

ISSN: 2278-9529

GALAXY

International Multidisciplinary Research Journal

May 2016 - Vol. 5, Issue- 3

Editor-In-Chief: Dr. Vishwanath Bite

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Theory of Novel and Henry James

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Abstract:

The preponderance of virtuosity in James's art is not a matter of treatment, of expression, of 'process'. It is rather an integral part of the very fabric of his conception. It is engaged and involved in the substance of his works. Instead of 'a closer and more intimate correspondence with life', the result of his critical theorizing about the what and how of fiction is a confusion of life and art, which are normally as distinct as subject and statement. Virtuosity of technique is legitimate enough, but virtuosity of vision is quite another thing. And it is to this James's study and practice of the art for which he has quite as much of a passion as a *Penchant* have finally brought him.

Keywords: Splendid-waste; Meditative Virgil; Chaotic; Fine Conscience; Renunciation.

Henry James was not a very systematic theorist, and his brilliant insights into the working of fiction have been generally sparse and scattered- casual notes, preface to his novels, and his views on other novelists. It was F.O. Matthiessen and Kenneth B. Murdock, whose patient hard work produced *The Notebooks of Henry James* in 1947. Even earlier, in 1934, had appeared James's prefaces to the 1906 volume of his novels, edited and annotated by R.P. Blackmur. Some other important names in making James's ideas available to us are Leon Edel, Percy Lubbock, F. R. Leavis (*The Great Tradition*), and Lionel Trilling (*The Liberal Imagination*). All of them have nicely discussed Henry James' art and morality. For a long time, he writes, it has been assumed that the English novel has lacked a theory, a conviction, a consciousness of itself behind it of being the expression of an artistic faith, the result of choice and comparison. This is because, he suggests, of the allegedly pragmatic opposition to theorising peculiar to the British on the grounds that a novel is a novel, as a pudding is a pudding, and that our only business with it could be to swallow it. There are, however, signs of returning animation which is a good thing because art, he argues, lives upon discussion, upon experiment, upon curiosity, upon variety of attempt, upon the exchange of views and the comparison of standpoints: the successful application of art is a delightful spectacle, but the theory too is interesting for there has never been a genuine success that has not had a latent core of conviction. Discussion, suggestion, formulation, these things are fertilizing when they are frank and sincere.

James begins by rejecting the widespread assumption that prose fiction (what he calls thenceforth fiction) should admit in an almost apologetic way that it is merely make-believe: this view leads one to renounce the pretension of attempting really to represent life. He believes that

the tolerance granted to it on such a condition is only an attempt to stifle it, disguised in the form of generosity. The old Evangelical hostility to the novel, which was as explicit as it was narrow, and which regarded it as little less favourable to our immortal part than a stage-play, was in reality far less insulting. James point is that the only reason for the existence of a novel is that it does attempt to represent life in a way similar to the visual arts.

Evidently, James's literary theories are not extremely radical. His feeling that art is coherence, and life is chaos, was echoed in the Renaissance itself. In his *In Defence of Poesy* Sir Philip Sidney pronounced that 'poet finds a world of brass; and delivers a world of gold. Other renaissance critics were also concerned with establishing the superiority of the world of art over the world of nature while the former is all perfection, the latter is chaotic and formless. Shakespeare, Coleridge, Keats, Rimbaud, and Dostoevski also shared this belief. Later on, Pater and Oscar Wilde maintained that all art is beauty and life is dullness. Henry James falls in the line of the victorians like Tennyson and Yeats, and believes in the superiority of art over life. James takes great exception to writers of the day like Anthony Trollope conceding that the events he narrates have not really happened for it implies that the novelist is less occupied in looking for the truth than the historian, and in doing so it deprives him at a stroke of all his standing-room. To represent and illustrate the past, the actions of men, is the task of either writer, and the only difference that I can see is, in proportion as he succeeds, to the honour of the novelist, consisting as it does in his having more difficulty in collecting his evidence, which is so far from being purely literary. It seems to me to give him a great character, the fact that he has at once so much in common with the philosopher and the painter; this double analogy is a magnificent heritage. The point of writing a novel, as of painting or writing history, James insists, is to depict life. This is something for which the novelist should not apologise. James then turns his attention to Besant's claim that fiction is one of the fine arts: he demands not only that it shall be reputed artistic, but that it shall be reputed very artistic indeed. It is assumed to be opposed in some mysterious manner to morality, to amusement, to instruction. When it is embodied in the work of the painter (the sculptor is another affair!) you know what it is; it stands there before you, in the honesty of pink and green and a gilt frame; you can see the worst of it at a glance, and you can be on your guard. But when it is introduced into literature it becomes more insidious-there is danger of its hurting you before you know it. Literature should be either instructive or amusing, and there is in many minds an impression that these artistic preoccupations, the search for form, contribute to neither end, interfere indeed with both. They are too frivolous to be edifying, and too serious to be diverting; and they are, moreover, priggish and paradoxical and superfluous. That, I think, represents the manner in which the latent thought of many people who read novels as an exercise in skipping would explain itself if it were to become articulate.

