

HENRY JAMES THE ART OF FICTION (1884)

James wrote this essay in response to a lecture on the art of fiction (44) by someone relatively unknown today called Walter Besant with whose ideas he very much disagrees but is too polite to say so. As James points out later, that his own essay is targeted at the novelist, the producer, from whose point of view . . . we are attempting to consider the art of fiction (55).

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 (44). 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 (44). There are, however, signs of returning animation (44) 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 (55): the successful application of art is a delightful spectacle, but the theory too is interesting (45) 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 (45).

James begins by rejecting the widespread assumption that prose fiction (what he calls thenceforth fiction) should admit in an almost apologetic (45) way that it is merely make-believe (45): this view leads one to renounce the pretension of attempting really to represent life (45). 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 (45-46). James point is that the only reason for the existence of a novel is that it does attempt to represent life (46) in a way similar to the visual arts. The

analogy between the art of the painter and the art of the novelist is, so far as I am able to see, complete. Their inspiration is the same, their process (allowing for the different quality of the vehicle) is the same, their success is the same. They may learn from each other, they may explain and sustain each other. Their cause is the same, and the honour of one is the honour of another. Peculiarities of manner, of execution, that correspond on either side, exist in each of them and contribute to their development. . . . The only effectual way to lay it to rest is to emphasize the analogy to which I just alluded-to insist on the fact that as the picture is reality, so the novel is history. That is the only general description (which does it justice) that we may give the novel. But history also is allowed to compete with life, as I say, it is not, any more than painting, expected to apologize. The subject-matter of fiction is stored up likewise in documents and records, and if it will not give itself away, as they say in California, it must speak with assurance, with the tone of the historian. (46)

James takes great exception to writers of the day like Anthony Trollope conceding that the events he narrates have not really happened (46) 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. (46-47)

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 apologize.

James then turns his attention to Besant's claim that fiction is one of the fine arts (47): he demands not only that it shall be reputed artistic, but that it shall be reputed very artistic indeed (47). He argues that many persons would resent such a view, however, because of a Christian (and Platonic) suspicion of the immorality of art:

'Art,' in our Protestant communities, where so many things have got so strangely twisted about, is supposed, in certain circles, to have some vaguely injurious effect upon those who make it an important consideration, who let it weigh in the balance. 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. (47-48)

James points out that all would agree that a novel ought to be good (48) but they would each interpret this term differently:

being good means representing virtuous and aspiring characters, placed in prominent positions; another would say that it depends for a 'happy ending' on a distribution at the last of prizes, pensions, husbands, wives, babies, millions, appended paragraphs and cheerful remarks. Another still would say that it means being full of incident and movement, so that we shall wish to jump ahead, to see who was the mysterious stranger, and if the stolen will was ever found, and shall not be distracted from this pleasure by any tiresome analysis or 'description.' But they would all agree that the 'artistic' idea would spoil some of their fun. (48)

As James points out, the 'ending' of a novel is, for many persons, like that of a good dinner, a course of dessert and ices, and the artist in fiction is regarded as a sort of meddling doctor who forbids agreeable aftertastes (48).

There are, James admits, a surfeit of novels being written. Many of them are bad. However, he argues that

there is as much difference as there ever was between a good novel and a bad one: the bad is swept, with all the daubed canvases and spoiled marble, into some unvisited limbo or infinite rubbish-yard, beneath the back-windows of the world, and the good subsists and emits its light and stimulates our desire for perfection. (49)

