

Labyrinth of Consciousness: On Henry James

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I

“It is art that *makes* life,” wrote Henry James, “makes interest, makes importance, for our consideration and application of these things, and I know of no substitute whatever for the force and beauty of its process.” (qtd. in Gard 530). James was concluding, in July 1915, a dignified yet passionate defense of his work against what he felt was the obtuseness of H. G. Wells—a writer colleague, even a personal friend, who had lampooned him in a crass and tactless parody, *Boon*, which had been published earlier in the year. Wells was a brisk, practical-minded author, with no qualms about writing popular books for money; blessed with a daring imagination, and no mean artist himself, he was not interested in consciously fine writing in the cause of James’s conception of “art” as a somewhat sacred phenomenon. The James-Wells quarrel epitomized two very different attitudes to the nature of literary production.

For James, the art of the novel was just that, an art, on a par with music, painting, and architecture: the novel should be as well-composed, as well-structured as was expected of the products of these other arts. He was reacting against the assumption, in the nineteenth century and in the English-speaking countries, that a novel was a way of passing the time, was entertainment, and that it didn’t matter if it wasn’t beautifully shaped, that it was just a novel, just a story after all. No: for James, such essentially philistine attitudes were symptomatic of an increasingly materialistic age. He witnessed and recorded the readiness of England, and indeed of continental Europe, to become just as graspingly money-minded as his native land, America: “I suspect the age of letters is waning, for our time,” he wrote to an American friend, Thomas Sergeant Perry, in 1881. “It is the age of Panama Canals, of Sarah Bernhardt, of Western wheat-raising, of merely material expansion. Art, form,

may return, but I doubt that I shall live to see them—I don't believe they are eternal, as the poets say. All the same, I shall try to make them live a little longer!" (James, *Letters* II: 341–2)

James's spiritual pedigree included an ancestral Scots-Irish Presbyterianism, his father's Swedenborgian mysticism, and he greatly respected the high-minded ethic of New England Puritanism (while all the time mindful of its provincialism and its devotion to duty at the expense of beauty). Yet we are never strongly aware of James as committed to any religion as such—unless that be “art” as a religion, “art” as indeed sacred. In the absence of a clear faith, in the conventionally religious sense, it was as if art offered James a path, existentially, to meaning—a meaning that “life” was unable to offer him: as if art redeemed life. “Really, universally, relations stop nowhere,” he wrote in the preface to his first substantial novel, *Roderick Hudson*, “and the exquisite problem of the artist is eternally but to draw, by a geometry of his own, the circle within which they shall happily *appear* to do so.” (James 1934: 5). This idea is effectively developed in a later Preface, to *The Spoils of Poynton*: “Life being all inclusion and confusion, and art being all discrimination and selection, the latter, in search of the hard latent *value* with which alone it is concerned, sniffs round the mass as instinctively and unerringly as a dog suspicious of some buried bone. The difference here, however, is that, while the dog desires his bone but to destroy it, the artist finds in *his* tiny nugget, washed free of awkward accretions and hammered into a sacred hardness, the very stuff for a clear affirmation, the happiest chance for the indestructible.” (James, *Art of the Novel* 120). Art *makes* life, indeed, by rescuing it from its innate chaos, by transforming that which is transient and contingent into something permanent and transcendent.

That “tiny nugget” could be discovered unexpectedly and by chance in the most mundane of circumstances, as at a dinner table in the course of conversation. James could find himself picking up from a fellow-guest some anecdote that he could later work up into a tale or even a whole novel. This happened on many occasions,

and indeed *The Spoils of Poynton* itself grew out of such a small stimulus—or *donnée* as he called it, as if it had been “given” to him.

He would also refer to the “nugget” or “donnée” as a “germ”—in the benign sense of that which can grow. Against the “stupid, mechanical, arbitrary action” (such as could be found in conventionally formulaic, nineteenth-century novels), James works towards “a little organic and effective Action” as the motive-force for his fiction (James, *Notebooks of Henry James* 103, 348). That antithesis of the undesired “mechanical” as countered by the desired “organic” was a key concept in nineteenth-century English and Anglo-Scottish thought, which itself relates strongly—via the friendship of Thomas Carlyle and Ralph Waldo Emerson—to New England transcendentalism: James is innovative in applying this to the “new” art of fiction.

