

FREDERICK J. HOFFMAN

the Modern Novel in America



 GATEWAY

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AMERICA**

A GATEWAY EDITION

**HENRY REGNERY COMPANY
CHICAGO**

CHAPTER I

HENRY JAMES, W. D. HOWELLS, AND THE ART OF FICTION

When Frank Norris said scornfully, "Who cares for fine style! . . . we don't want literature, we want life," he suggested a division in fiction which most of his contemporaries gladly accepted. Somehow, they thought, the strength of a novelist's value might be measured by the amount of "raw life" present, the amount of "fine style" absent. This division marks an important tendency in modern American literature generally, in fiction certainly. Style was in itself regarded as a defeating circumstance, and concern over style postponed, if it did not literally abandon the hope for, a direct approach to life. Life in this case meant society in the large: human nature muscular, glandular, and undressed—"scientific objectivity" which kept up to date with scientific discovery and experiment. There was a stimulating excitement in all of this; Norris' naturalist contemporaries could not be condemned for lack of courage or earnestness. They were in the thick of the fight against timidity, reticence—for "the Truth" writ large and splashed with color.

Of a temperament so precise and meticulous that it seemed a stranger to the naturalist group, Henry James quietly devoted himself to a quite different view of life and of the responsibility of art to it. James set out to reveal the state of a civilization, to study it in terms of the most highly conscious

and discriminating intelligence he could bring to it. But for him the question of a civilization was reduced to a matter of individual sensibilities in close interaction and in subtle social intercourse. As Morris Roberts says of him, "He is . . . in a sense the most intellectual of critics, and yet the least interested of all in general ideas." Except for occasional acknowledgments of them, James did not invoke general ideas in his criticism; when he did (as in the case of his long essay on Zola in *Notes on Novelists*), it was primarily to show that science in itself (or philosophy, for that matter) did not necessarily bring us nearer life and might even keep us apart from it.

In short, James was a vital link in the continuation of the traditional novel, whose principal sponsors in the nineteenth century had been English. As an American writer, he also continued the American art of the novel, established chiefly by Hawthorne. The very extremity of his devotion to form in the novel not only served quietly as a minority voice in the naturalist clamor; it gave rise to, and somewhat emphasized, a very small body of criticism in the field of literature hardest to discuss as art and most readily available to anything but critical analysis.

That this was no empty "art for art's sake" interest was a fact that few critics or novelists were willing to acknowledge. His qualified dismissal of Flaubert's art, and his qualified admiration for Zola's "sincerity, passion for truth and seriousness of intention" should certainly have suggested that he was not interested in style per se, as opposed to the naturalist's life. He was concerned, not to discover

how far art might dissociate itself from that life, but to determine just what the art of fiction formally involved and required. In the years 1906 to 1908, James worked on the project of a selected reissue of his novels and tales, the "New York edition." In the course of this work, he not only revised the fictions themselves, but proceeded to write a discriminating review of the formal problems their original writing had posed. The prefaces to these twenty-six volumes, combined with essays on the novel and on novelists, in *Notes on Novelists* (1914) and elsewhere, form an illuminating, and what amounts to a pioneering, body of critical investigations and principles for the art of fiction. It was to stimulate (though not always to dominate) the production of a small group of books dedicated to a similar purpose: Edith Wharton's *The Writing of Fiction* (1925) and Percy Lubbock's *The Craft of Fiction* (1921), among them; and in the revival of critical study in recent years, it was James who was invoked more often than any other as a guide and an acute critic of the art.¹

From the beginning, James insisted that art in fiction served primarily to order life; life itself he called a "splendid waste," and it was only through the novelist's art that the significant and essential form might be brought to a realization of it: "... in

