



Terminations: The Death of the Lion. The Coxon Fund. The Middle Years. The Altar of the Dead

Henry James

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THE appearance of *Terminations* will in no way shake the general belief in Mr. Henry James's accomplished touch and command of material. On the contrary, it confirms conclusions long since foregone, and will increase the respect of his readers. Only one of the four stories in the volume sees the light for the first time, 'The Altar of the Dead.' 'The Death of the Lion,' 'The Coxon Fund,' and 'The Middle Years' have already appeared elsewhere. In spite of his usual but singular mastery of phrase, suggestion, and minute analysis, there is, as usual, a super-added note of hesitancy, doubt, and uncertainty. It is as though Mr. James, whatever his effect on his readers may be, was never quite pleased with himself; as though throughout his varied and wonderful effects he himself remained the inexorable unsatisfied judge of his own work. In conception and execution 'The Altar of the Dead' stamps itself as very peculiarly his. Scarce any other contemporary man of letters could have brought the same qualities to bear in like degree and proportion, or bestowed the rare and delicate handling he has lavished on this picture of the isolation of two souls. If it at all fail of its full effect, we need not dwell on shortcomings to which the author is himself far more keenly alive than we can be. The human interest may be at times slightly thin and impalpable, but it is not for that unsympathetic nor unbeautiful. The reasons for poor Stransom's cult of the dead are natural accidents, such as death, estrangement, oblivion—abundantly human, and of the stuff of which life is woven. Acute discrimination and expression are throughout mingled with a half-perverse air of subtlety and remoteness that sets Mr. James (author of 'Daisy Miller' though he be!) entirely apart from the heartier and more robust forms of human motive and desire. 'The Coxon Fund' is the one of the four stories that reaches most often, perhaps, the highest point of his inordinate cleverness. A part of it is, however, shrouded in a haze of obscurity, with certain baffling indications of a something moving below the surface that is perpetually grasped at, but never once brought quite to the surface. This submerged and elusive consciousness that is not exactly sentiment and is certainly not incident) is never suffered to emerge clearly nor yet to sink completely. The consequence is the reader, and we suspect the writer also, experience a sense of strain and effort, though confronted with many most amusing and happy effects. With such passages of trenchant wit and sparkling observation, surely in his best manner, Mr. James ought to be as satisfied as his readers cannot fail to be. The relations between the admiring disciple and the accomplished master have often been used by him in fiction. Two of the stories are based on this favourite motive; in each, of course, the situation and treatment are entirely different. 'The Death of the Lion' and 'The Coxon Fund' are concerned with the intrusion of "fashionables" into the sphere of what was once called "literary circles." Mr. James is keenly alive to the jarring of incongruous temperaments, and the humorous and sometimes pathetic misapprehensions and misappreciations that follow on a mixture of opposing elements.

—*The Athenaeum*

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