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HENRY JAMES, NOVELIST

DURING THE RECENT HENRY JAMES "REVIVAL" there has been exhibited an almost stupefying quantity of ingenious and subtle interpretation of his work. Some of it may strike us now as ingeniously and subtly perverse, most perverse when the critical method has been to draw our attention away from the heart of James's matter and direct it to some marginal or incidental element. It would be wholesome, for a change, to look straight at the conditions of the *genre* in which James worked and at the means by which he made that *genre* yield its utmost in interest and artistry.

Let us begin by being sceptical about several modes of criticism lately in vogue.

One of these is to impose upon a story or novel a monistic psychological or psychoanalytical interpretation of the chief characters or the principal relationships. The most notorious instance of this occasioned a long-drawn-out debate over *The Turn of the Screw*. Mr. Edmund Wilson's notion that the ghostly visitants are hallucinations deriving from the narrator-governess's repressed passion for the handsome young master of Bly has been several times competently refuted, on its own terms. But even if the Freudian interpretation were sound by Freudian standards, it would still work an aesthetic damage upon the story—as "The Pupil" is damaged by an attempt to explain the relationship between Morgan Moreen and his tutor as "homosexual" or as *The Golden Bowl* is damaged by any merely clinical account of the relationship between Maggie Verver and her father. The moment the critic of James produces the words *ego*, *id*, *complex*, or *repression* — or *libido* or *anima* or *shadow* — watch out! He is on the point of making a simplification that is wholly inimical to the way a novelist works. Simplifications of personality are death to the novel. A trick, by the way, that the Freudians miss, and that would be much more in the period and tone of *The Turn of the Screw*, is Freud's appalling documentation of childhood sexual experiences made available by nurses, tutors, and governesses. That would be more relevant to Peter Quint and Miss Jessel.

Just as baneful is the proposal made from time to time, and even by otherwise enlightened critics, that we should read a James story or novel as though it were a "prose poem". One might understand this as a weak-kneed stratagem for circumventing some of the problems of *The Sacred Fount* or "The Great Good Place". But one must be baffled when Dr. F. R. Leavis applies this kind of nonsense to *The Europeans*. Certainly James abounds in images and metaphors. It is even one of his little weaknesses to be "poetic" and colourful, as in the Sohrab-and-Rustum sort of image of the wild eastern caravan in chapter thirty-six of *The Golden Bowl*. Ordinarily, however, his images are used to enhance the effects proper to a novel. "Hawthorne," he remarks, "is perpetually looking for images which shall place themselves in picturesque correspondence with the spiritual facts with which he is concerned, and of course the search is of the very essence of poetry." Hawthorne, that is, like almost every novelist one can think of, used symbolism to enlarge his meanings. The novelist almost equally with the poet — at least the novelist of the past hundred years — is from time to time engaged in the struggle to communicate ineffabilities of feeling and thought, but such enhancements or extensions do not affect his particular way, as a novelist, of mediating between actuality and the reader. If one looks through the learned journals and the literary quarterlies, one will find that James has too often been exploited by the prose-poem fanciers, who seem unaware of his firm statement, in the essay "The Art of Fiction": "The confusion of kinds is the inelegance of letters and the stultification of values."

A third kind of endeavour to stultify the peculiar values of James's fiction is to interpret it allegorically. "Allegory is never a first-rate literary form" — so James put it. "It is apt to spoil two good things — a story and a moral, a meaning and a form." Yet there are extant a fair number of attempts to re-write James. The allegorists seem to have a common weakness for the Garden of Eden and the Fall. James, of course, was asking for trouble when he named Maggie's father Adam. But even such seemingly unamenable names as Miles and Flora can be bent to the purpose of allegory, as in Robert Heilman's astonishing performance on *The Turn of the Screw*. Bligh, the scene of the story, is equated with Eden; the two corrupted children with our first parents; Peter Quint with the serpent; Mrs. Grose, the house-keeper, with commonplace mortality; the governess who recounts the events with, first, the priest in the confessional and, then, the saviour of mankind. Mr. Heilman's essay is worked out with much more subtlety and artistry than this crude *dramatis personae* may intimate, and it is not without an uncanny interest all its own—an interest entirely at variance with the narrative emphases of James's *nouvelle*. One is bound, in any event, to rub one's eyes a little at such a bold-faced

mingling of the most awful and sacred truths with a trifling fiction. Since I have less respect for the theological system that Mr. Quentin Anderson uses as the sub-structure for his allegorizing, I feel less squeamish about his book *The American Henry James*, even though I cannot believe that it comes at all near the mark as an elucidation of James's method and meaning.