¹ We may note especially the volume by Caroline Gordon and Allen Tate, *The House of Fiction* (1950), whose discussions of structure and point of view owe much to a continuing interest in James's critical writings. Other textbooks in the art of fiction include *Understanding Fiction*, by Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren (1943 and 1950); *The Art of Modern Fiction*, by Ray West and R. W. Stallman (1949); and *The Story: A Critical Anthology*, edited by Mark Schorer (1950). Among the magazines especially interested in the art of fiction, *The Western Review*, edited by Ray West at the University of Iowa, and *The Sewanee Review*, edited by John Palmer, are perhaps the best.

literature we move through a blest world in which we know nothing except by style, but in which also everything is saved by it, and in which the image is thus always superior to the thing itself." The controlling factor in the art of fiction is *method*, and James had always a vivid sense of the art-process, of the larger structural concerns which must at least begin the writing of a novel, and control both its scope and its enumeration and use of details. This is a primary distinguishing feature; it is through this fundamentally larger concern that James was able to mark the limits of such an otherwise distinguished talent, that of Flaubert. Style in Flaubert, his keen sense of the precisely relevant, did in his case serve to conceal the property of his subject. James was also able to see quite clearly the way in which facts exercise their tyranny over the artist when the material dominates him. The excessive passion for facts, or the refusal to see them as material upon which the process of selection and ordering works, can lead to fiction in which method has all but abdicated. So, in his review of "The Modern Novel," James gives credit to a chosen few, among them Edith Wharton and Joseph Conrad, for having discriminated and applied a method to their materials, for having approached them as conscious artists and not as mere obedient servants.

One requirement which method imposes is that of the point of view—through whose eyes and intelligence the thing seen is actually given. The greatest contribution of James to modern fiction is his discussion and use of what he has variously called the "large lucid reflector" and the "central

consciousness." Thus the range of the novel's *donnée* is seen in terms of the character who provides its point of view. The situation of a novel and the decisions that this situation requires, are after all the responsibility of those characters who are forced to face, to examine, and to act in terms of the situation. "I could think so little of any situation that didn't depend for its interest upon the nature of the persons situated and thereby on their way of taking it," he said in his preface to the New York edition of *The Princess Casamassima*; and some years earlier, in the now quite famous essay, *The Art of Fiction*, he had set aside such criticism which insisted on arbitrary divisions of "story," "incident," "character," by asking: "What is character but the determination of incident? What is incident but the illustration of character? . . . It is an incident for a woman to stand up with her hand resting on a table and look out at you in a certain way. . . ." For a character in a novel of James, doing and feeling are one, the interacting parts of a single whole; the action is itself qualified by the feeling toward it; the feeling is absorbed in determining the nature of the action. It may very well be that the action is slight, or even that it does not occur at all. In any event, the control which a point of view exercises upon the probabilities of action immensely and splendidly qualifies our awareness of them: "What a man thinks and what he feels are the history and character of what he does."

Under these circumstances of perception, it follows that the novelist will not seek necessarily for large actions and huge panoramas for their own

sakes. The range of a central consciousness may be circumscribed so that his perception gains in subtlety of consideration and application. In fact, the novelist's concern ought not to be the canvas but the character—the discriminating intelligence of that central consciousness who is to make a situation artistically real to the reader. The fineness of a story's insight into whatever "scene" is indeed the fineness of its central character. This is not a trick of technique, but the very core of a novelist's moral view of his art. Granting willingly the success with which Flaubert had held his novel within the range of Madame Bovary's point of view, James nevertheless demurred with respect to the results obtained from that point of view. The central consciousness must be "richly responsible" and "finely aware": as Morris Roberts usefully puts it, "Its fineness creates the predicament upon which the story hangs, and in dealing with this predicament the character's lucidity and passion play upon and intensify each other; awareness heightens responsibility, and both are supposed to lend a high dramatic value to conduct by making it difficult and precarious."

