

H.G. Wells and Henry James: An Unnoticed Item

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The unlikely friendship between H.G. Wells and Henry James has long been of interest to students of the art of the novel. James was originally a warm admirer of Wells's novels, so different from his own, as we see in the letters collected by Leon Edel and Gordon N. Ray in *Henry James and H.G. Wells* (1958); there is some evidence that Wells reciprocated the admiration, though not very much, since most of Wells's letters to James have not survived. But on 9th April 1913 he wrote enthusiastically to James about the latter's autobiographical volume, *A Small Boy and Others*. The friendship turned sour in 1914 when James published a long essay on contemporary novelists, 'The Younger Generation', in which he subjected Wells's recent fiction to muffled but distinctly unfavourable criticism; Wells, in turn, parodied and lampooned James in *Boon* in 1915, and the friendship ended, though not without regrets and misgivings on Wells's part. The implications of this literary relationship have been discussed by Edel and Ray, and more recently by Patrick Parrinder and Robert M. Philmus in *H.G. Wells's Literary Criticism* (1980). Parrinder and Philmus reprint Wells's earliest critical discussion of James's fiction, in a review of *Terminations*, published in the *Saturday Review* in 1895. He senses the quality of James's short stories, but is repelled by the complications of the narrative manner: "We could be enthusiastic over these stories were we not exasperated by the thorns and briars of style we have traversed to appreciate them". The reservations expressed in this review seem to anticipate the much more substantial attacks on James's obliquity and difficulty that Wells made twenty years later in *Boon*. But before long he was to overcome his early reservations and appear in public as a vehement defender of James's art; this much is apparent in the following letter, published in the *Morning Post* on 13th October 1900 and not previously noticed by writers about the relationship between James and Wells. On 11th October the newspaper published a hostile review of James's book of short stories, *The Soft Side*, that treated it rather as Wells had treated *Terminations* five years before, though in a patronizingly arch tone, asking how a candidate for the Civil Service would fare if he were asked to make a précis, not of official documents, but of some of James's stories: "Would he not complain of being asked to make bricks without straw, to search for a plot where there is only prattle?" Two days later the *Morning Post* published Wells's letter defending James; the same issue carried an editorial repeating the criticisms of *The Soft Side* whilst ironically commending Wells on his lack of professional jealousy in leaping to the defence of a fellow novelist.

"The Soft Side"

To the Editor of The Morning Post

SIR, — There is surely a limit to the permissible oddness of a review, and surely that limit is passed in your treatment of "The Soft Side," the new

collection of stories by Mr Henry James. Your reviewer's case seems to be that the stories would puzzle Civil Service candidates if they had to make a précis of them, but why your reviewer got on that tack only Heaven and your reviewer know. It is perfectly true, of course, but then it is true that you could not use them for election addresses nor copy them out as your own original love-letters nor find your way about Italy with them if you took them instead of a Baedeker. But then no one, except possibly your reviewer, would ever try to do so. One gathers he has "searched for a plot and found only prattle." I like the suggestion of that conscientious search. First find your plot — the "plot" of a short story! "Where the devil is the plot?" He turns at last to the only apparent substitute, "the prattle," or mere writing, in despair. "The prattle is highly polished and pleasant, but it is decidedly thin," he writes, too evidently with a natural sympathy for thickness. Imagine a comparison on these lines between "Tristram Shandy" and "Called Back." Imagine your reviewer transferring his natural gift to the treatment of a kindred art, and comparing a portrait by Rembrandt with Frith's "Derby Day," all to the advantage of the latter. "The copyist of Mr Rembrandt," he would say, "searches for a good hard, definite outline in vain. Over great spaces there is nothing painted — absolutely nothing but prattling colour — 'incoherent' brush marks and their 'drift quite unascertainable'."

His review cuts me the more keenly because "The Great Good Place," concerning which story he uses this phrase, "a succession of incoherent remarks and its drift quite unascertainable," has been a source of particular delight to me. I have read and re-read it many times. It seems to me to be just one of those happy, perfect things that come to reward the good artist for many laborious, not quite perfect, days. And then — your reviewer's voice is heard. I cannot imagine the lack of imagination that fails to see that restful place Mr James has so happily invented. That "Europe," which your reviewer calls "heavy talk," is really a quite amazing portrait of a dreadful old woman; and the cousin in "Paste," the widow in "The Real Right Thing," and that delightful magazine editor in "John Delavoy" live and entertain — as very few figures in fiction do entertain. Even the larking in "Maud Evelyn" and "The Third Person" struck me as exceptionally good fun.

And the word "prattle" in connection with Mr Henry James, and the length and position of the review, and generally the whole thing, are matters that stir me to protest. I suppose that no one who has given a year's serious thought to the art of English fiction will dispute that Mr James is one of the three living great masters of that art, as an art; that with Mr George Meredith and (conceivably) Mr Hardy he forms a group of seniors that the younger writers ripen only to respect, and that so soon as the market bawling of these present times has died away he will come to his own place. Evidently there is a section of the public to whom the qualities of his work are "quite unascertainable"; and, though I should doubt whether they form a large proportion of *Morning Post* readers, I can understand that it is reasonable for a daily paper to give a warning that for the after-dinner reading of dull people Mr James will not do. But it seems to me to be considering and indulging that sort of person altogether too much to present Mr James in the manner of your review. Surely in the past Mr James has undergone a sufficiently ample amount of the sort of punishment a reviewer

may inflict for the perplexing distinction of his work. What harm can there be, and who is going to suffer to any appreciable extent, if, temperately and modestly, and without any attempt to direct the natural direction of the "boom" current, the indisputable fact that Mr James is, after all, no mere obscure novelist in a crowd, but a very considerable Literary Swell indeed, is permitted occasionally to appear?
Yours, &c.,

Oct. 12. 1900

H.G. WELLS.

(This letter is dealt with in our leading columns.)

Book Review

J. R. Hammond, *An H.G. Wells Companion*, Macmillan, 1979, 288 pps., index, illustrations, £12.

Although one has many good friends in the Wells Society, and when one thinks of Britain and H.G. Wells (as I do every day of my life) I can conjure up many faces and many happy times; in fact, John Hammond is the person most likely to come to mind when I think of the Society, and especially when I have a query about Wells. I suppose much the same thing is true of many others for whom Hammond, as the long time secretary of the Society, remains the source of knowledge on H.G. W. This book provides much of that knowledge for us in a readily accessible form and it also allows us to think about Hammond's views of the fiction of Wells, to quarrel with it perhaps, to accept much of it, to rethink our own views, but to have, as the book's title suggests, a companion to Wells, which is what John Hammond is and has been through his role in the Society.

It is not a complete guide to Wells at all. Its focus is almost entirely on the fiction, including the short stories (or many of them). Very little of the journalism is mentioned, and almost none of the important works of prognostication, social engineering, philosophy, speculation, and science that also gushed forth from Wells's pen and mind. This is not because Hammond does not know these works, but this book is one of a series to be a companionate source to English authors. The others in the series, Jane Austen, the Brontës, Hardy and Lawrence help place the provenance of this book exactly.

There is a brief introduction to Wells, and an essay on his literary reputation, neither of which are startling. This is followed by a dictionary listing of the items that fit into the fictional canon with a brief descriptive note on each item. A section on the short stories occurs and a detailed summary (a page or two for each) of all the romances, and then the novels. There then follows what Hammond calls a key to all the characters and locations utilized in Wells's work of this nature. A brief appendix listing film versions is very useful, and the obligatory notes, and bibliography are appended as