but it is not "inexplicable". For he explains it fully — quite fully.

The numerous imitations of Henry James in meditation unfortunately do not oblige because they do not accurately render, as the Balzac imbroglio clearly shows. The method used for the notable Ibsen quotation — catching up a phrase here, another there, consummating the union by a few connubial dots, with no marriage licenses, birth records, or divorce papers offered by way of footnotes and good faith, has been the method employed to the *nth* degree of polygamy in the indirect rewriting process. Naturally, all the "relations" are mixed, and not until Mr. Brooks has made Henry James's definition of relations his own can he sound the proper note of repentance. On page 23, for just one instance, he is musing over Newport in the master's manner and in a veritable "stew" of the master's words; the Newport (among other things it was not, to James's really acute vision) of the "inverted romantics". He picked up that distinguished phrase from "Notes of a Son and Brother", and any reader sufficiently curious may refer to pages 475–478 of that book, to discover for himself to what or to whom the phrase refers. It is a small matter, but the reader will rise up from the brief research with an eternal query over the "strict accuracy" of the incorporate method, as well as with a touch of sympathy for Mr. Brooks's task in elucidation. His sentences parse, his verbs have subject and object, but they are not the subjects and objects of James's verbs — at least, not often.

He betrays no perception of James's prime quality: irony may be, of course, easily mistaken for other things, including, in these days, grave complexes; but he mistakes the quality itself when he says that James, when writing of young girls, "abandons his irony"; when he lists Maggie Verver of "The Golden Bowl" with "innocent cat's paws"; when he speaks of Milly Theale of "The Wings of the Dove" as "victim of the basest plot that ever mind conceived". And this, perhaps, is the secret of his mishap; he has read James seriously, not lightly; which means, of course, that he has still to read James seriously enough.

Why did James go abroad and stay abroad? It is an interesting question, and worth a book's span, if, that is, the question is answered. A sentence could answer it, but to that sentence the author of "The Pilgrimage" is hardly entitled just now. However,

if one said that James went abroad to be closer to the American scene, the proof would take some doing, but it could be done. Or if one said that he went abroad to know himself to be farther from Europe than Mark Twain and his Innocents conceived themselves to be, that would take more doing, but it might be done — and without tears.

Why did James advise other writers to stay at home? This is a good question, and Mr. Brooks asks it. "Why", he queries, "did he write of Mrs. Wharton; 'She *must* be tethered in native pastures, even if it reduces her to a backyard in New York'— adding that this was the pure essence of his wisdom and experience? Why did he write to Mrs. Wharton herself: 'Your only drawback is not having the homeliness and the inevitability and the happy limitation and the affluent poverty of a country of your own'?"

Well, as Mr. Brooks often says in these ruminative pages, "we can only assume". But let us assume here, aided by context; and very interesting these contexts are — in "The Letters" (I, 396; II, 285). For the first, the context is Mrs. Wharton's "The Valley of Decision", a novel of eighteenth century Italy; for the second, the context is Mrs. Wharton's "The Reef", a novel laid in modern Paris. Perhaps — just perhaps — James was placing no restrictions of "country" on anything but Mrs. Wharton's pen. If, for instance, you know New York and not eighteenth century Italy, or if, though you know Paris, your point of view is not quite yet Parisian, and the works betray these alien notes, discard the Italian setting and the "vague and elegant French colonnade" for Manhattan, as the *mise-en-scène*, the "tone". On the other hand, if you are to be truly "international", really a citizen of the world, it may necessitate, for reasons of "art" and the "dark psychologic" and all else, "expatriation" from any native soil whatever, and the creating of a Country of your Own. Perhaps in this way, and in this way only, the native soil becomes the Sacred Fount.

But the treadmill of the syllogism does away with the game of "constatations" — the word is James's own coined one for special illuminations. Mr. Brooks has merely gone through James and has come out at the gate he went in, weary and unillumined. And yet he put this book together. Why did he do it? This is another interesting question, particularly when carried to the light so often turned on to explain the pilgrimage of Henry James. "The Pilgrimage of Henry James" and "The Ordeal of Mark Twain", if not too carefully examined, can serve for the apologia of all frustrated artists who are American citizens. Choosing Mark Twain's way, or the path of Henry James, success will be in spite of either road, not because of it. To live or not to live in these States? — It is a perilous choice to make.