For James life may be chaotic and common (or a 'splendid waste'), and art may give beauty and meaning through form and expression, but he also believed in the saving grace of morality. He

held that the artist organizes his art in such a way as to adopt a moral position. In his novels James allots maximum importance to the moment of truth, a moment of realization when the character realizes his mistake or mistakes. We have two such moments in *The Portrait of a Lady*: the first, when Madam Merle, looking at a tea-cup, wonders whether she had been wasting her life in living a life of sophisticated uselessness; and the second, when Isabel Archer realizes her mistakes in the famous "Meditative Virgil" scene. Similarly, Lambert Stretcher realizes, in *The Ambassadors*, not only the failure of his proposed mission of bringing Chad Newsome back to America from the seductiveness of Paris, but also his failure as an American. James focuses, firstly, on the claim that characters must be real and such as might be met with in actual life. He responds that the measure of reality is very difficult to fix. The reality of Don Quixote or of Mr. Micawber is a very delicate shade; it is a reality so coloured by the author's vision that, vivid as it may be, one would hesitate to propose it as a model. It is obvious, James argues, that you will not write a good novel unless you possess the sense of reality; but it will be difficult to give you a recipe for calling that sense into being. Humanity is immense and reality has a myriad forms; the most one can affirm is that some of the flowers of fiction have the odour of it, and others have not; as for telling you in advance how your nosegay should be composed, that is another affair. The same is true of the injunction that one should write from experience: to say that one must write from experience; to our supposititious aspirant such a declaration might savour of mockery. What kind of experience is intended, and where does it begin and end? 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. If experience consists of impressions, it may be said that impressions are experience, just as (have we not seen it?) they are the very air we breathe. James hastens to add that he does not wish to be interpreted as trying to minimize the importance of exactness of truth of detail: the air of reality (solidity of specification) seems to me to be the supreme virtue of a novel- the merit on which all its other merits helplessly and submissively depend. If it be not there, they are all as nothing, and if these be there, they owe their effect to the success with which the author has produced the illusion of life. The cultivation of this success, the study of this exquisite process, form, to my taste, the beginning and the end of the art of the novelist. They are his inspiration, his despair, his reward, his torment, his delight. It is here, in very truth, that he competes with life; it is here that he competes with his brother the painter, in his attempt to render the look of things, the look that conveys their meaning, to catch the colour, the relief, the expression, the surface, the substance of the human spectacle. This is why James agrees with Besant's advice to the aspiring writer to take notes. The problem is that he cannot possibly take too many, he cannot possibly take enough.

