Book Reviews

Henry James and Modern Moral Life. By Robert B. Pippin. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2000. xi, 193 pages. $49.95 US.

Robert B. Pippin, author of books on Kant, Hegel, on "Idealism as Modernism" and "Modernism as a Philosophical Problem," examines some of the major works of Henry James as serious explorations of the bases of moral understanding in modern Western society. Pippin argues that James treated his characters' mores as aspects of a historically specific epoch—a "secular, non-religious, self-interested society" (3)—in which authority and meaning are problematic, and that James was concerned not only with moral judgments in a specific, fictionally realized context but with the very bases upon which that context of choice is construed. James goes very far, Pippin notes, in presenting the "uncertainty about what must be done," so far that he "threatens the very possibility of moral meaning" (15): "The norms themselves are often the heart of the matter, and their status is always at issue, never dismissed or psychologized (treated as the particular beliefs of individuals)" (58–59). Even so, Pippin argues that, "despite James's assumptions about modernity," and despite "the manifest uncertainties and absences in that world," James was not a "moral skeptic" (7), that he was a kind of "idealist" when it came to the reality of moral terms (9). In James's fictions moral truths are not founded on any easily referenced social consensus. James always supplies characters whose views of right and wrong are too simple, but as his heroes launch themselves into the "never limited ... never complete" web of experience (14), and into the "vacancy" of modern society in defiance of merely formal codes of conduct, they paradoxically discover that their tenuous freedom and the hard-won meaning of their experiences are predicated upon "dependency, a dependency even at the level of possible consciousness itself, and some 'lived out' acknowledgment of such dependency" (11). This meaning may only be understood by two or three characters, but the point is that it must be shared or it does not exist.

For this reader, one of the most important insights of Pippin's approach has to do with the way that this "dependency" with respect to meaning and moral choice extends to the very construction of consciousness itself, to what one habitually regards as the content of one's "own" experience. As Pippin notes, "even in circumstances where unreliability or perplexities are not prominent, and characters seem to have some sense of what they think or intend, James's treatment of the problems of consciousness and sociality is still marked by a number of challenges to individualist and traditional mentalist frameworks. He portrays how they come to know what they think or what

they believe motivates them, in highly complex relations of minds, and not as introspective revelations" (74–75). This suspension of individuality—including an individual's awareness of self—in such a relational web is simultaneously an insight into the nature of being and a particular development of the novelist's art. With attention to how moral meaning is construed by this art, Pippin offers extended readings of *The Wings of the Dove*, *The Golden Bowl*, *The Portrait of a Lady*, *The Ambassadors*, "The Beast in the Jungle," and "The Turn of the Screw," with comments about many other of James's works. Throughout, Pippin emphasizes how characters' attention to, or neglect of, "our affirmative, meaning-constituting dependence on others, and what we owe them in the light of that link" determines their moral fates (175).

Pippin's treatment of how moral meaning is present in the modern lives of James's characters leads us to the heart of James's major themes, and Pippin's readings are highly responsive to James as a novelist, not a philosopher, and to serious fiction as a form of thought that does not need translating into some other discourse in order to be fully understood. I am not fully convinced, however, that Pippin's insistence on the historical uniqueness of "modernity," on James's conscious evocation of its particular challenges, is always warranted. While one hesitates to question the assumptions of someone who has authored two books on the subjects mentioned above, I am not quite convinced that a "vast historical alteration had been taking place in Western European and American societies," that this was a "historical crisis ... which greatly complicated our moral assessments of each other," that this "complexity has to do with the increasing unavailability of what we used to be able to rely on in interpreting and assessing each other" (11). That is, while I acknowledge the historical specificity of James's era, sharing Pippin's admiration of James's wonderfully specific rendering of his world, I am not convinced that moral thought and action was more difficult than at any other time, and I'm not sure that James's achievement lies in making it appear unusually difficult. Pippin may be countering a tendency to see the conflicts experienced by James's characters as specific only to a small elite, arguing instead that their struggles reflected modern times in a much more essential way. I welcome this argument, but sometimes it seems Pippin's insistence on the historic uniqueness of James's times makes "modern" conditions almost the cause of James's art. Without denying that James was acutely engaged with, and responsive to, his own times, I would also keep in mind his awareness of form, his conscious innovation within the tradition of the European novel, his own statements about the personal element in art: "the deepest quality of a work of art will always be the quality of the mind of the producer" ("The Art of Fiction," 1884). James was also a creator of modernity.

