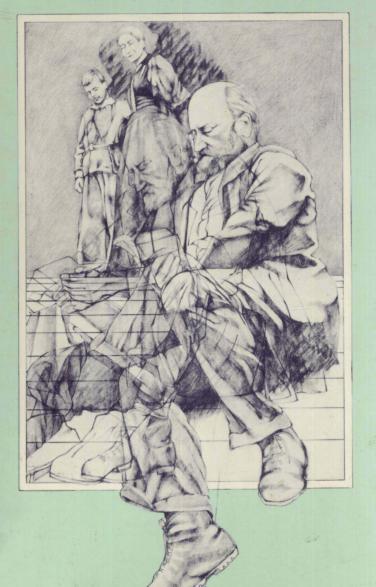# WRITING & READING IN HENRY JAMES

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Foreword by Tony Tanner

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Foreword

We tend to think of the writer, the critic, the reader in terms of a descending hierarchy – privileged creation, parasitic redaction, passive consumption. Dr Kappeler's book changes all that – and changes it most decisively and constructively. She sets about achieving this in an unusual and very interesting manner. First she considers some of the current theories – deriving from V. S. Propp – that modern narratives, for all their complexity, are in some way derivatives of certain basic, generative structures to be found in folk tales. Drawing on her own extensive knowledge of linguistics, structuralism, and semiotics, she demonstrates that this is simply not true – for many reasons, but in large part because the function, expectation, and behaviour of the reader has changed radically from that of the notional 'listener' to the folk tale. Alluding to the insufficiently known work of Clemens Lugowski on the emergence of individuality in the novel, Dr Kappeler shows how the erosion of the collective audience of the folk tale created the modern reader, a figure who has learned suspicion, expects ambiguities, tolerates polysemic texts, indulges in reflective 'double' reading, and wants difference rather than repetition – the never-told, not the twice-told, tale. As in the detective story in which 'the reader is not a simple listener: he becomes himself an imaginary subject of his reading, traversing the narrative space along the traces and clues provided', and as, in a different way, in the *nouveau roman*, so in the Jamesian novel the reader is invited to join in the endless work – the endless game – of active and creative interpretation. We learn – if we read James as he invites his work to be read, as Dr Kappeler invites us to read him – what she calls 'the tricks of the hermeneutic', in particular of the 'second hermeneutic', i.e. not just the plot contained in the text, but the deeper plot of the construction of the text itself. As an example of this, Dr Kappeler offers an extended, detailed, and quite arrestingly brilliant, reading of *The Aspern Papers* which is itself something of a milestone in Jamesian criticism. Then in a second part she examines a number of James's works in which

the relations between the writer, the critic – the editor, journalist, readers of all kinds – and the community, communities, at large are explored. She elicits James's sense and depiction of the problematical relationship between the artist, his work, and society's demands – and the related relationship between creativity, sexual passion, and marriage. There is also the problematical status of the literary product – a commodity which is never fully consumed; and she shows how, for James, there are 'conceptual' productions which partake of the nature of art even though they never find any external realisation or concretisation. One important part of this exercise is to decisively dissolve the established and accepted distinction, or opposition, between the artist as a passive observer, renouncing participation in life, and society as the realm of action and mating. As she shows, the terms can all be inverted according to the perspective you adopt and, in any case, art, beside being a substitute for love and marriage 'is itself of the very nature of passionate love' as James dramatises it. To explore and explain this further, in a third part Dr Kappeler offers a marvellously subtle and scrupulous reading of *The Sacred Fount* – a text which, as she shows in a long important appendix, has been quite excessively, even absurdly, mis-read, over-read and under-read by generations of critics. She compares the activity of the narrator of that story to that of the artist – as is usual; but then goes on to show how his activity is also like that of the anthropologist, the psychoanalyst, and the literary critic. Analyst and interpreter of the signs and symptoms of the society of Newmarch, penetrator of the secrets, not just of individual traumas, but the 'dissimulations of a collective unconscious', he also acts, paradoxically, as part of the 'collective suppression agency' knowing that, as it were, what he knows must not be made known. The important point is that his activity is not *just* para-creative, or *just* psychoanalytic (or pathological) – it is, in every sense, interpretative. If he is not quite a novelist he is not 'merely' a critic. Our old unexamined divisions are inadequate and false: 'the novelist is as much an interpreter of "the canvas of life" as the reader is an interpreter of the novelist's embroidery . . . the activities of writer and reader are singularly similar'. Dr Kappeler conclusively, and really quite dazzlingly, develops and demonstrates this conclusion by an examination of James's Prefaces in which he writes as a reader-critic of his own work, and in which there is nothing 'apart from some trivial biographical data of little interest, that we as readers should not be able to trace on our own'. As she trenchantly

