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GERTRUDE ATHERTON AND HENRY JAMES

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IN her autobiography, Gertrude Atherton states that during 1904 she wrote "a long short story of which Henry James was the hero and called it 'The Bell in the Fog'"¹ This was the title story of a collection published in New York in 1905, dedicated, by permission, to "The Master, Henry James." Mrs. Atherton, in her mid-forties at this time, had published sixteen novels and a volume of short stories; several works dealt with the international theme associated with James. She had read James in her youth, and while in London in 1904 she met him on three occasions.² Her story "The Bell in the Fog" records in cryptic fashion her impressions of James.

Ralph Orth is a successful novelist of fifty. American by birth, he has lived for years in England, and upon inheriting some money has at last gratified his desire to own a country estate. In the gallery of the old house he is attracted to the portraits of two charming children, identified in the catalogue as the Viscount Tancred and the Lady Blanche Mortlake, son and daughter of the second Earl of Teignmouth. From the present Earl, Orth discovers only that the charming children died in childhood. Nearly obsessed with the appeal of the pictures, Orth finds himself imagining the children in the various rooms of the old house, and finally he writes a story about them. It proves to be a great literary success. Returning to his estate, he is startled to meet a little girl resembling the Blanche of the picture, and named Blanche Root. She proves to be the

¹ *Adventures of a Novelist* (New York, 1932), pp. 374-375.

² At a tea Mrs. Atherton told James of her youthful enthusiasm for him. Later, when calling on Lady Colin Campbell, Mrs. Atherton discovered that James, not she, was the expected caller. A third time Mrs. Atherton saw James at a luncheon at Sidney Lee's. A few days later she wrote him, asking permission to dedicate her volume of stories to him. "I told him that I had been much under his influence when I began to write but had withdrawn. . . ."

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daughter of an American woman who is visiting English relatives in the vicinity. Learning from these neighbors that the Blanche of the picture was involved in a love affair, Orth seeks out the sister of the present Earl, who tells him that Blanche, instead of dying in childhood, lived to be twenty-four. After her marriage, she had a love affair with a yeoman, which ended in the suicide of both. Orth returns once more to his estate, and becomes a constant companion of the young American Blanche. Finally he shows her the painting of the earlier Blanche, but is surprised to learn that she has already seen it many times. Not only that; she has discovered and makes known to Orth a secret spring which reveals behind the child's picture a likeness of the early Blanche as a young lady. Orth soon offers to adopt his little American friend, promising her everything she may wish. The girl is unaccountably startled, and shortly falls into ill health. When the mother is called back to America by difficulties of her other children, Orth proposes again that he adopt Blanche, pleading the many advantages he can give her. Finally the decision is left to Blanche, who refuses to stay with Orth because she is needed by her brothers and sisters. To this Orth says: "if they are made of the right stuff, the memory of you will be quite as potent for their own good as your actual presence." To this Blanche replies, "Not unless I died." So Blanche returns to America, and later Orth learns of her death. The story concludes: "And when, a year later he received her last little scrawl, he was almost glad she went when she did."

In this story are several obvious Jamesian themes, quite ingeniously combined. There is first the use of a portrait of remarkable quality as a motif. "The Liar" (1888) employs a portrait as a means of exposing the title character. The theme of adopting an appealing child is also a favorite with James, as in *Watch and Ward* (1871); in this early novelette a wealthy bachelor adopts a young girl and later falls in love with her. In *What Maisie Knew* (1897) Maisie's

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rejection of her step-parents in favor of Mrs. Wix, the housekeeper, is a partial parallel. A third Jamesian theme in Mrs. Atherton's story is the psychic overtone in Blanche's "reincarnation" of the portrait, and in her odd premonition of death. Finally, and most important, is the renunciation of Ralph Orth by the little girl, who explains that "my brothers and sisters need me." This simple explanation seems to mask the child's intuitive recognition that to preserve her independence she must reject Orth as, for example, Isabel Archer rejects Lord Warburton in *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881).

What is the point of Mrs. Atherton's story? One reviewer threw up his hands at the whole volume of stories, grumbling that "if anyone can tell what they are all about or why they were written it is Mr. James, and professional ethics will probably seal his lips."³ Another reviewer readily identified Ralph Orth with James himself ("Aut Jacobus, aut diabolus."),⁴ but went no further in explaining the story, though he found it "a charming tale."

The title, "The Bell in the Fog," obviously signifies a warning, but precisely how does this apply to the story? The isolation of Orth, the successful author of American birth, is parallel to that of Henry James in 1904, at least in Mrs. Atherton's view. "He had lost his large public during his second phase and was little read now save by intellectuals," she comments in her autobiography (p. 374). But what of Blanche, the little American in whom the old portrait is so mysteriously reincarnated? The fact that she is an American visiting in Europe may be significant. Would Ralph Orth have noticed her if he had merely encountered her on a trip to his native America? The story emphasizes that it is the resemblance to the old portrait which attracts Orth to Blanche. In a somewhat similar way, it was the foreign setting of Winterbourne's encounter with Daisy Miller

³ *Public Opinion*, XXXVIII, 298 (February, 1905).

⁴ *The New York Times*, X, 114 (February 25, 1905).

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that made him perceive her charm. Such a state of mind with regard to one's own countrymen might well justify a warning bell, and it is interesting to recall that James did set out to rediscover America—with indifferent success—in the very year that Mrs. Atherton wrote her story. The plight of Ralph Orth, then, is a warning to James of his isolation from his old reading public, and from his native country.

What, then, is to be made of Blanche's death? In urging her to remain with him, Orth's argument was that her brothers and sisters would find the memory of her as satisfying as her presence. "Not unless I died," was Blanche's extraordinary reply. In an odd way, Orth's own behavior after her departure illustrates the truth of her insight. For Orth's love of little Blanche was so jealously possessive that it did not survive their physical separation. Had she died while still associated with him, he would have remembered her tenderly. But since she separated from him before she died, "he was almost glad she went when she did." This testifies to a spiritual death within Orth himself. "The Bell in the Fog" was Mrs. Atherton's warning to "the Master" that his artistic victories had been won at too great a price. He had alienated himself not only from his own country, but from the most vital springs of his own earlier genius.⁵

Whether this was actually true is another matter. The story remains a skillful fiction in James's own manner, recording the impression made by "the Master" upon a gifted and sophisticated American woman in 1904.

⁵ A similar warning had been voiced a dozen years earlier by another woman who knew James—Violet Paget, who wrote under the pen-name of Vernon Lee. She too had dedicated a work of fiction to James, and she too later painted her own portrait of him in a work of fiction: see "Henry James and his Tiger-cat," by Carl J. Weber, *PMLA*, 68 (September 1953), 672-695.