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The Trouble with Principle. By Stanley Fish. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1999. 328 pages. $24.95 US.

The trouble isn't with principle; it's with liberals (a group Fish wants to "stigmatize"). The trouble with liberals is that they have principles, specifically "neutral principles," which is to say they believe in things "like fairness, impartiality, mutual respect, and reasonableness." Or at least they say they try to adhere to these principles in advancing a social, academic, and political order that would give wider and wider room for such principles to inspire and regulate human action in the only way that human action can be put in motion, i.e., through communication. Fish knows better: these principles don't exist; neutrality is simply an excuse for doing nothing, and liberals, no more than deluded liars and moral shams. "'Mutual respect' should be re-named 'mutual self-congratulation'"; being reasonable blocks you from doing God's will—this is the core argument of the book, but it is bizarrely without explanation or justification; impartiality is no more than a higher order partiality. One is necessarily partial towards impartiality if one claims to be impartial, which equally necessarily leads one to bar those who claim to be partial from impartial discussion; therefore, the claim to impartiality doesn't exist. As for fairness, "*the* liberal virtue," "Fairness is the virtue that mitigates [sic] against winning." Fish is driven into the solecism by his inability to grant liberals ("passive-aggressives") so masculine a *virtu* as being able to "militate" against anything. For Fish winning is everything; there is only "taking sides" (title of the prologue); it's "politics all the way down" (title of Part I).

Liberals use their so-called principles to avoid politics, to abandon morality (freedom is the enemy of morality), to "spend their lives watching *Masterpiece Theatre*," while letting "bad things" happen in the name of neutral principles. The worst liberals are people who read Shakespeare; they think He is God: "Shakespeare and God—one and the same in literary circles." The reason Shakespeare is God is that we don't know where he was born; he could be the Earl of Oxford ("current favorite") as well as God. If you are the sort of exalted creature that recognizes, without being told, that *The Merchant of Venice* is a play by Shakespeare and not Homer Simpson, or do not, as "those (surely the majority) ... think that *The Merchant of Venice* sells surfboards in a California beach town," you are a member of that "'fit audience, though few'," whose canonical pleasures depend heavily "on the power to *ex*clude, to cast out into an undifferentiated outer darkness all of those who neither receive nor respond to the light." You live above the "fears and prejudices of ignorant rabble" among the "opinions of prominent critics" and "well-placed law professors" valorizing "the life of the mind" in a powerful alliance of literary and legal canons. Probably your father, uncle and brother aren't plumbers like Stanley's, and that's why he knows and you don't that philosophy is only a cheap set of tricks with no validity outside "the highly artificial circumstances of the philosophy seminar."

Does that sound silly? It gets worse. Because on the other hand, "under the banner of new historicism and cultural materialism, a legion of academics" (My name is Legion; for we are many) have been "busily removing Shakespeare from the pedestal of timeless value ... and re-embedding him in social, economic, and political histories." "Quite obviously, this line of argument, which is now endemic [sic] takes away Shakespeare's autonomy ...." (For a Miltonist Fish seems oddly insecure in the Greek and Latin heritage of English; presumably he meant pandemic.) What is even odder is the conclusion that new historicism and cultural materialism render Shakespeare ("the very emblem of humanity's essence") "an illusion" and take away not only Shakespeare's autonomy but "*everybody's* autonomy by refusing to recognize, never mind privilege, a core self whose integrity survives the sea changes of mortal existence." The man who wrote, "We are such stuff / As dreams are made on, and our little life / Is rounded with a sleep," would not be disturbed to find he was an illusion. And would not in that speech appear to be recommending that anyone else think otherwise.