In fiction and in the criticism of fiction, these matters of central consciousness and point of view opened a large area of discussion. James was himself to ring many changes on the notion. In one case, that of crucial dialogue, he was to transform fiction into a modified drama—notoriously in *The Awkward Age* (1899). In *What Maisie Knew* (1897), he was to show the subtly qualifying effect of a point of view—in this case, that of an intelligent child in an awkward situation—upon a subject

(divorce) which he admitted was in itself sordid and ugly. In many instances, he was to supplement points of view by introducing the confidant or confidants, who have a varying but always a minor importance in the novel. Most skillfully, as in *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881), the confidant Ralph Touchett might eventually prove to be a character not only to advise and to see but actually to dominate the moral tone of a novel. But the use had its own risks; the confidant was too often irritatingly drawn in because a central consciousness could not give a completely satisfactory view either to the reader or to himself. Mrs. Wharton's remarks concerning the Assinghams of *The Golden Bowl* (1904) are perhaps an extreme indictment of this device:

This insufferable and incredible couple spend their days in espionage and delation, and their evenings in exchanging the reports of their eaves'-dropping with a minuteness and precision worthy of Scotland Yard. The utter improbability of such conduct on the part of a dull-witted and frivolous couple in the rush of London society shows that the author created them for the sole purpose of revealing details which he could not otherwise communicate without lapsing into the character of the mid-Victorian novelist chatting with his readers of "my heroine" in the manner of Thackeray and Dickens. Convention for convention (and both are bad), James's is perhaps even more unsettling to the reader's confidence than the old-fashioned intrusion of the author among his puppets. . . .

ii

The crucial facts of James's place in modern American fiction are two: the first, discussed above, is his concentration upon method and form in a world where these were usually touched upon only

incidentally. The second may be said to have had a more immediately cogent effect upon the novel's history. It involved a difference of view over what precisely was to be known as the moral sense or the moral purpose of the novel. This was not dissimilar to the question of "literature and life" which Norris and others had raised. It was really a matter, not of affirming or denying responsibility to society, but rather of defining the precise nature of that responsibility. Hamlin Garland had insisted that a novelist could do no more or less than portray truthfully and honestly conditions which a politician might conceivably move to remedy or improve. The majority of book reviewers of James's time, and of Howells's as well, continued to assert a didactic purpose—perhaps the novel was not a moral fable, but it ought at least to show without too much subtlety or confusion the proper balance of virtue and moral sanction. Even if it criticized convention, it should remain basically conventional, which is to say, Christian and discreet. More pertinently, the "social novel" might also deal with social issues—that is, it might show characters more in external conflict than in inner distress. What nobler purpose than to demonstrate the degree to which American democracy had abused its original virtues, or had been abused by small but powerful minorities? From James to Howells to Herrick, there was a growing social sense, a movement away from subtlety to large purpose; the concluding scenes of Howells's *A Hazard of New Fortunes* (1890) lead by perceptible degrees to the direct and uninhibited social uses of the novelist's art found in Henry Fuller's

The Cliff-Dwellers (1893) and Robert Herrick's *The Common Lot* (1904). These novels differ essentially from naturalist studies of society in the location of the critical intelligence engaged in the treatment of issues—in this case it was an upper-middle-class, "liberal" intelligence, remote from James's but equally remote from that of Dreiser, Upton Sinclair, or James T. Farrell.

That James was quite capable of using social issues and their determining doctrines can be seen in such novels as *The Princess Casamassima* (1886) and *The Bostonians* (1886). Lionel Trilling has said of these two books: "In these novels James is at the point in his career at which society, in the largest and even the grossest sense, is offering itself to his mind with great force. He understands society as crowds and police, as a field of justice and injustice, reform and revolution. The social texture of his work is grainy and knotted with practicality and detail. And more: his social observation is of a kind that we must find startlingly prescient when we consider that it was made some sixty years ago." Aside from these facts, which present James as an observer of his contemporary world in a way not frequently acknowledged, James's concern with fiction was preeminently a moral concern; he insisted upon the highest degree of cultivation and sophistication in the characters who were the central consciousnesses of his novels. A crisis had therefore to be a personal moral crisis; and the decision taken by his character was therefore not forced upon him but arrived at after a careful and often attenuated moral concern over it. This moral view is inter-

