

Portrait of a Novel

Henry James and the making of an American Masterpiece

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I read Henry James in my late teens. In fact, I recall reading 'The Wings of the Dove' which I must have picked up randomly in a bookstore. My mother read it after me, and did not think that I could have understood much of it. No doubt she was right, the book left little impression on me, except possibly that of boredom. About the same time I watched a BBC adaptation of 'The Portrait of a Lady'. Maybe this came first, making me aware of the author, and thus directing me to him. Of this I have more vivid impressions, although I would be hard pressed some forty odd years later to recall what it really was all about, except the image of Osmond as the epitome of fastidiousness did stay with me. Perhaps this was the very first time I came across the English word - fastidious. Soon I turned to other books and became in my early twenties enchanted with the Russian classics, most of which I read in English translation, due to my then American residence. In comparison with the Russians, Henry James did indeed appear very bloodless, and so I told people, and I more or less forgot about him, even if they did not stop me from collection some Penguin editions of his novels to be stored in my personal library for possible future reading.

As the years passed I heard a lot of Henry James and the supposed sophistication of his novels. I noted it, but maybe the need for literary snobbism, that certainly had had some affect on my youth, had abated, or at least sought out other outlets. Yet, I kept it in the back of my head. As I got older I became more intrigued by the figure of his older brother - William, and when in the relatively recent past, read through his seminal 'Principles of Psychology' and his later philosophical writings, I was inspired enough to read a few biographies of him which naturally led to an interest in the brother. Maybe now, as an adult, in fact much older than my mother was when she chided me for my reading, I might be ready for him. After all, sophisticated as I was, would I not appreciate a really sophisticated writer? I started slowly at first, just reading his shorter novels which I found in my library, such as the 'Spoils of Poynton' 'What Maisy knew, Washington Square' and incidentally first of all 'The Europeans'¹. I chose the shorter novels, knowing my principle of always finishing a book which I have started² I did not want to get stuck in a longer work which I might have to torture myself to finish. They were nice and certainly sophisticated, but still my long dismissal of them as being bloodless remained. A pity, because in so many ways, the kind of novels he wrote seemed to pander to my tastes. Could it be that I found my own taste bloodless? One thing that struck me, and also left me disappointed, was

¹ A few years earlier I had in fact read the ghost story 'The Turn of the Shrew', but considered that as a temporary diversion into the land of his fiction.

² There are exceptions of course, but of the five hundred odd books I have read in the past ten years, abortion of reading has only occurred a recorded five times.

the failure to evoke a geographical setting. In the 'Europeans' there is an excursion into the wooden interior of Massachusetts, a foretaste of the wild country which in a sense lay beyond. But there is no sense of being there at all, the action even on this rural excursion, seems to take place in a void. It is as if James is an entirely disembodied writer to whom nature does not count, not even as a fitting backdrop, it is all deliberate thought and conversation. In other words, was not Henry James after all really suited for the stage? The more refined a play is, the less need for props, it is all about the meeting of minds, that exist in a universe without any furniture. To this we will have occasion to return, let me just remark that David Lodge, seems to have similar reactions, pointing out that the novels of James are excellent for televised adaptation. What is lacking in the novels, is so easily filled in on film.

Recently I came across a very enthusiastic review by James Wood of the present book in the NYR. The review was so enthusiastic enough that not only did I decide to get the book, but also to read my first full-length James novel in almost forty-five years. 'The Portrait of a Lady' was not for some reason to be found among my collection of James novels, but as luck would have it, browsing through the books of my maternal aunt, I found it and appropriated it with her tacit blessings.

So Gorra has decided to make a Portrait in his turn of the 'The Portrait of a Lady'. The novel is considered as central in the oeuvre of James, and ideal for an extended analysis. This made me also realize what really attracted me to James in principle, and why I found such a disappointment in actually reading him. James is a novelists novelist, for him the very craft of writing takes precedence over the finished result. Not that the latter is not important, on the contrary, but it seems to serve more to manifest his effort of writing than anything else. James is indeed a sophisticated novelist, but the sophistication lies in the construction of a novel, and you only appreciate it fully, when you are led to understand how it was constructed, piece by piece. His novels are not meant to be page-turners, on the contrary they are almost written in the spirit of mathematical proofs. Thus to be present at an autopsy of the novel seemed to me a very exciting idea. James extolls the writing of a novel to an art, not necessarily the novel itself, as I just noted. For anybody with serious ambitions of writing, the experience at the autopsy table must be irresistible. The body itself stretched out is not as interesting as what is hidden inside and makes it move.