James’s organic theory of fiction is most clinchingly expressed in that 1884 essay which bears the title “The Art of Fiction”:

I cannot imagine composition existing in a series of blocks, nor conceive, in any novel worth discussing at all, of a passage of description that is not in its intention narrative, a passage of dialogue that is not in its intention descriptive, a touch of truth of any sort that does not partake of the nature of incident, and an incident that derives its interest from any other source than the general and only source of the success of a work of art—that of being illustrative. A novel is a living thing, all one and continuous, like every other organism, and in proportion as it lives will it be found, I think, that in each of the parts there is something of each of the other parts. (James, *Selected Literary Criticism* 87–88)

Earlier in the essay, he makes an explicit criticism of one of the leading practitioners of the mid-Victorian inorganic (if not mechanical) mode:

I was lately struck, in reading over many pages of Anthony Trollope, with his want of discretion in this particular. In a digression, a parenthesis or an aside, he concedes to the reader that he and this trusting friend are only ‘making believe.’ He admits that the events he narrates have not really happened, and that he can give his narrative

any turn the reader may like best. Such a betrayal of a sacred office seems to me, I confess, a terrible crime; it is what I mean by the attitude of apology, and it shocks me every whit as much in Trollope as it would have shocked me in Gibbon or Macaulay. It implies that the novelist is less occupied in looking for the truth (the truth, of course I mean, that he assumes, the premises that we must grant him, whatever they may be) than the historian, and in doing so it deprives him at a stroke of all his standing-room. (James, *Selected Literary Criticism* 80)

Those earlier novelists had tended to prioritize plot over characterization, to work out a story dependent arbitrarily on chance and coincidence, rather than on human motivation. James aimed rather for psychological realism, for the action to grow from a convincing portrayal of a character in his or her solitary ruminations or in interaction with other characters equally credible in their thoughts and emotions. A remark by the Russian novelist Ivan Turgenev (1818–83), whom he had met in Paris, struck James with particular force: Turgenev had described how his characters “hovered before him, soliciting him,” then he “had to find for them the right relations, those that would most bring them out,” by which he would “arrive” at his “story” (James, *Art of the Novel* 42–3). So this is more than merely the characters spinning the plot (which would be just as mechanical as the plot spinning the characters): what Turgenev describes for James is, again, an organic process, all the parts of the developing “fictive picture” growing together as a whole.

Turgenev would also appear to be describing the methodology of what came to be known explicitly as “the psychological novel,” which would be such a major force in the modernism of the twentieth century. James is a precursor of Marcel Proust and James Joyce, whose mark is made at last in the 1920s, in those years following James’s death. We are talking here of that powerful feature of the new novel: stream of consciousness.

“Consciousness” is one of the most recurrent concepts (and, indeed, a keyword) in James’s meditations on his art, where he is concerned with the ways in which it interacts with “experience”

(again, very explicitly, a keyword). Here, then, is James's most indispensable utterance in this regard:

Experience is never limited and it is never complete; it is an immense sensibility, a kind of huge spider-web, of the finest silken threads, suspended in the chamber of consciousness and catching every airborne particle in its tissue. It is the very atmosphere of the mind; and when the mind is imaginative—much more when it happens to be that of a man of genius—it takes to itself the faintest hints of life, it converts the very pulses of the air into revelations. (James, *Selected Literary Criticism* 85–6)

That passage is invaluable for two reasons: for its insight into the psychology of creativity (and that of Henry James in particular) and as applicable to the flux of thoughts and feelings of a character in a work of fiction. Concerning the latter, in the prefaces to his novels and tales, we shall find James on the “limited vessel of consciousness” (in relation to *The Princess Casamassima*, whose main character is Hyacinth Robinson, the young bookbinder of mixed-class origins); “my light vessel of consciousness” (the child Maisie, whose innocence gives way to—yes—experience, in *What Maisie Knew*); “the whole ordeal of whose consciousness,” referring to the terminally ill Milly Theale in *The Wings of the Dove*. Returning to the psychology of the creative artist, and specifically that of himself, James writes, in the preface to *The Golden Bowl*, of “the silver clue to the whole labyrinth of his consciousness”—and there are few more complex labyrinths than James's in all of literature! (James, *Art of the Novel* 63, 143, 289, 340).