national in its nature; it absorbed whatever in several cultures might contribute to its greatest and most heightened receptivity to experience. It is not merely a matter of James's having found a subject or a theme in the international scene; rather, the Italian, the French, the English, the American worked repeatedly in his novels toward a balance of sophisticated and basically ethical sensibilities. Once that balance had been achieved and revealed, he was in his view more eminently capable of discussing and treating social and moral issues; for he felt that they *issued from*, and that their significance *centered upon*, the manner of their having been taken in by the individual conscience.

The point of greatest difference from the naturalists was James's insistence, not arbitrary but perhaps conditioned, upon the nature of that conscience—on the one hand, his sophistication; on the other, his almost invariable social status. There is, after all, a humility (usually called a snobbery) in his feeling that his most vitally relevant characters should have come from the world with which he was most familiar; the point is that James contributed to them not only (and far from primarily) the status of a social class but also an educated and highly perceptive consciousness. They possessed, therefore, a vitality of scruple, to put against the muscular vitality of an uncomprehending McTeague or a vulgar Cowperwood. Their scrupulosity was in one way the consequence of a minute concern over the art, as James had seen it—as a formal development (with such technical results as we have seen) of the moral intelligence surveying its world not “in

the large," but, as F. R. Leavis puts it, as "a matter of personal relations between members of a mature and sophisticated Society." So that the question of moral purpose is inextricably bound to the question of aesthetic fitness (and truth in this sense is in direct relation to accuracy of insight and not to breadth or grandeur of social reference). As James has definitively said, ". . . the deepest quality of a work of art will always be the quality of the mind of the producer. In proportion as that intelligence is fine 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 the needful moral ground: if the youthful aspirant take it to heart it will illuminate for him many of the mysteries of 'purpose.'"

It follows also that the method used to criticize most adequately such fiction as arises from this point of view will be that of analysis—of the degree to which James's "ideal civilized sensibility" will by inference and subtle revelation of motive provide a deep moral insight dramatically contained. Such an analysis might profitably be used in each of a score of places in James's fiction—as indeed in the fiction of others. It has a devastating effect upon fiction hastily contrived or dependent on other than a literary means. In the case of its most fruitful results, it demonstrates the value of "inflection" and "implication"; as Leavis said, "a nuance may engage

a whole complex moral economy and the perceptive response be the index of a major valuation or choice."

iii

The place of James in modern American fiction has not always been fairly judged. James was not a popular novelist; *Daisy Miller* (1883) was his one clear triumph. Except for a few isolated figures, his discussion of his methods—the "story of a story"—did not lead to a serious development in the art of fiction, at least not during his lifetime. Contemporary with him, however, and most certainly of a mind with him in his earnest resolve, Mrs. Edith Wharton perhaps remains the greatest single example of a confiding and sympathetic concern. For all her travels to Europe and her "exile" in France, Mrs. Wharton was more solidly aware than was James of the specific American reality that goes into the making of so much of her fiction. That she had learned much from James's work (perhaps more from his conversations, at which she was frequently present) is abundantly evident in her little book, *The Writing of Fiction*. She remained, not a disciple but an individual artist working with similar matters. *The Reef* (1912) shows her working most closely within the art and method laid down in James's criticism and practice; it is a brilliantly successful novel in the Jamesian mode. But for the most part, Mrs. Wharton had her own field to cultivate. Her greatest affinity with James would seem to lie in their fundamentally similar concern over