formulates it – 'thus it is that we can learn from the prefaces our job as critics, but not the master's craft'. But writer-critic-reader have by now become much more richly inter-related terms. All are 'reproducers', just as a novel itself is a text, a production, which precipitates endless further reproductions, reinterpretations. There are no final, definitive terminal readings. There are only endless re-readings and the all important thing is the 'how' of it, the how of the writing which is reproduced in the how of the reading. Dr Kappeler's own book is a beautiful example of just how rewarding, enriching, such an approach to the pleasure, the game, the play-work, of reading a complex literary text can be. As she says, using James's own terms, 'the critic should not fall into normative criticism, but shall, rather, "for the fun of it" "appreciate", "appropriate", "take intellectual possession" and make the thing criticised his "own"'. And as she says, she does. Drawing with admirable and informed lucidity on the whole range of con-temporary literary theory and, refreshingly, showing – by her own example – that its use must be demonstrated in practice, the creative reading of specific texts, Dr Kappeler has written a book which shifts Jamesian criticism into a new key of sophistication, scrupulousness – and pleasure.

TONY TANNER

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I Analysis of Narrative

1 The relevance of folkloristics to the analysis of modern narrative

It is well known that the literary analysis of narrative structure has derived inspiration from anthropological studies of verbal folklore, the most notable source being Propp's *Morphology of the Folktale.*[1] The felt relevance of such studies to the analysis of modern literary narrative, however, is based on intuition rather than on a careful consideration of the necessary premises. The adoption of folkloristic methods into literary narrative analysis occurred under the general influence of structuralism, Propp's morphology itself offering an essentially structuralist method, while its application to a different corpus, literature, seemed sanctioned by the interdisciplinary orientation of structuralist methodology. This folkloristically inspired tradition has been greatly developed and sophisticated, especially in France, and in combination with textual linguistics;[2] but rather than review the various current theories I wish to draw attention to their point of origin.

The assumption behind this methodological transference is that the relatively simple and uniform structure of the folktale provides a fundamental matrix for the analysis of the highly complex narrative structures of literary fiction. It is considered the essence of narrative, the archetype of story, if it is not indeed thought to embody universals of narrative that correspond almost to innate ideas of story in the human mind. But to assume that modern narratives are structural derivatives of the folktale is to confuse structural with historical ancestry. It is rather like trying to use the form of the sonnet in order to analyse and explain free verse. Indeed, it is worse than that, since folklore and modern literary fiction pertain to mutually remoter modes of cultural production than do the sonnet and free verse respectively. It has often been pointed out that the structuralist bias towards synchrony can lead to a serious neglect of

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the diachronic dimension. To treat folklore narrative and modern literary narrative as if they were instances of the same 'language' or 'grammar' – say, like Chomsky's early kernel and complex sentences – is a mistake of precisely this order. For in the process of this comparison a number of crucial factors are being overlooked, the most obvious of which will be discussed below. They are factors which mark the difference between the oral and the literate traditions, as well as the change in attitude towards artifice as it manifests itself in conventions of representation, and of narrative in particular; and which means by implication a change in the understanding of reality. The former are captured in the problem of the relationship between 'author', text and audience, and can be broached extrinsically in terms of the sociologies of folklore and of literate art. Discussion of this shall serve in the first instance to dispel the notion of simple kinship between the two modes of verbal production; but it will also lead us to intrinsic considerations of the second complex of problems, which is necessarily affected by the former.