My reading of 'The Portrait of a Lady' I have commented upon at length in a previous review³ and will not dwell on it now. To read it is of course a prerequisite for reading the present book. You need to make up your own personal opinion before you can receive any pleasure from comparing notes. Now the book is so much more than just an analysis of the novel, and how it may have been written. The subject invites various digressions and in the end we get a full biography of sorts of Henry James, a biography in which one part, the writing of the 'Portrait' takes on disproportionate importance. This has many advantages. It evades the tedium of a standard biography, where each portion takes on the same importance (or at least as reflected by the documentary evidence available, or at least consulted by the author). An inevitable consequence of an ambition that promises to be exhaustive is the depressing realization that is there no more to life after all than what can fit between the covers of a book, be it a thick one. A more impressionistic one,

³ December 28-30, 2012

in which large parts are only sketched and put at a distance gives a far more reassuring sense of the vastness of a personal life. All what we can expect to see is what a friend can see, anything more would be presumptuous. Enough to nourish, but not enough to satiate, but instead to allow the imagination to envision what is hidden. And it is well known that what imagined is far easier to digest than what is presented as solid facts on the plate. But the digressions are not just restricted to the personal life of Henry James, but include instructive asides on the business of publishing at the time, as well as allowing us to glimpse the author's own pilgrimages to seek out the locales that once James graced. Such excursions, exciting as they may be, are inevitably disappointing, and the lesson to be learned is simply that time passes and the past is relentlessly obliterated. Or perhaps on a more up-beat mode. The material fades and disappears, but the spirit lives on. Work is for posterity, daily living only for the individual. A necessary prerequisite for the former⁴.

The 19th century is often seen as the golden age for the novel. Certainly it never enjoyed a wider popular support. Writing for a large audience was not seen as something derogatory it was more or less necessary at least if you were a professional and needed to live on your wits. Consequently the novel was not thought highly of as an artistic object. Not on par with a painting, a poem or a symphony say. One often says that art needs freedom, that may be true, but there is no keener stimulus to the imagination than constraint. The typical novel in mid-century Britain was the serialization. A novel was not presented to the public as a whole and a complete, but in typically monthly installments. Those were cheap enough, at least one at a time, to be affordable to a large public, the trick being that each installment should engender enough interest to induce the reader to buy the next. This if of course an age-old strategy, one only needs to be reminded of *Thousand and One* night. The point of the game is to ensue that one extra night (one after the other, but that is an automatic consequence, which will tally to the thousand⁵.) In practice it means that each installment has to come to some climax, whose resolution is only given in the next. Now, no ordinary plot, can carry the burden of so many crises and resolutions, there has to be four or five (or some such number) plots which are weaved together in a seamless way. Dickens was a master of the craft. His novels were carefully crafted and planned, as he had not the option of second thoughts. The format of publication seriously affected the way of composition and forced the solution of many technical questions, forcing you to think of things, you would never have thought of, had you had the luxury of untrammelled freedom. That the 19th century novel in this shape differs very little from the modern soap-opera is an obvious insight, which is relatively seldom expressed, much to my surprise. On the contrary any such comparisons are met with painful responses by serious lovers of Victorian literature. How can you compare Dickens to the mindless trash of modern television! But the comparison nevertheless stands valid, and indeed, even in trashy TV, there is a definite development of the classical soap-opera to heights that rivals serious art. Nevertheless that Dickens catered to the mass-audience is understandable, but that somebody like the intellectual Mary Evans a.m.k.a. George Eliot, also would succeed in

⁴ Of course for a novelist, the trivia of daily living is an irreplaceable source of inspiration for the work, unlike the case of a mathematician.

⁵ Borges interprets the title as one more than infinity, I think the one I just sketched is the more appropriate one.

