



Interview: 'A Very Long List of Things I'm Not Doing': An Interview with Philip Horne

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‘A very long list of things
I’m not doing’:
an interview with Philip Horne

by Leo Robson

In his first term at Cambridge, Philip Horne shared a kitchen with a fellow undergraduate who talked endlessly about Henry James. He had studied *The Golden Bowl* at school and expressed the belief that anyone who hadn’t read the book couldn’t understand literature. Horne was left with no option but to do what no undergraduate really wants to do. He spent the Christmas vacation reading *The Golden Bowl*.

If his intention had been to prove his hallmate wrong, the effort was a miserable failure. Horne, now a professor in the UCL English department, devoted the next forty years to reading, rereading, teaching, and editing James’s work. In 1990, he published *Henry James and Revision*, a study of the New York Edition of James’s fiction. Then, after putting together *Henry James: A Life in Letters*, for Penguin, he became general editor of the James titles in the publisher’s Classics series. His work for the publisher has not marked the limits of his editing. He has recently finished a volume containing James’s autobiographies and memorial writing for the Library of America, to celebrate the centenary of James’s death, in February 2016. And he is currently overseeing a scholarly edition of James’s novels and stories, which is being published by Cambridge University Press. Horne will be the volume editor for *The Golden Bowl* and James’s working Notebooks.

Here Professor Horne talks to Leo Robson, cultural critic and the author of an essay about the James industry “The Master’s Servants”, about his obsession with James’s life and work, from inauspicious beginnings to hyperactive present.

Q: You originally started reading James basically out of spite. [Shakes his head.] How did that lead to you writing the PhD which became the book, *Henry James and Revision*?

A: I read James in my spare time through the rest of my degree. I did an American paper, which was taught by Tony Tanner, among other people. Tony taught him in relation to Hawthorne a bit. I remember reading Tony’s book *The Reign of Wonder*, which contains a lot about the novella *A London Life*, which I later edited. I expected him to be my supervisor but a friend of mine was doing Hawthorne and they thought that had to be with Tony. So I got Philip Gaskell, the author of *From Writer to Reader*, a bibliographer, who had an interest in Ezra

Pound, an interest in James Joyce, and no interest in Henry James. He was a nice man, very keen on gadgets. I'd go to see him for twenty minutes every two terms, he'd correct some punctuation, and then show me his gadgets.

Q: Was he interested in revision?

A: Not noticeably. I think as a bibliographer he wouldn't have been very interested in my very Cambridge close reading interest in what I had got by collating the different versions of the texts. In a way, that was alright. It was a blessing in disguise. It gave me an excuse to go back to people who had taught me as an undergraduate and even people who hadn't, like Christopher Ricks. I'd ask people to read bits and pieces: Adrian Poole, Howard Erskine-Hill, Eric Griffiths. This was 1979 to 1983-ish. I got a separate grant to travel to Yale. I can't remember where it came from. I may have got a grant from the college or a prize of some sort. I was never in America for longer than three or four months.

Q: Do you just sit in the library all day long?

A: The nice thing was that you were kicked out at four-thirty and then you couldn't do anything. You could watch a movie. Play video games.

Q: Were you conscious of the rest of the James community squirrelling away on related topics?

A: I certainly knew of Ruth Bernard Yeazell. I think the whole academic world was a bit insular and Cambridge especially. There were already quite a few graduate students – already too many in the sense that there was a job dearth. It was really in 1993, at the conference for the sesquicentennial of James's birth, that I met the rest of the James community. The book was already out by then and so I thought I should show my face and it was an excuse to go to New York. I met a lot of people there – people I've collaborated with since.

Q: Back then, though the universities had expanded, James as a field of study was relatively open. How did you decide what to study?

A: I was a bit of a Ricksian. I'd been going to his lectures. So I knew I wanted to read James with as much attention as you'd read poetry. Revision is a way you can do that – but also you have to do that to get anything out of it.

Q: Was there a particular Eureka moment during the process?

A: My Eureka moment was to do with the convergence of revision and allusion. James revises in order to allude. There's a revision in *Daisy Miller* where Daisy and Winterbourne are coming out of the Coliseum. [Horne takes the book down from the shelf] In the 1883 version, he writes, "He felt the young girl's pretty

eyes fixed upon him through the thick gloom of the archway; she was apparently going to answers.” But the revision goes, “He felt her lighted eyes fairly penetrate the thick gloom of the vaulted passage – as if to seek some access to him she hadn’t yet compassed.” There was something about the revision. The words “passage” and “access”, as well as “thick”, which was there in the original version. It puzzled me for some reason. I suddenly realised it was Lady Macbeth’s soliloquy: “Make thick my blood,/Stop up th’access and passage to remorse”. I thought that James was remembering this speech and drawing on it for his rewriting – the use of “thick”, “passage”, and “access” calling up the idea of “remorse”, and therefore putting an emphasis on the repentance for hardness which comes over Winterbourne. He alludes more when revising the work.

I think the style changes quite a lot in the course of the 1890s. I know there’s a famous moment when he starts dictating, but he also starts feeding in poetical language. Quite often you will look up a phrase – we have been doing that a lot for the Cambridge Edition at the moment to trace allusions - and you’ll see that it is poetic, but it’s in one hundred and fifty minor poems from the nineteenth century but not in any good poetry really. He seems to be using it as part of a conscious way of making people read prose differently. It’s basically become possible to do work like this now. Well you could do it before. I got obsessed with this subject in the early 1980s and wrote a thirty-thousand word essay on James and allusion. I basically just sat for ages in the university library. It’s never been published. I’ve drawn on it quite a lot. I’m thinking of going back to it. I’ve collected rather a lot of them ever since. In the past you had to think quite seriously that something was an allusion before you bothered to look it up in the concordances. You’d think “Keats? Shelley? Wordsworth?” It was amazing I found anything really. It wasn’t that I recognised them from a poem. I just thought there was something about them. I suppose I’ve got an ear for it.