In James's novels, one comes across 'fine consciences'. There is an ethical acceptance of limitations of one's ideals or position, and a moral intelligence is seen in characters. Isabel Archer adopts a moral code of renunciation and sacrifice towards the close of *The Portrait of a Lady*. Explaining a 'fine conscience' Joseph Conrad says that it is 'naturally a virtuous one' and further: 'what is natural about it is just its fineness, and abiding sense of the intangible ever present right. It is most visible in their ultimate triumph in their emergence from miracle through an energetic act of renunciation'. 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. The critic who over the close texture of a finished work will pretend to trace a geography of items will mark some frontiers as artificial, I fear, as any that have been known to history. Likewise, the distinction commonly drawn between novels of character and novels of incident, and between the novel and the (Medieval) Romance (first pointed out by Samuel Johnson) are pointless clumsy separations, James argues, for the depiction of character is as bound up with the description of incidents as the romance is with the novel (the French, not insignificantly, have but one word for both romance and novel: roman). What differentiates these different genres is not subject matter but form, James stresses, that is, the way in which the novelist brings to artistic fruition a particular idea: Of course it is of execution that we are talking that being the only point of a novel that is open to contention. This is perhaps too often lost sight of, only to produce interminable confusions and cross-purposes. We must grant the artist his subject, his idea, what the French call his *donnée*; our criticism is applied only to what he makes of it. Art derives a considerable part of its beneficial exercise from flying in the face of presumptions, and some of the most interesting experiments of which it is capable are hidden in the bosom of common things. Criticism is still largely about liking a work of art or not liking it, James adds in an effort to refute any suggestion that the idea, the subject, of a novel or a picture, does not matter. But he does not feel that he is in a position to adjudicate between what it is good to write about and what not: if I pretend to tell you what you must not take, you will call upon me to tell you then what you must take. Rather, all the critic can do is to assess the degree to which a particular novelist's execution of an idea is successful or not: it isn't till I have accepted your data that I can begin to measure you. I have the standard; I judge you by what you propose. By form, James does not mean an artificial rearrangement of elements in such a way that they appear different from how they would in real life. Form derives from content, art from life: as people feel life, so they will feel the art that is most closely related to it. This closeness of relation is what we should never forget in talking of the effort of the novel. Many people speak of it as a factitious, artificial form, a product of ingenuity, the business of which is to alter and arrange the things that surround us, to translate them into conventional, traditional moulds. This, however, is a view of the matter which carries us but a very short way, condemns the art to an eternal repetition of a few familiar clichés, cuts short its development, and leads us straight up to a dead wall. Catching the very note and trick, the strange irregular rhythm of life, that is the attempt whose strenuous force keeps Fiction upon her feet. In proportion as in what she offers us we see life without rearrangement do we feel that we are touching the truth; in proportion as we

see it with rearrangement do we feel that we are being put off with a substitute, a compromise and convention. This matter of rearranging is thus all important but not in the simplistic sense intended by Besant: Art is essentially selection, but it is a selection whose main care is to be typical, to be inclusive. The novelist is free to rearrange events but, paradoxically, must do so constrained by the demands of truth.

Henry James's art is in nothing more modern than in being theoretic. Difficult as his theory is to define, it is perfectly clear that his art is the product of it. Last but not least, James turns his attention to the novel's conscious moral purpose. He admits that this branch of the subject is of immense importance. However, James seems to have doubts that novels do have an overt moral purpose, or at least that artists and critics can assess this sort of thing, though he realises that he has to tread carefully lest he bring down censure upon himself. Such things as morality are not, he suggests, within the purview of a literary theorist: Vagueness, in such a discussion, is fatal, and what is the meaning of your morality and your conscious moral purpose? Will you not define your terms and explain how (a novel being a picture) a picture can be either moral or immoral? You wish to paint a moral picture or carve a moral statue; will you not tell us how you would set about it? We are discussing the Art of Fiction; questions of art are questions (in the widest sense) of execution; questions of morality are quite another affair, and will you not let us see how it is that you find it so easy to mix them up? James accordingly sees as not an entirely bad thing the moral timidity of the English novelist, with his (or with her) aversion to face the difficulties with which on every side the treatment of reality bristles. There is, however, one point at which the moral sense and the artistic sense lie very near together; that is, in the light of the very obvious truth that the deepest quality of a work of art will always be the quality of the mind of the producer. In proportion as that mind is rich and noble will the novel, the picture, the statue, partake of the substance of beauty and truth. To be constituted of such elements is, to my vision, to have purpose enough. No good novel will ever proceed from a superficial mind; that seems to me an axiom which, for the artist in fiction, will cover all needful moral ground; if the youthful aspirant take it to heart it will illuminate for him many of the mysteries of 'purpose.' It is in this, coupled with the other virtues of the novel, that the magnificence of the form lies, The other arts, in comparison, appear confined and hampered. The only condition which James attaches to the composition of the novel is that it be sincere: 'all life belongs to you, and don't listen either to those who would shut you up into corners of it and tell you that it is only here and there that art inhabits, or to those who would persuade you that this heavenly messenger wings her way outside of life altogether, breathing a superfine air and turning away her head from the truth of things. There is no impression of life, no manner of seeing it and feeling it, to which the plan of the novelist may not offer a place. . . .' each of these sentences is a key to his own fiction. The joy of recognition born of observation is what apparently he aims at, and that is what attracts his readers to him.

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