the game may raise a few eye-brows. Obviously she made a few concessions, but not more than her basic integrity could accommodate. It is in this tradition we should place James, or more exactly there are three traditions to which he had to position himself in regards to. In addition to the English one, briefly alluded to, there was the American, mostly consisting of Hawthorne and Melville, while in a sense Poe stands out of it and belongs to none, but also involving the marginally older Twain. Then there was the French, that of Flaubert, Maupassant and, by some stretch of classifying tolerance, Turgenev, whom he all would meet in Paris. James had early on ideas about how fiction should be written, ideas which were clearly articulated before he even had produced any of his own. This is of course very much in character. James ideas of a novel comes as aforethought (not necessarily malicious of course) not after the facts. He is a cerebral writer, eminently conscious of what he does and his intentions, not an inspired fool writing in tongues. His ideas were of a early age, one might almost be tempted to call them prodigal. And he had friends to discuss them with, the most notable one during his formative years being the friendly editor of the Atlantic - Howells, who also wrote novels, but is largely forgotten nowadays. What did James object to in the contemporary novel? Maybe his most serious objection was that it was not serious enough, that it was mainly written to entertain. James wanted to improve the standing of the novel, to make it a object of art fit to be put alongside the other traditional objects, and as such he objected to the stock performances that characterized the typically successful novel, its various standard tricks. A novel should have just one basic plot, for one thing, not to be a connection of several independent ones more or less artificially connected. Henry, as opposed to his older brother William, found his metier early on, and stuck to it, throughout his life, much to the initial envy and later exasperation of the latter⁶. Henry James published regularly in the Atlantic, while William was floundering about.

Now a central aspect of the life of James was that he was an expatriate, that he somehow straddled the Atlantic. He was an American in the Old Country always under the threat of being at home at none. He was no stranger to a peripatetic life-style, his, if anything, eccentric father had taken his hapless family on many a transatlantic crossing in pursuit of the best education for his gifted sons. A childhood in suitcases as James later would characterize his early life as. The dilemma of the expatriate had already been explored by Hawthorne, but James would come to live it more than any of his writing forerunners. He found London life congenial, and Paris instructive. He also travelled down to Italy, where Florence and Venice would become his favorite haunts in preference to Rome. Italy after the reunification experienced a transformation, and became the destination for many an artist and writer and their well-heeded hangers on. James fitted. It was of course a perfect identity for a congenial outsider. By belonging nowhere, he has found a situation, if not a geographical place to belong to. He was a writing professional, and as such he early on discovered his limitations, achieving a firm sense of what he could do and what he could not do, thus wasting little time on the latter. Minor writers never come to such awarenesses, Gorra points out obliquely, they may try to do anything not realizing that different tasks calls for different writing. Of course like all poetic truths, it

⁶ William was no great fan of the novels of his younger brother, just as he was no fan of the mathematical logic lectures of his colleague C.S.Peirce.

should not be taken too literally. The obvious example being James later failure as a writer for the stage. This he could not do, although he thought that he could. This was later in life, and maybe his good sense and authorial instinct was blinded by the all too-human pull of the promise of commercial success. But that was in the future. The pivotal event of James life was the writing of the 'Portrait'. Until then he had merely be a promising writer, with the 'Portrait' he came on his own, and he changed the face of the novel. James would indeed influence further developments of the medium, and maybe contribute to the fact that having reached a zenith, with writers such as Proust, it degenerated into a kind of self-indulgence, the modern serious novel being an object of art alone, and hence increasingly irrelevant to society at large, and only the concern to a small clique of critics and writers and frustrated readers who have failed to become either, or still are young and innocent enough to harbor such ambitions.

What was new about 'The Portrait'? Or to put it more dramatically, what was revolutionary? For one thing there is not much action, what is important is life of the mind, the development of personality. As a technical innovation we have the so called 'stream of consciousness', incidentally coined by his brother William as a psychologist. The most important actions take place in the mind, and not necessarily as a prequel to bodily actions but as a pure insight and understanding of self. In particular Gorra places the scene when Isabella sits by the fireside and in an extended reverie, the pertinent points of which, sketched artfully by James, comes to an understanding of the nature of her marriage, and in particular that it failed. Not that this understanding will necessarily precipitate some actions, the understanding by itself is enough, it needs not to manifest itself. The moral message of the novel, as far as there is any moral message, is that Osmond and Merle are evil, as they have used Isabel, in Kantian terminology⁷, thought of her as a means, and not as an end to herself. Finally James dispenses with the classical epilogue of a novel, when the reader is told everything that happened to the characters. We will never know whether Isabel will go back to her husband or not. For traditional readers that is of course a source of frustration. On the other hand, we only need to recall the case of 'Madame Bovary' to see how pointless such epilogues really are. With the death of Emma, the novel is finished, its life is squeezed out. The various fates of the subsidiary characters, although they may engage our imagination, they disappoint it by being spelled out. The effect is as if the book is a moral tale, that its purpose is above all didactic, and the author has an obligation to drive down with his relentless hammering, the moral lessons the reader is obliged to absorb. The natural end of the novel is that Isabel realizes that she is free to make her own decisions. That whatever happens to you, is possible to accept, if you know you entered upon it freely. This brings to mind the play 'Fruen fra Havet' by Ibsen, in which the concluding insight which reconciles the protagonist to a choice she has once made, consists in her realizing that it can in fact be entered freely a second time, i.e. being prefigured by a moment, when she could have willed it either way. Now, if we would learn how Isabel decides, her choice would have been determined, by not knowing, it remains a free one, literally being one or the other. The novel has no business to determine which. Life has no boundaries, nor any closures (except possibly the strict