a precisely formulated moral evaluation of their subjects—moral, as distinguished from social, political, or economic.² This involved the clear knowledge of standards; they were standards that Mrs. Wharton understood more clearly than did James—or perhaps it might be said, rather, that she possessed a narrower, a more local view of their context and originating circumstance. As we may infer from her comments on James's techniques, she was also less willing than James to persist in the implications of a technical strategy. The purview of her fiction was most generally a compromise between an omniscience, of which she did not entirely approve, and a tortured submission to the point of view of her creatures. There is a concern over them that may charitably be called maternal or feminine; and there is an obviously but cleverly contrived and manipulated assistance given them in her novels. Perhaps that is because she was not so ambitious for them as James was for his. They do not often achieve the position of "splendid isolation" that the Jamesian consciousness assumes; they are objects more often of pathos—victims rather than interpreters of the circumstance to which they address their attention. This means also that Mrs. Wharton's novels follow more conventionally along the lines of the contemporary "novel of manners." She is given to weaknesses of structure, to a softening of the structural

² Mrs. Wharton did discuss social and economic "issues" in her fiction, but with much less facility and skill than one sees in James's *The Princess Casamassima* and *The Bostonians*. Her *The Fruit of the Tree* (1907) is concerned with economic problems in a New England mill town, though its major dramatic and moral conflict involves the question of a mercy killing, and the whole depends too much upon issues which interfere with careful integration of materials.

line at points where it needs to be hard and inflexible — as the conclusions of *The House of Mirth* (1905) and *The Age of Innocence* (1920) testify.

The early work of Mrs. Wharton suggests an almost inflexible concern over a simply devised moral equation: *The Greater Inclination* (1899), *The Touchstone* (1900), and *Sanctuary* (1903) are developments of the theme of temptation and propriety: each clearly defined as is the conflict between them. *Madame de Treymes* (1907), with France for its setting and the international contrast for its theme, takes the Jamesian problem at its bare minimum and treats it with an earnest economy and barrenness of manner. *The Valley of Decision* (1902) is Mrs. Wharton's most active tribute to the George Eliot of *Romola*; like *Ethan Frome* (1911) and *Summer* (1917), it is an exception to Mrs. Wharton's usual themes.

Her principal novels, those published from 1905 to 1920, treat of a setting and a theme which profit from her intimate knowledge and her steadfast concern. The place is New York City and its immediate surroundings, the time chiefly the second half of the nineteenth century. The theme, upon which she rings a number of changes, is the moral decline of an older New York which is under attack by the raw new industrial and financial world. Mrs. Wharton has a clear view of the point from which the decline has begun and has therefore to be judged. I have previously described the world dominated by this view. It was

. . . a world clearly remembered by her because entertained chiefly in memory. Every dollar of it was worth ex-

actly one hundred cents; every act was the end-expression of hard, pure motive; the sensibility of her hypothetical world was uniform and immediate in its perceptions, direct and unquestioning in its adherence to forms. Such a world was made up of streets clearly seen and slowly and gracefully traversed; of names which were traceable to America's beginnings and held to with a gracious persistence as social and moral symbols; of arts limited by her own taste in gardens and furniture; of moral decisions made with the most exquisite sensitivity to the discreetly proper and the most graceful scorn of expediency and compromise. It was a world in which renunciation of the even slightly improper was inevitable and predetermined, moral relaxation a source of horror and the beginning of lifelong atonement.*

This was a purified and almost entirely abstract ideal point, to which Mrs. Wharton's novels refer in their detailing of exceptions to it. Responsible for the breakdown of this world were, of course, the post-Civil War industrial and financial maneuverings. These made a clear-sighted judgment, or even a view, of social conduct extremely difficult. With them came a new type of person, whose background had not been so fortunate or so principled. In an important sense, such novels as *The Custom of the Country* (1913) are an exhaustively detailed portrayal of the triumph of the new group over the old. Elmer Moffatt of Apex City is the new financial "barbarian," whose values and incentives are so vigorously opposed to those of the older society that because of sheer strength of will they are able to conquer against negligible resistance. Mrs. Wharton is not without her ironical reserve concerning

* Hoffman, "Points of Moral Reference: A Compromise Study of Edith Wharton and F. Scott Fitzgerald," in *English Institute Essays*, 1949 (New York, Columbia Univ. Press, 1950).