What we might gratefully recognize in James's work is an opportunity to study the novel as a *genre* isolated and distinct from all other *genres*. James himself supplies the rubric: "Kinds are the very life of literature, and truth and strength come from the complete recognition of them, from abounding to the utmost in their respective senses and sinking deep into their consistency." In its emergence as a literary kind, the novel drew upon or grew out of other kinds. Many works that we almost unhesitatingly call novels show plainly their relation to these contributory *genres*. In the novels of James, on the contrary, the contributory or precedent elements have become completely absorbed or entirely alienated. His novels come, I think, as close as any to being perfect novels — by which I mean to being perfectly and exclusively novelistic. It is only confusing and discommoding to look in them for the qualities that belong to epic, tale, myth, legend, romance, comedy of manners, essay, autobiography, social or political tract, polemic, or satire; or the qualities, beyond the basic narrative, that distinguish the greatness of *The Pilgrim's Progress*, *Tristram Shandy*, *Nightmare Abbey*, *Moby Dick*, *The Scarlet Letter*, *Erewhon*, and *Marius the Epicurean* — works which stand off, at various distances, from what might be called the centre of the *genre*.

Name, rather, the criteria of the novel, by which it operates at its most characteristic, and show that these were the criteria by which James both judged other men's fictions and composed his own. Criticism in action upon the novels of James — and, of course, the short stories and *nouvelles* as well — might busy itself, for a while at least, in identifying the problems and analysing the solutions of his particular mode of mimesis. For example: his field of action being ordinary life, the most evanescent, complex, and trivial of data, how has he managed to give significance to the events and people through which and by whom he rendered his vision of reality? How has he achieved the effects of realism while still preserving the values of economy, unity, proportion, design, treatment? Has he found the right way of being plausible without being documentary, of creating the effect of human diversity and at the same time suggesting the typical and the universal, of being significant without becoming doctrinaire, of creating the overtones that may loosely be called "poetic" without sacrificing the virtues of prose? James shows everywhere, in his theory as

in his practice, that he is aware of these problems, and no critical activity could be more rewarding than to distinguish his solutions.

"The supreme virtue of fiction," according to Henry James, is its "air of reality". The ability to produce "the illusion of reality, of life" is "the merit on which all other merits . . . helplessly and submissively depend." The "illusion of reality"—isn't that, after all, created by every literary work of art that successfully presents an image of human behaviour; strikingly created, for instance, by works as ancient and as diverse as the *Odyssey* and the *Satyricon*? What, then, is peculiar about the novel's "air of reality"? A hint is given, perhaps, by a sentence from James's essay, "The Art of Fiction", one of the most evocative sentences he ever wrote: "It is an incident for a woman to stand up with her hand resting on a table and look at you in a certain way . . ." The sentence defines the novelist's way of presenting life. This would be an "incident" that would give a three-fold register of reality: the woman is the focus of attention and she is doing something; more than that, the woman is in a relation to an observer; and she is observed in relation to a real object, presumably, in a real room. Action (external or subjective or both), interpretation of the action, setting: by these three elements we identify the novel — by a particular combination and proportion of them, rather, a peculiar equilibrium. The critic's task would be to decide how, in a particular novel or passage, the elements are balanced, for what purposes and with what effects the equilibrium is adjusted in one novel or another.

The table on which the woman is observed to be leaning represents "solidity of specification" (James's phrase). Balzac was the novelist James ranked, on the whole, foremost in their profession; and one of the lessons Balzac taught was that the novelist, more than any other kind of narrator, must keep his characters vividly and constantly in relations to things and places, to architecture, landscape, *décor*. "Solidity of specification" is a pervasive "mark" of James's method as a novelist. Some readers perceive this more readily in the earlier works: *Washington Square*, *Roderick Hudson*, *The Europeans*, *The Portrait of a Lady* — and in *The Bostonians*, which abounds in locales that contribute to meaning as much as to interest: Olive Chancellor's drawing room with its view over the Charles, Miss Birseye's room in the South End, the Tarrant menage, Memorial Hall at Harvard, Ransome's rooms off Third Avenue in New York, Mrs. Burrage's mansion, and Olive's summer cottage on Cape Cod, which contained "very few chairs but all George Eliot's writings and two photographs of the Sistine Madonna". A nicer measure of the critic's acumen would be to recognize the same "solidity of specification" in the later novels. Even Edith Wharton was one day obtuse enough to ask the Master what his idea had been in suspending the characters of *The Golden Bowl* in the void. Pained and

puzzled, he answered in a disturbed voice: "My dear — I didn't know I had!" And of course, he hadn't. He had only exquisitely adjusted the proportion of subjective to objective.