⁷ Gorra points out that James probably was not enough read philosophically to be familiar with Kant's dictum, in contrast to his brother William who certainly would have, or George Eliot who quite likely did.

individual one by inevitable death), any division is arbitrary.

Another matter in which James changed the face of the novel, at least the Anglo-Saxon one, is in the degree of outspokenness. Adults know more than children, in fact the very essence of childhood seems to hinge on this reticence of sexual knowledge. Novels which contain such secrets, even if implicit, are bound to not only sully but even to corrupt the young mind. Thus in the classical Victorian novel there was censorship. Nothing sexual should be explicit in the novel, it should not corrupt the young. This censorship was not just a tacit understanding to the social mores of the times, but also, as the author explains beautifully and convincingly (but remember that the beautiful and convincing is not always true), commercially enforced through the institution of lending libraries. The price of books, especially in England, was prohibitive, thus only the wealthy collector could systematically indulge his hobby of acquisition, most people had to resort to lending libraries, to which they paid an annual fee. Those libraries thus had power exercised through their acquisitions and could impose conditions. With the advent of cheaper books, their powers were circumvented and eventually they faded and disappeared. When it came to sexual license the French paved the way. French novels were not always translated into English. To read one in the original was a sign of high culture and accomplishment, to read one in translation, a manifestation of a vulgar and prurient interest in contents alone. James never resorted to any vulgarity in his depiction of sex, in fact there has been speculations whether he had any experience at all of carnal lust. (If not, would that not beautifully account for the bloodlessness I purported to find in his work?). If so it was hardly of the heterosexual kind. His friendships with women were intellectual and intimate, probably more intimate than those he had with his male friends, but never in the meaty way. James never married, and although tempting to suspect, not out of any fastidiousness. If he ever found a carnal pull, it was towards the same sex, and if so late in life. A Danish-born sculptor of middling talent - Hendrik Andersen whom he met in Italy, is usually seen as the man who really woke up his physical desire. It is clear that in his later works, such as the 'The Wings of the Dove' the sexual theme is paramount. And no wonder my mother assumed I had understood nothing. As a teenager you may be aware of the physical aspect of sexual desire, but more as in the nature of curiosity than an emotional current. James certainly was aware of and deeply fascinated, maybe even obsessed with the latter, without ever descending into mere explicit vulgarity. How fitting it is, when he wants to indicate that the marriage between Osmond and Isabel has been consummated, that he refers to a child dead in infancy. The implication is obvious, the fact, however, free of any taint of obscenity. It is symptomatic also of the craft of James. This poor child is no end to itself, as it would have been in a more naive tale, it is surely a means to an end, a piece of technical mastery. This is an example of what I mean, that the machinations of a James novel, may be far more interesting than the novel itself.

And this leads us to the final part of James writing life. The so called New York edition. James was given the opportunity to edit his collected works. This meant a golden opportunity to actually polish his former works. He took the assignment seriously and worked many years on it. He made revisions, but only minor ones, testifying to his initial care and that he did indeed see his novels as works of art, not yarns that he has spun for the pleasure of the moment, and of no further consequence. To each work he wrote

a preface, in fact as an integral piece of critical work to the work itself to be seen as a whole. Those prefaces turns out to be the most interesting aspect of that edition, and it is absolutely unique that a novelist also played the role of his own definite criticism of his fictional work. It would have been natural to publish the prefaces on their own, but it was not made, at least not in his lifetime, and he resisted the temptation to write a preface to them (because that surely would have been to succumb to self-parody?). One has a hard time evading the possibility that at heart James was a critic, who wrote his novels to illustrate his points of criticism. This is a rather strong statement and can only be made by somebody who lacks the authority to make them. Nothing like ignorance to form strong opinions. As someone who has only read a fraction of James fiction, but of course by this enthusiastic book more than eager to sample the soft-back treasures of my private library which have patiently waited for attention all those years, and who has furthermore never read any of his prefaces, I am ideally posed for such proclamations.

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