Jakobson and Bogatyrev[3] pointed early to the different sociological backgrounds of oral and written literatures, and to the danger involved in ignoring them. Myths, legends, folktales etc., are anonymous with respect to their inventors, and are being recreated in many variant forms. In this aspect they resemble the performing arts, in which the individual articulations of an original – a score, a script, a choreography – have a status of their own, and not just that of performance in the Chomskian sense of competence *manqué*. It is the performance which bears the marks, if any, of originality and individuality, rather than the 'material' which is being recreated. But the existence of an oral work, unlike, say, a Beethoven symphony, depends entirely on these performances, since there is no script or other notation. Hence the reception by the public plays a crucial role, and neglect by the public may mean the death of any particular work. A work of literature, in contrast, may well survive periods of public neglect and be rediscovered by later generations, as the history of literature has repeatedly shown.

This active role of the public in the determination of its art may partly account for the relative uniformity of folk literature. Jakobson and Bogatyrev discuss what they call the 'preventive censorship of the community':[4]

the absolute reign of the preventive censorship, which makes any

conflict of the work with the censorship futile, creates a special type of participant in poetic creation and forces the personality to renounce any attack aimed at overcoming the censorship.
(my translation)

(die absolute Herrschaft der Präventivzensur, die jeden Konflikt des Werkes mit der Zensur fruchtlos macht, schafft einen besonderen Typ von Teilnehmern am dichterischen Schaffen und zwingt die Persönlichkeit, auf jeden auf die Überwältigung der Zensur gerichteten Anschlag zu verzichten.)

The purpose of this passage is to dispel the romantic misconception of the folk poet being, like the modern poet, a social outcast or rebel. While the modern poet is allowed, if not expected, to be critical of his *milieu* and to disregard demands made by the public, and hence has the opportunity to influence both that *milieu* and those demands, the folk poet is entirely at the mercy of the 'preventive censorship of the community', which will strictly guard its values and suppress subversive tendencies.

While it is obvious that the advent of writing literature down, and later of printing, has significantly changed the sociological conditions of the work, it still does not mean that the earlier oral tradition has been completely superseded by our literary tradition. It is true that as a result individual authorship was able to develop the particular tendency towards avant-gardism in response to the pressure of originality which characterises our particular concept of canonical literature. Yet it is not an intrinsic or exclusive merit of the written medium as such. The same preventive censorship of the community may still be at work in a literate culture, only its efficacy is restricted, both to its own age, and in degree. Due to the permanence of the written medium censorship is no longer preventive in a strong sense, and its verdict is not final. But even such control as there is no longer lies in the hands of the community at large. Different instances of censorship are installed between the author and the public, the economic, aesthetic and political censors embodied by editors, publishers, patrons, public propagandists and critics, church and government. The limited censorship of the community at large, consequently, no longer acts as preventive, as this is beyond its scope, but in the way of positive selection. The phenomenon is perfectly familiar, only we have chosen, with our disposition for avant-gardism, not to call literature what has not

passed the test of literary history in a strict sense. Common parlance divides literary products into 'art' and 'trash', 'highbrow' and 'popular', depending on the desired inflection. It is of course in itself characteristic that the critical vocabulary lacks a proper term for non-arty literature, say, like the concept of *Trivialliteratur* of German literary criticism. In conclusion it remains to point out, of course, that it is not to be taken as a sign of greater enlightenment if a literate community allows a wider ranging, less censored literature which it cannot prevent.

The differences between oral and literate art have been stressed particularly as a warning against the rash application of folkloristic analysis to literature proper. I now emphasise that we must further distinguish collective and individual production, as a further call for caution. For these factors are not just sociological, but they significantly influence the intrinsic constitution of the works themselves.

Speaking in terms of function, folklore is a vehicle for expressing the collective wisdom and taste, and is thus orientated towards moral content. In contrast, the modern 'high literary' interest has shifted more and more to the level of form and technique as the means for expressing individuality. Popular wisdom and existing mores need to be rearticulated, not innovated, and this is helped by a set of strict conventions. One way of looking at it shows how in the diachronic development of oral folklore actional 'content' turns into formal symptom, structuration and content thus mutually reinforcing each other and so doubly ensuring the conservation of values. For example, it is a general observation of folklorists that character attributes in a folktale must be shown functionally rather than be given descriptively. That is to say, the hero is shown to act nobly and can thus be recognised as the candidate for the role of hero. On the other hand, his qualification for that role is overdetermined by other features – or symptoms – in the narrative, for instance by the fact that he is the third and youngest son, or the last in a row of suitors. Similarly, the hero is finally given the King's daughter in marriage, as a reward for his good deeds. However, these narrative developments go over into the structure of expectations on the audience's part, which allows the folktale to be schematic rather than expansive in its demonstration of attributes. This means that the listener can pick out the clues from the 'symptoms' in the structure of the tale, no longer relying exclusively on a convincing de-monstration of attributes. In this overdetermination we can see the