"Solidity of specification" is much more the concern of the novelist than of the poet or the dramatist, though they do not of course ignore it. An extension of the principle is that the persons and events of a novel must be involved with a community. The novel is inevitably contemporary, social, domestic. Everything takes place to the accompaniment of a social hum or murmur. Society as a compact ever-present community, called Highbury, say, or Jefferson; or as an unfolding exposure of a civilization such as is journeyed through by Huck Finn or Tom Jones; two households — Wuthering Heights and Thrushcross Grange; or a single family and its intimates, as in *To the Lighthouse* — in whatever manifestation, society criss-crosses thought and action with the patterns of convention, belief, custom. But it makes its pressure most felt in private life — not before the tents of the heroes or at the foot of the throne. The novel is persistently, at times oppressively, domestic.

Like all other great literary artists, James creates his own world. It is a world of much greater range and diversity than some critics seem to be aware. The setting which in our imagination is most Jamesian is upper-middle-class London society, of the late Victorian and the Edwardian ages — privileged, fashionable, cosmopolitan. We may have a vivid image of that world, whose inhabitants, preposterously gowned and groomed, are elegantly at home in great houses in Eaton Square or Cadogan Place, Prince's or Lancaster Gate; they move with accustomed splendour up and down monumental staircases, along polished and gilded galleries, across gleaming, high-windowed salons, over boundless lawns under huge trees, along Sunday paths that link the hall and the church, in broughams, landaus, and hansom cabs that carry them to balls, tea-time gatherings, and rendezvous in the National Gallery or the Sloane Museum. Some-one has yet to do a job on James's use of contemporary social data—a job for the student saturated in the memoirs, magazines, newspapers, fashion plates, photographs, the great scandals, the tremendous trials in libel and divorce actions. This may appear to be a revolutionary view of James, the annalist of social facts. The reason for it is that his use of detail is so selective and so perfectly in proportion to action and reflection that is it only by a deliberate exercise that our imaginations separate one element from the other.

This glittering world is by no means the object of James's infatuation. On the contrary, his novels convey a strong sense of corruption and stupidity in this society that was madly rushing towards or blindly awaiting the fate of 1914. It is a society that he often presents to us through a detached observer, an artist or an American.

But it is a world that he uses as a novelist should: as the source of forms and manners within which the characters work out their destinies. But they work them out incident by incident, behind closed doors, in groups of two and three standing to one side but never out of earshot of the social murmur.

James's style, too, is consummately the novelist's style. Curiously, except for occasional foragings by image-hunters of the prose-poem school, James's style has never been carefully and analytically studied. Syntactically, it is perfectly adapted to the interplay and combination of elements. This is especially so of the later style in which every paragraph, at times almost every sentence, like a microcosm of the novel as a whole, performs its small equilibrium of action, specification, and cognition.

The style of James, even at its most complex and comprehensive, is highly colloquial, full of the sound of the speaking voice — James's own voice, perhaps—holding us very close to the action and the commentary on it. It abounds in slang phrases and fashionable clichés. Its diction and cadences are never bookish, never academic, always free from every kind of jargon — aesthetic, psychological, sociological — every jargon but that of the drawing room or the tea-table. Out of the clubman's gossip and the prattle of the smart hostess James devised a style of matchless charm and suggestiveness. Critics have not sufficiently seen or celebrated its power to give the world of the novelist utterance in its own voice, mundane and unheroic.

On the larger scale, James's renowned devices of composition—the ingenious little tricks, exquisite schemes, over which he exults in the Prefaces and the Notebooks: plan, scenario, structure, alternation of scene and panorama, point of view, compression, foreshortening, organic unity, the inveterate adjuration: "Dramatise! Dramatise!", the constant demand that the reader appreciate how stroke by stroke the great game has been played — these are not the mere muscle-flexing of the virtuoso, but aids to the novelist's own peculiar transformation and representation of reality.

Consider especially the technique of the observer, the reverberating and interpreting consciousness through whom the reader sees the action of the novel. Sometimes it is a major character in the action: the Prince in the first half of *The Golden Bowl*, Maggie in the second half; Merton Densher through most of *The Wings of the Dove*; Strether in *The Ambassadors*; Laura Wing in *A London Life*; Fleda Vetch in *The Spoils of Poynton*; Hyacinth Robinson in *The Princess Casamassima*; Maisie in *What Maisie Knew*. Sometimes a spectator is charmed or bewildered by the action in which he is not directly involved: the girl in *In the Cage*; Rowland

Mallet in *Roderick Hudson*. Sometimes, by a fine and ironic pathos, the observer fails or refuses to recognize the claim of the action upon his power to respond as a human being: Winterbourne in *Daisy Miller*; the narrator in *The Aspern Papers*; John Marcher in *The Beast in the Jungle*; the inquisitive "I" of *The Sacred Fount*. Whether singly or divided among several observers, whether in the first person or the third, the story is not told by James so much as registered for our benefit by a mediating awareness. His method (as J. W. Beach has described it) is "not to tell the story at all as the story is told by other narrators but to give us instead the subjective accompaniment of the story".