The question arises, therefore, what sort of an affair a good novel will be (49). There is no ready formula, no brief prescription for writing a novel: the

good health of an art which undertakes so immediately to reproduce life must demand that it be perfectly free. It lives upon exercise, and the very meaning of exercise is freedom. The only obligation to which in advance we may hold a novel without incurring the accusation of being arbitrary, is that it be interesting. That general responsibility rests upon it, but it is the only one I can think of. The ways in which it is at liberty to accomplish this result (of interesting us) strike me as innumerable and such as can only suffer from being marked out, or fenced in, by prescription. They are as various as the temperament of man, and they are successful in proportion as they reveal a particular mind, different from others. A novel is in its broadest definition a personal impression of life; that, to begin with, constitutes its value, which is greater or less according to the intensity of the impression. But there will be no intensity at all, and therefore no value, unless there is freedom to feel and say. The tracing of a line to be followed, of a tone to be taken, of a form to be filled out, is a limitation of that freedom and a suppression of the very thing that we are most curious about. The form, it seems to me, is to be appreciated after the fact; then the author's choice has been made, his standard has been indicated; then we can follow lines and directions and compare tones. Then, in a word, we can enjoy one of the most charming of pleasures, we can estimate quality, we

can apply the test of execution. The execution belongs to the author alone; it is what is most personal to him, and we measure him by that. The advantage, the luxury, as well as the torment and responsibility of the novelist, is that there is no limit to what he may attempt as an executant—no limit to his possible experiments, efforts, discoveries, successes. Here it is especially that he works, step by step, like his brother of the brush, of whom we may always say that he has painted his picture in a manner best known to himself. (49-50)

The writing of a novel, James stresses, is neither one of the exact sciences (50) nor the exact arts (50).

James then turns his attention to a series of principles expounded by Besant with which he sympathises at the same time that, paradoxically, he finds it difficult to positively assent to them (51). Besant contends that the 'laws of fiction may be laid down and taught with as much precision and exactness as the laws of harmony, perspective, and proportion' (50-51). James, who has just argued that the rules of writing cannot be prescribed in some scientific way, is especially opposed to such positivism which smacks of Zola's attempt in France around this time to turn novel into a science that would represent life in all its specificity (a doctrine that came to be called naturalism). James lists the specific claims made by Besant as follows:

That the novelist must write from his experience, that his 'characters must be real and such as might be met with in actual life;' that 'a young lady brought up in a quiet country village should avoid descriptions of garrison life,' and 'a writer whose friends and personal experiences belong to the lower middle-class should carefully avoid introducing his characters into Society;' that one should enter one's notes in a commonplace book; that one's figures should be clear in outline; that making them clear by some trick of speech or of carriage is a bad method, and 'describing them at length' is a worse one; that English Fiction should have a 'conscious moral purpose;' that 'it is almost impossible to estimate too highly the value of careful workmanship—that is, of style;' that 'the most important point of all is the story,' that 'the story is everything.' (51)

The value of these different injunctions (51) which are, James contends, so beautiful and so vague is wholly in the meaning one attaches to them (51), the troubling ambiguity of which he proceeds to spell out.

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 (51-52). 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 nose-gay should be composed, that is another affair. (52)

The same is true of the injunction that one should write from experience (52):

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 air-borne 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. (52)

This is as true of an innocent young lady living in relative isolation in a village as it is of men of the world. The gift of representing reality, the

power to guess the unseen from the seen, to trace the implication of things, to judge the whole piece by the pattern, the condition of feeling life, in general, so completely that you are well on your way to knowing any particular corner of it—this cluster of gifts may

almost be said to constitute experience, and they occur in country and in town, and in the most differing stages of education. 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. (53)

James hastens to add that he does not wish to be interpreted as trying to minimise the importance of exactness of truth of detail (53): 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 (including that conscious moral purpose of which Mr. Besant speaks) 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. (53)

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. All life solicits him, and to 'render' the simplest surface, to produce the most momentary illusion, is a very complicated business. His case would be easier, and the rule would be more exact, if Mr. Besant had been able to tell him what notes to take. But this I fear he can never learn in any hand-book; it is the business of his life. He has to take a great many in order to select a few, he has to work them up as he can. ((53-54)

Even the philosophers who might have most to say to him must leave him alone when it comes to the application of precepts, as we leave the painter in communion with his palette (54), James warns.