All of this wretched nonsense was provoked by an Illinois Appelate Court Judge, who in writing the opinion for a majority concurring with a lower court's upholding the First Amendment right of neo-Nazis to demonstrate in the town of Skokie (home to a significant Jewish population, many of them survivors of the death camps), despite an ordinance prohibiting the dissemination of any material promoting racial, religious, or ethnic hatred, stated that the decision was "supported by the fact that the ordinance could conceivably be applied to criminalize the dissemination of *The Merchant of Venice*." The judge's crime was in having felt "no need to identify the author of *The Merchant of Venice*," thereby raising the issue of canonicity in law and literature and somehow proving that a "bad thing" happened because of a pusillanimous liberal concern for great literature and the freedom of speech clause of the First Amendment. "Neutral principles," presumably, did not permit a distinction to be made between Shakespeare and neo-Nazi rant, with the consequence of submitting people who had survived one form of Nazism to further harassment by a miserable lumpen American version of it. Judge Pell in his opinion acknowledged the dilemma and the court's "extreme regret" that the barbarism represented by groups like the neo-Nazis is still with us. But the court is bound to uphold the "supreme law of the land," the US Constitution, which in its First Amendment guarantees the right to the freedom of speech and assembly to all citizens. It is the regret that infuriates Fish (although Fish's passion is largely a joke): don't regret barbarism, stop the neo-Nazis. And if that might mean the criminalizing of *The Merchant of Venice*? "So what? After all, the guy wrote 36 other plays, 154 sonnets, and several rather tedious narrative allegories ...." One doesn't have to be a Shakespeare idolater to sense the silly barbarism of that, were it at all meant. But it wasn't meant; nothing in this book is meant. In fact, Fish does not declare his own position. "It might well be that had I been on the bench that day I would have decided to permit the march, on the reasoning, perhaps, that the [neo-

Nazis] posed no real danger or that the danger presented by the march was outweighed by the danger (in present and future costs) of stopping it." Fish doesn't declare his position, but he gives it away nonetheless. The parenthesis indicates he has joined the movement, headed by Richard Posner, the éminence grise of this book, to break law away from its traditional alliance with literate culture and unite it with economics. Stopping the Nazis just wasn't worth it. You don't have to pretend there was anything high-minded involved in letting them march, least of all "neutral principles."

This is a book filled with disgusting and laughable imbecilities. Academic freedom is a "bad idea, a dubious principle," but it's a good thing so long as it keeps the outside from interfering with professional academics; on the other hand, the "vocabulary of its pious champions is a sham and a cheat," besides, it doesn't exist. All that is possible is to see that your side, your interests have enough power within the university for you to define what will be and what will not be academic freedom. The largest section of the book, "Reasons for the Devout," is a plea for the political triumph of religious bigotry dressed up as faith, in the process of which Milton is misread, misquoted, misunderstood, and misrepresented (as he is throughout the book) in order to be made serviceable to championing everything he hated.

For the most part it is all just a desperate silliness in which Fish parades a quite startling ignorance and a prolix inability to follow a line of thought, while offering his own standard form of argument: Of course it's that way, don't you see how smart I am? On several different occasions he identifies himself with Polonius (e.g., "I come out from behind the arras of analysis"; "Here I am, the new Polonius"). It's as if Moliere wrote *Hamlet*. I don't know what Fish was trying to tell himself, but it's too bad he didn't listen. Because there is one thing the foolishness does not excuse and that is the sickening defamation of Prof. Herbert Wechsler, the man who introduced the term "neutral principles" to legal scholarship. What Wechsler meant by the necessity for neutral principles had nothing to do with liberals or liberalism, formed no agenda, was nothing a priori. He was speaking solely to the responsibilities of the US Supreme Court and in particular to its appelate function, the function that, *pace* Fish, puts an end to politics, and without which, in the words of Judge Learned Hand, the whole system of American democracy would collapse. The independence of the judiciary is fundamental and there is nothing that can establish or sustain that independence except the moral and intellectual integrity of the Court itself; it is the whole burden of Hamilton's seventy-eighth Federalist Paper. No sort of silly "anti-foundationalism" or misunderstood notion of deconstruction can have any bearing on that. The law—to be law and not simply fiat or the will of the strong—must give reasons.

For the Court to produce results, no matter how seemingly desirable, without reasons, impartial and perspicuous, would be to undermine its integrity and thereby its "dignity and utility." Hamilton's words are still to the

point: "Considerate men of every description ought to prize whatever will tend to beget or fortify that temper [disinterestedness, impartiality neutrality] in the courts; as no man can be sure that he may not be tomorrow the victim of a spirit of injustice, by which he may be a gainer today. And every man must now feel that the inevitable tendency of such a spirit is to sap the foundations of public and private confidence, and to introduce in its stead, universal distrust and distress." Fish, who claims to be "in differing degrees," "an authoritarian in the classroom, a decided conservative in cultural matters, [and] inclined to the absolutes of theology," and a Hobbesian, will take the distrust and the distress. When God's on your side, you don't have to be fair.

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The Road to Egdon Heath: The Aesthetics of the Great in Nature. By Richard Bevis. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's UP, 1999. xv, 409 pages. $75.00.