The “vessel of consciousness” is James's innovation to point-of-view techniques in fictional narrative, and as the above quotations suggest, each “vessel” is as unique as each character to whose consciousness it refers. Briefly, the reader is diverted from narration *by the author* into narration *through a character*: i.e., neither third-person nor first-person narration as such, but a blend of the two, akin to the *free indirect speech* (also described as *free indirect discourse* or *free indirect style*) as deployed by the French novelist Gustave

Flaubert (upon whom James wrote several essays) and the “stream of consciousness” that we associate with Proust and Joyce.

The innovations of nineteenth-century French fiction were central to the development of James’s art. As well as Flaubert, he wrote on the work of Honoré de Balzac, George Sand, Émile Zola, Guy de Maupassant, and others. James admired the care taken by French writers over structure, shapeliness, form—in a word, *art*—in their compositions. He was aware of his own tendency to verbosity in writing (and in speech, according to those who knew him), and he consciously aimed—especially in his shorter tales—at “Something as admirably compacted and *selected* as Maupassant”; earlier in his *Notebooks*, he made a heartfelt invocation: “Oh spirit of Maupassant, come to my aid!” (James, *Notebooks of Henry James* 104, 89). One of his most craftsmanly short stories, “Paste” (1899), is a variation on Maupassant’s *conte*, or tale, “The Necklace” (“La Parure”): both stories derive their “compacted” ironies from the question as to whether a piece of jewellery is genuine or a fake. (During a course on the short story which I taught at the University of Grenoble in France, the students delighted in the mental gymnastics of discussing and comparing the two stories.)

By contrast, James found in English and Russian fiction a failure to observe sound qualities of structure—he was fond of referring to the “architecture” of a work of fiction, as of a verbal artifact that was well built. So he would criticize novels by William Thackeray, Alexandre Dumas (a French writer, but a nonliterary one!), and Lev Tolstoy (*War and Peace*) as “large loose baggy monsters” (James, *Art of the Novel* 84). Tolstoy came in for more criticism, along with Fyodor Dostoevsky (best known for *Crime and Punishment*) for producing “fluid pudding” (James, *Letters IV*: 619). (His favorite Russian, Turgenev, escapes such strictures: his novels are indeed tightly constructed, and he is believed to be an influence on James’s *The Princess Casamassima*.) James qualifies his remarks on Tolstoy and Dostoevsky with somewhat patronizing praise for their “strong, rank quality.” His critique echoes that of one of Tolstoy’s literary correspondents who, in 1876, complained of the faulty “architecture” of *Anna Karenina*: Tolstoy responded by

drawing his friend's attention to the "labyrinth of linkages" in that novel, of patterns which ran below the more obvious levels of the story and the interaction of the characters (qtd. in Greenwood 95 and *passim*) and which, therefore, made for closely-woven composition. Accordingly, James could have afforded greater sympathy for Tolstoy; in his own later works, such as *The Golden Bowl* (1904), James makes intricate use of recurrent metaphor and symbol—the outcome of his "spider-web" of "immense sensibility," his own "labyrinth of [...] consciousness."

However, if the French (apart from Dumas) teach what the English and Russians (apart from Turgenev) ignore, James still has serious reservations about that first-named literary culture. To James, the French novelists are far too obsessed with sex and all things deemed by him to be unclean. This is documented comically in a letter which he wrote in 1888 to the relatively minor French writer Paul Bourget, objecting to the latter's book *Mensonges* (*Lies*):

To my mind, your characters are so lacking in *importance*, that I remain quite astonished when I find you expending so extreme a care upon their peculiarities. [...] you devote to her [the character Mme Moraines] and to her *underclothing* a quite particular and unwholesome attention [...] You tell me that Paris is full of Suzannes, of Desforges, of Renés and of Vincys; this is equivalent to saying that life is full of wretchedness and dirt. But that is no reason for cramming our heads with it. (qtd. in Markow-Totevy: 142–3; the letter was written in French, and this is John Griffiths' translation.)

It is not often that Puritans accuse non-Puritans of a certain narrow-mindedness, but that's what's happening here; despite his Old World cosmopolitanism, James retained a strong loyalty to the strict moralism of New England. There is a Henry James the European, and a Henry James the American.

II

"What James admires in Europeans," writes Wallace Robson, "is their sophistication, ease and urbanity. What he deplores in Americans is their rawness, crudity and provinciality." However,