Q. Do you think that Pound and Eliot saw James as a predecessor in allusion?

A. I think James doesn’t allude in that jagged way. They don’t allude in a polite way. With James, you don’t have to get the allusion to see what he’s talking about. Very often they are for his own amusement. Have you looked at Christopher Ricks’s edition of *What Maisie Knew* in the Penguin Classics edition? It’s an amazing thing, the notes are done as an essay – he says you don’t need notes for Henry James because he’s always explaining everything you need to know when he alludes to something you might not be familiar with.

Q. So isn’t that just borrowing, and not allusion?

A Well, he’s playing with it in some way. It’s never inert. He obviously thinks they’re great images, I suppose. The stuff I notice is the stuff that he’s made stand out. It’s a different register. He’s using words and phrases with more weight than the others – they’re coming from somewhere. I’ve got this runaway

James reading group at UCL, which started a few years ago, with graduate students, colleagues, academics from elsewhere, a novelist or two. I needed to find a way to read *The Golden Bowl* very carefully, for the edition. In the end, it got about six sessions and then we went on to other things – like the essay on D’Annunzio. Reading D’Annunzio is what makes him think he can write about the Prince. Once we did *The Golden Bowl*, we moved onto other things.

Q. Why did you choose to edit *The Golden Bowl*?

A: Well, low motives—it’s textually not so complicated. I thought: I can’t face doing all that again. Plus it’s the summit of James. And I was interested in what it would be like to annotate it. People say it’s abstract, but it’s full of references to particular things. I’m supposed to be doing it at the moment. Well, it’s on a very long list of things I’m not doing.

Q. What are the others?

A. I’m also trying to organise things for the James centenary. I’m going over to America because the Library of America volume is coming out. I’m doing a couple of talks and I might do something as well. I’ve got a talk on James and Roosevelt’s autobiographies.

Q. The subjects of a book you’re writing?

A. I’m supposed to be. That’s another thing I’m *not* doing.

Q. Is it almost finished?

A. In some senses. I’ve got fifty thousand words.

Q. A comparative study?

A. It’s sort of biographical, literary-critical, a bit of cultural studies, quite political. If I weren’t doing the Cambridge Edition, that would be done. But the volume editors keep sending them over. The big thing is the notes and the edition. It’s very hard to read a book and just look for notes. When you’re editing a book, you’re thinking about so many things at once and it becomes very easy to be distracted. We’re trying to do things like – if he names a town in Italy or the United States, it’s kind of interesting/relevant to know whether he had been there at that point or if he went there later. If he had been there, what did he say about it? If he hadn’t been there, what would it have signified – was it an industrial town? In scholarly editions, it’s not particularly conventional. We did *Confidence* and Gert Buelens came over because he’s editing it. His edition is coming in so I thought it was a good way of getting me to read it again.

The famous ones have had critical or scholarly editions. But they wouldn't have the full variants. Our remit is historical. The introductions are about genesis, sources, inspiration, composition, publication, and reception, with some idea of the context – the expatriate community in Paris, that kind of thing.

Q. How does a scholarly edition come about?

A. They write to you – in this case, to me. It was about seven years ago. They were doing a fair number of editions – Austen, Conrad, Lawrence. They asked me if there should be a scholarly edition of Henry James and I said, Yes. So I put in a proposal and then they said Yes. And then I panicked and didn't reply for about six months.

Q. Do people get paid?

A. They are supposed to, though not yet. It is an honour to be doing it. And we hope that this kind of edition will count as a monograph. There seems to be a view that editing is just donkey work. Well there is donkey work in it!

Q. Tell me about editing James's autobiographies for the Library of America. What did it involve?

A. The text is just the first edition – he didn't revise it. The main contribution is the additional material. I asked various people for suggestions – memorial pieces, though nothing that was in the Library of America edition of the criticism done by Leon Edel and Mark Wilson in 1985. Some that got left out of the criticism. His essay on Charles Eliot Norton, for example. They were incredibly good, those volumes. But if they left something out, it was because there was so much. And I wrote a note on the text. I consulted some previous books and saw there could be a bit of style to them – they can be expressive, whereas we've got a fairly austere remit on the Cambridge Edition. It is a very good operation. They give you somebody to work with – in my case, James Gibbons. We were almost collaborating on the notes.

I was very glad to do it. I never thought I'd get to do one, mainly because I'm not American. And with the Cambridge edition, you put in all this work. You feel you need to do something with your name on it.

Q. Was writing an autobiography a natural thing for a novelist to decide to do?

A. Well, he wasn't supposed to do it in the way he did it. It was supposed to be about his brother. For him, it was "the family book". Obviously by the time of *The Middle Years*, he's on his own in Europe. It comes to be all about him, but it's still about his relationships.

Q. Did novelists do that sort of thing though?

A. I hesitate to say that they didn't.

Q. Do you have any particular thoughts on why Henry James matters in 2016?

A. The closest I could get to an answer is the reading group. There are six or seven members of the MA who join the group each year. It has this very loyal following. James's sense of humour – if you get it, you want more of it. It is a training in reading. Paul Armstrong wrote about James's writing as being didactic in an enlightened way. The level of pleasure is very obvious from this group. We all have a drink at the start. I don't want to exaggerate the effect of the alcohol, but it's not a graduate seminar when you drink afterwards once the serious work is done. We're all enjoying it, even if it gets a bit rowdy sometimes.