folktale's embodiment of its own diachronic development, as it is integrated in the synchrony of its structure as the simultaneous representation of a didactic moral purpose and the confirmation of expectations formed precisely under the tutelage of this didacticism.

One might say that the folktale is a primitive prototype of the notion of genre, if genre is the abstract ideal – never attained – of the 'grammatical' capture of a form. But while the folktale complies diachronically, reconfirming its definition, the diachronic development of a genre continually negates provisional definition, as each work generically redefines itself, thus undermining the very concept of genre. The fact, then, that folklore is so strikingly uniform, reducible to a small number of plots if not indeed to one archetype,[5] is directly related to this self-conservative double structure, where formal features are symptomatic of actional content. This leads to the almost paradoxical observation that the permanence of the written medium in fact helps literary works to shed the formal permanence which the oral medium preserves.[6] The affinity of writing to a kind of exorcism has of course been noted as a phenomenon of writing as the activity of an individual; but it seems to have this curious parallel in the history of writing and the evolution of genres.

The fact that in folklore there does not exist a proper communicative relationship between an author and an audience, because the audience community exercises direct censorship on the product and thus virtually assumes the function of authorship itself, has far-reaching repercussions on the semiotics of the text. The folktale dissembles the fact that there is mediation between reality and representation. That is to say, there is no room for doubt encoded in the structure of the text that what the folktale says, 'is', and is as it says. It presumes a one-to-one relationship between the narrative and the fictional world it creates. Hence the folktale speaks the truth, can only speak the truth: it is *bona fide*. There is consequently no need to distinguish between narrative and narrated content, as there can be no disparity, no arbitrary selection or omission from a putative continuous reality beyond the narrated content. One might say that the folktale is the unselfconscious text *par excellence*, which in turn means that it achieves, or simulates, a complete suppression of the (textual) subject.

It might be well to pause at this point to consider that inevitably our approach to folklore is coloured by our own experience of narrative. To say that the folktale is unselfconscious betrays that our

own narrative has turned selfconscious; to point out the virtual identity of narrative and fictional reality is to have noted disparity between *récit* and *histoire* in later fiction. To be puzzled by the naiveté and the uniformity of folklore is to know suspicion and diversity; to find the subject suppressed is to have made the acquaintance of that subject. Almost inevitably, also, the terms applied to folklore seem pejorative or at least implying superiority of another standpoint, thus tacitly enforcing the view of folklore as a 'primitive' ancestor of our 'mature' literature. In a comparison like the present one, where modern fiction is indeed the point of reference, and the aim to show the disparity of the two modes, such bias of the language of analysis is hard to avoid. However, to gain a real understanding of the nature of folklore, or even early literate narrative, a continuous attempt to bracket off our own peculiar historical and literary perspective is imperative.

I would like briefly to discuss a little known study by Clemens Lugowski, *Die Form der Individualität im Roman*,[7] which is not only exemplary in just this respect, but is also highly relevant to the present argument. Lugowski sets himself the task of tracing the emergence of individuality and the development of its form in the novel. His initial point of reference is the relationship of the Greek to tragic myth, namely their *unmediated* engagement with the poetic or fictional world (p. 12). In this Lugowski sees a fundamental definition of community:

> Attic tragedy over and over again shows the old themes which are deeply rooted in the folk consciousness. Those who were not familiar with the heroic subject-matter had no access to Attic tragedy, could not be Greeks, but only barbarians; they did not belong to the people (*Volk*), for the people here means still the circle of spectators before the stage (*skene*). As it was only this communal look to myth which created the communality of the Greek people, so in particular it is in the heroic subject-matter of Attic tragedy, rather than poetic fiction, that the Greek finds his home with the Greek and the Greek communality is truly founded. Later, this relation changes, the circle of the heroic myth, which created the communality, loses its closure and dissolves; partly it extends, partly it is forgotten or no longer taken seriously. (p. 10; *my translation*)

No occidental nation after the middle ages of course possesses a

mythology as comprehensive as the Hellenic. Yet, Lugowski claims, 'the relation of man to poetic fiction – and not only to poetic fiction–shows a peculiar analogy to the attitude of the Hellenic Greek towards the mythic "subject-matter" of tragedy' (p. 10).