This is that masterly indirection which is the only true directness. Why was indirection so precious to James? Why should it be of the very essence of the novel as a literary kind? A novel is to be a picture of life: a picture must have a compositional centre, and that must be fixed in relation to a viewer. A novel, again, must be, in its own way, dramatic; action yields its maximum meaning and intensity when it is played out before a spectator.

Above all, the woman leaning on the table must be explained. It is inconceivable that she should be in that particular place at that particular time without a reason. Motive, impulse, purpose: these are as much part of the incident as her physical presence and posture. Some novelists do not explain; they simply present—Maupassant, for instance, whose method James calls the epic:

the simple epic manner which avoids with care all complicated explanations, all dissertations upon motives, and confines itself to making persons and events pass before our eyes.

James distinguishes this "simple epic manner" from the other method—presumably his own—which he calls the analytic. But if explanation is to be done, why shouldn't the novelist do the explaining himself? Scott does so, Jane Austen does so; Esther Summerson and Nelly Dean are the exceptions in novel technique before James. Most novelists seemed unaware of the necessity of submerging their chronicling activities in the novel's own element. Few things so shocked James aesthetically as Trollope's brazen defiance of the principle of submersion:

Trollope took a suicidal satisfaction in reminding the reader that the story he was telling was only after all a make-believe. He habitually referred to the work in hand (in the course of that work) as a novel and to himself as a novelist, and was fond of letting the reader know that the novelist could direct the course of events according to his pleasure. . . . In describing the wooing of Eleanor Bold by Mr. Arabin he has occasion to say that the lady might have acted in a much more direct and natural way than the way he attributes to her. But if she had, he adds, "Where would have been my novel?"

Such "pernicious tricks" James sees as "little slaps at credulity". More, how-

ever, is in question than verisimilitude. Indirection is an instrument of unity; it is a means for achieving what is called "aesthetic distance". Something still more important—the observer narrator, the novelist's deputy, acts also as the reader's deputy in his imaginative transaction with the people and events of the community which the novel presents. This sort of involvement seems to be a peculiar necessity in the experience of novel-reading. Perhaps it is because the novel imitates the actions of men and women not better than we or worse than we but very much like us; living in, roughly, our era, subject to the pressure of a society held together by much the same concepts and conventions as inform our society. And the novel, as a *genre*, will have had its day when these concepts and conventions cease to apply.

Let the critic consider, finally, James's subjects. Ultimately, James is to be judged by the distinction and insight with which he used his resources as a novelist for the expression of major themes. He was an avowed opponent of the creed of "art for art's sake". He was interested in moral issues, crises of conscience, problems of choice. Every story is a lesson of the master; but rendered in the novelist's proper mode, not discursively or abstractly, but closely involved in the texture of the story. If one reflects on the issues that James dramatized in his one hundred and twenty-five novels, *nouvelles*, and short stories, one will see that they are precisely the issues which most concern the private consciousness in its intercourse with the social or domestic community.

The sins in James's world are treachery, betrayal of confidence, infidelity, adultery, the cancelling of vows, intolerance, petty oppression, interference with personal liberty, making use of another human being for one's own gain or gratification, selfishness, cruelty. The virtues are loyalty, honesty, self-discipline, courage, silence, renunciation, kindness, tolerance, compassion. His characters are caught up in the conflict between institutional values and personal values, the claims of the spirit against matter, differences and similarities among national traits.

So I propose Henry James as the essential novelist. Here is ample scope for critical action: both in analysis of individual works and in comparative studies within the *genre* in which James laboured with such devotion and distinction. If, for instance, we considered James as the essential novelist, we could hypothetically place his work at the centre of the *genre* and estimate the distances of other novels from it. This would not be a system of values. *Tom Jones* we might judge closer to the centre than *Joseph Andrews*, *Amelia* closer still; *Wuthering Heights* surely comes closer than *Jane Eyre*; *Middlemarch* than *Romola*; *Ulysses* than *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (*Finnegans Wake* is, as they say in jazz circles, "way way out"). *Between the Acts* is more central than *The Waves*; *Esther Waters* than

Héloise and Abelard; *Lady Chatterley's Lover* than *The Plumed Serpent*; *Anna Karenina* than *War and Peace*; *Le Rouge et le Noir* than *La Chartreuse de Parme*; *The Sound and the Fury* than *As I Lay Dying*; and so on. They are all novels, but some are more novelistic than others.

It is not maintained that the distinction is necessary or desirable or even, it may be, very interesting. But it is there, and as teachers and students of literature, we thrive—don't we?—on distinctions and the reasons for them.