

Yes, you Mr James!

WHEN dealing with the work of our most respected writers, as here we are dealing with the latest novel by Mr Henry James, an author who, notwithstanding the occasional infelicity (for surely Mr James would, as a dedicated artist, subscribe to the truth of the acute observation that *Keine Kunst ist makellos*), and who has hitherto demonstrated beyond the doubt of any man that he is the master of his craft, we concern ourselves with such a colossus of prose that we are obliged to proceed with caution and circumspection.

It is, indeed, eminently advisable that both are observed if the purpose of one's endeavour, as it is here, is to evaluate and finally to pass judgment; and when, perforce, such a task is undertaken in the atmosphere of perpetual rivalry which is the natural state of all artistic community and with which weekly we are confronted, whether in the cultural pages of our journals or in London's many salons where the sharpest minds of art and criticism gather to exchange views and cogitate, both are essential.

Your correspondent can with pleasure concede and affirm that this latest offering from Mr James does not just equal the achievements and standards of his previous work, but, one might venture, comes close to exceeding the excellence we have come to expect from the pen of our most welcome American cousin.

With the deftest touch and the subtlest coloratura, such that one is almost unaware of the workings of his pen and of its warp and weft, Mr James seems again to have brought to life, in a manner he now surely has made his own and one which only a dullard from the furthest shire would not appreciate, another of his inimitable heroines and the exquisite details of her, to all appearances, thoughtful and complex existence.

It is here, however, when discussing the plight and subtle inner life of Mr James's latest and most charming young protagonist, that your correspondent, having considered the matter deeply, and, not least, having equally considered the unprecedented nature of his intention, must gather in one committed purpose from every nook and cranny of his being the necessary courage to dare to venture beyond the bounds of critical appraisal, and, alas, sound a distinctly discordant note.

What is amiss? What need for courage might there be? Your correspondent's fear is thus: once having broken those bounds will he ever be forgiven? Is there any likelihood that a pardon for such gross violation might perhaps be possible? Will the arbiters on such matters, before whose grave pronouncements we cower, such is the severity of their will and whim, be inclined to indulge a young critic, one who can try to justify his behaviour only as he counts himself, however humbly, in matters literary as a fellow of Mr James's fraternity?

Will these arbiters find themselves able to forgive a transgression so keen that all who hear of it, laymen and colleagues, will be so awed and shocked by its professional perfidy that any thought of a benign resolution to the matter must be banished for ever? Could salvation, of each and any kind, ever be contemplated, in as far as, unpunished, such perfidy will surely increase the danger of encouraging in other, younger, men the notion of emulating such disorder?

These and other unavoidable matters have haunted the anguished mind of your correspondent since first he began to read Mr James's new novel, and when, with each page read, then turned to reveal its next, he came to comprehend the sorrowful essence of his dissatisfaction; all too soon he grew aware of the dictate of an obligation, one, he knew, he could not ignore or try to evade, however much obeying it constituted a transgression of the norms of his profession, a transgression, moreover, whose consequences, he was certain, would mortally offend his peers.

Yet such is the nature of honour that it must of necessity be reckoned as a whole, that there can never be a half-honourable response; and if honour, at its sacred core, is not just a personal matter, but a matter of soul and integrity, one without which no man, however gifted, might dare call himself an artist or ever espouse the calling of any muse, any challenge to it, real or imagined, must be countered, forcefully and with noble conviction, and for the true artist no such evasion can ever be contemplated, let alone indulged.

Three years ago, your present correspondent, who though here he functions as a humble critic, for he is, as are all, obliged to provide for himself and his family, but who away from his desk, away from his official pen and inkwell, is otherwise a man of far loftier ambition, a man at one with the hopes and plans that surely once were shared in their younger days by all in the fraternity of which Mr James is a leading light, published a modest book, a novel, a slim fiction called *The Widow Of Romford*.

It is not for your correspondent to express admiration for his own work, but he may report that some fellow critics, unaware of the book's provenance, were kind enough to praise some aspects of it, the working out of its themes and their astute expression.

Imagine, then, your correspondent's dismay, given both the modesty of his station and an awareness of the elevated position of Mr James, when, upon reading the first few pages of Mr James's new novel and continuing to its conclusion, he could not ignore what he found so familiar and recognised so easily.

The outlines of Mr James's protagonist and her situation were all so much alike those of the heroine of his own work and her situation; the nature of his protagonist's dilemma, her vicious adversary and that adversary's eventual nemesis were more than just a distinct echo of the details he described in his own production.

Your correspondent assured himself, or essayed such charity, that he should be flattered that a talent so much greater than he possessed had, by chance, created so similar a fiction to his own; he reminded himself that no honest man of literary standing would do what only the most febrile mind would dare to suspect had indeed been done; there could, he told himself, be no question that nothing but modest happenstance and mere coincidence were devilishly at play.

Yet functioning as both prosecutor and defending attorney was impossible; and he found himself unequal to the task of performing both roles, vital though each was to the imperatives of equity and justice. He could not persuade himself to forget that many artists such as Mr James were not obliged for a pittance to read twenty bad novels a week and compose two thousand words on each, words forgotten almost sooner than composed. He could not deny that each night at supper a man like Mr James enjoyed the keenest, most informed and delightful company, while artists such as he had no company of an evening but a glass of weak porter, a fat wife and two screaming children.

Finally thus unable to banish such thoughts from his mind, your correspondent resolved, however his transgression of accepted norms might prove to be unforgivable, that he was obliged to make a choice; he allowed himself to acknowledge that the paths of self-respect and honesty were the only paths a true artist might tread; and thus he has trodden them. If damnation is to be his fate, he welcomes it as an honourable one.