> One's attitude towards a work of art is different from one's attitude to an event in real life, different towards a work of fiction than it is towards a sculpture, different again to drama than it is to a novel. Within literature every one of the great genres has a peculiar character of artifice. . . . As literature as such means a (generally) determined artificiality, and as within this sphere of artifice particular modes are differentiated in the great genres, so within a genre a variety of forms of artifice can be distinguished. Certainly, a single poetic work always stands under the sign of a special kind of artifice, and further within a whole hierarchy of artifice. Here, too, people find each other in the understanding of these modes of artifice and in their acceptance of them as a matter of course; and here too a communality originates which defines itself by the recognition of those outside it as the uncomprehending, the 'barbarians', the uninitiated, to whom literature at large, or this specific work, remains a closed world.[14] The mutual relationship between artifice and community presents an analogy to the relationship of Greek communality and tragic myth. (pp. 10–11; *my translation*)

A further factor is emphasised, following Dilthey, namely that the 'immediate relationship of man with reality, of being in and with reality without objectifying it (in a theoretical sense), equally holds for his relationship to the handed-down forms of the artificial reality which appears in the poetic work' (p. 11). These forms are history, that is, a living reality; 'they do not even appear as artifice to one to whom the work speaks: in contemplation of a poetic work he enters its world without deliberation and without reflection: only then can this world speak to him. Reflection destroys this world, as the "spirit of enlightenment" destroys the mythic coherence of the real world' (p. 11).

Lugowski points towards a distinction between the initiated and the 'barbarians', and adds in a note:

> Or turned the other way: the maid reads her backstairs romance with immediate (unmediated) abandon. One who is aesthetically

and critically competent can no longer do this. He is incredulous *vis-à-vis* the world of this novelette; he cannot, like the maid, enter it without reserve. He has become conscious of its 'artifice' and hence is disqualified from the communality.   (p. 189, note 14; *my translation*)

This is a most revealing addition, for it draws on a context in which the 'mythic analogon' must virtually have disappeared. In the German prose works of the sixteenth century which Lugowski studies, in the *Decameron* and in *Don Quixote*, he traces the first signs of the dissolution of the 'mythic analogon', and the emergence of the, no longer mythic, 'forms of individuality'. As we have differently inflected terms to distinguish the 'literary' from 'the trashy', 'highbrow' from 'popular', so we can see a change of inflection in Lugowski's example. In the text it is community and barbarians who are opposed, in the note it is the maid and the artistically critical in a scenario of 'Upstairs, Downstairs'. But now it is the cultured reader who is in the role of the 'barbarian', excluded from the communality of the maid and her type of readership. It is of course to be expected that the cast-out critic will in turn have found his community of like-minded readers: the 'educated', 'literati', the 'cultured', the readers of works which precisely trained his and their critical competence. We will have reason to remember this particular community when discussing Henry James's short stories in Part II. Meanwhile, we can begin to sketch developments and bifurcations from the premises given so far.

What Lugowski's pointer to the maid's reading matter means, of course, is precisely the continued existence of a 'folklore' – a mythic analogon – within a highly developed literary tradition, as we claimed that there would be above. He thus gives an initial position from which to develop a concept of *Trivialliteratur* which is not simply defined negatively with reference to the avant-gardist tendency, that is, as lacking in innovation and shortcoming in originality, but in terms of a 'folkloristic attitude' which is required for reading it.

The starting point, then, is the evolving community of the Greek spectators of tragedy, united in a common mythology. Outsiders are not specified as having any communality of their own, or some other folklore which they do comprehend; they serve merely to define the other side of the boundaries of community. The 'folk' of folklore, of the shared cultural heritage, give rise to the people of Hellene. With