Anyone who sets out to epitomize more than two centuries of discourse about a mutable aesthetic category, the Great, as Richard Bevis does in *The Road to Egdon Heath*, runs the risk of emulating Camilla in Virgil's *Aeneid*, who hardly bruised the wheat-heads in her cursory passage over the plain. Certainly, Bevis proves himself as light-footed as the warrior. But instead of leading an army to battle, he performs the office of shepherd, as he coaxes generations of poets, explorers, scientists and fiction writers toward his avowed destination, a passage from Thomas Hardy's *Return of the Native* (1878). This passage describes sombre Egdon Heath, incidentally observing how the taste of travellers has altered. Formerly, such people sought out the "orthodox beauty" that Hardy codifies under the rubric of Tempe, "charming and fair"; but, he adds, "the new Vale of Tempe may be a gaunt waste in Thule" (4). Bevis emphasizes Hardy's identification of a "chastened sublimity" as increasingly congruous with the mood of even "the commonest tourist," who now consciously visits "a moor, a sea or a mountain." Tracking the dialectic of Tempe and Thule, Bevis provides a genealogy for the evolving preference. His project is all the more agreeable because sympathy rather than scorn flavours his pages.

Bevis's work could be read as a sort of teleological commonplace book—a chronological register of editorialized quotations the end of which is ordained as early as the volume's introduction. Yet to characterize *The Road to Egdon Heath* in this way slights the pleasure and utility of Bevis's diachronic excursion, not to say its proliferating richness. His procedure may be likened to that of the geologists, such as Charles Lyell, for whom he shows informed affection. Bevis finds verbal fossils and fathoms verbal sediments; the faunal succession of ideas is his delight. By the conclusion of his compen-

dious book, which includes, along with eight apposite illustrations, its own lexicon of relevant terms, Egdon Heath and Hardy's words have acquired transparency, as though our bootsoles had become glass and the soil a medium as transpicuous as clean water. Nevertheless, Bevis's encyclopaedic method challenges a reader to augment significantly his canon of authors.

The reader may miss the pertinent eloquence of Thomas Browne. Further engagement with British landscape theory would have refined as well as substantiated Bevis's explorations. Humphrey Repton, for example, could have supplied circumstantial insight into the tectonic play of Tempe and Thule: "Modern taste has discovered," he wrote in *An Enquiry into the Changes of Taste in Landscape Gardening* (1806), "that greatness and cheerfulness are not incompatible; it has thrown down the ancient palisade and lofty walls, because it is aware that liberty is the true portal of happiness; yet while it encourages more cheerful freedom, it must not lay aside becoming dignity." The phrasing partially anticipates Hardy. Where it differs, speculation might have ranged widely. Elizabeth Simcoe's Diary supplies odd testimony to a British gentlewoman's responses when confronted with purportedly "sublime" phenomena such as Niagara Falls. Writing in 1795, she usually portrayed the Falls in terms of their "beauty" and "picturesqueness" (see her entries for 23 and 24 May). She found even bush-fires (some of which she happily set) "picturesque." In the early nineteenth century, John Clare raised a passionate voice to decry the transformation of moors—the topography of Thule—into the enclosed land that approximates more nearly the received image of Tempe. In a poem such as "The Mores" [sic], Clare articulately resented the subdivision by hedgerow and fence of Northamptonshire's "Great" commons. Finally, Bevis sometimes scants the German contribution to an aesthetic of Thule. Melville and Fromentin are impressively discussed. Would that Friedrich Hölderlin's poetry and Georg Büchner's *Lenz* had received as much attention.

Notwithstanding these cavils, Bevis's book is often excitingly suggestive. His treatment of *Frankenstein* adumbrates the link between an aesthetic of the barrens and childlessness. Bevis remarks that Byron's *Manfred*, with its sterile Alpine backdrop, may be scenically influenced by the unfruitful love between the poet and his half-sister Augusta. The frequent misogyny of early mountaineers is pointedly remarked.

I can recommend this book for its ambition and laconic humour. Even where its comprehensiveness manifests eccentric shortcomings, the very deficiency spurs the mind into the provocative act of necessary supplementation. To read *The Road to Egdon Heath* straight through is hard but rewarding work—like climbing a mountain. The effort is compensated by a renewed appreciation of Tempe and Thule, in their impressive interior as well as exterior guises.

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