James then turns his attention to the question of form and, in particular, the question of balancing description, dialogue, and incident in a novel: people often talk of these things as if they had a kind of internecine distinctness, instead of melting into each other at every breath and being intimately associated parts of one general effort of expression. I cannot imagine composition existing in a series of blocks, nor conceive, in any novel worth discussing at all, of a passage of description that is not in its intention narrative, a passage of dialogue that is not in its intention descriptive, a touch of truth of any sort that does not partake of the nature of incident, and an incident that derives its interest from any other source than the general and only source of the success of a work of art—that of being illustrative. A novel is a living thing, all one and continuous, like every other organism, and in proportion as it lives will it be found, I think, that in each of the parts there is something of each of the other parts. 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. (54)

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 (55), 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. Naturally I do not mean that we are bound to like it or find it interesting: in case we do not our

course is perfectly simple-to let it alone. We may believe that of a certain idea even the most sincere novelist can make nothing at all, and the event may perfectly justify our belief; but the failure will have been a failure to execute, and it is in the execution that the fatal weakness is recorded. If we pretend to respect the artist at all we must allow him his freedom of choice, in the face, in particular cases, of innumerable presumptions that the choice will not fructify. 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. (56)

Criticism is still largely about liking a work of art or not liking it (57), James adds in an effort to refute any suggestion that the idea, the subject, of a novel or a picture, does not matter (57). 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 (57). 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 (57).

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. (58)

This matter of rearranging (58) 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. For many people art means rose-coloured windows, and selection means picking a bouquet for Mrs. Grundy. They will tell you glibly that artistic considerations have nothing to do with the disagreeable, with the ugly; they will rattle off shallow commonplaces about the province of art and the limits of art, till you are moved to some wonder in return as to the province and the limits of ignorance. . . . One perceives . . . that the province of art is all life, all feeling, all observation, all vision. As Mr. Besant so justly intimates, it is all experience. That is a sufficient answer to those who maintain that it must not touch the painful, who stick into its divine unconscious bosom little prohibitory inscriptions on the end of sticks, such as we see in public gardens 'It is forbidden to walk on the grass; it is forbidden to touch the flowers; it is not allowed to introduce dogs, or to remain after dark; it is requested to keep to the right.' (58-59)

The novelist is free to rearrange events but, paradoxically, must do so constrained by the demands of truth.

James then considers the distinction between story (59) and treatment (59). The former represents the subject, the idea, the *donnée* (59), the starting-point (59) of the novel, the latter the artistic shape, the rearrangement, that this subject is given by the novelist. There is no school of thought which suggests, James argues, that a novel should be all treatment and no subject. There must assuredly be something to treat (59). The story cannot be spoken of as something different from its organic whole (60). Rather,

in proportion as the work is successful, the idea permeates and penetrates it, informs and animates it, so that every word and every punctuation-point contribute directly to the expression, in that proportion do we lose our sense of the story being a blade which may

be drawn more or less out of its sheath. The story and the novel, the idea and the form, are the needle and thread, and I never heard of a guild of tailors who recommended the use of the thread without the needle or the needle without the thread. (60)

To think of the novel in any other way is to make it perform the hapless, little role of being an artificial ingenious thing bring it down from its large, free character of an immense and exquisite correspondence with life (61).

Last but not least, James turns his attention to the novel's conscious moral purpose (62). He admits that this branch of the subject is of immense importance (62). 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? (62)

James accordingly sees as not an entirely bad thing the moral timidity (63) of the English novelist, with his (or with her) aversion to face the difficulties with which on every side the treatment of reality bristles (63). There is a traditional difference between . . . that which they see and that which they speak of, that which they feel to be part of life and that which they allow to enter into literature (63). There are some things, James seems to say, that we are best not being preachy about. 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.' (64)

It is in this, coupled with the other virtues of the novel, that the magnificence of the form (64) lies, The other arts, in comparison, appear confined and hampered (64).

The only condition which James attaches to the composition of the novel (64) is that it be sincere (64):

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. . . . (64)

All that it is incumbent upon the novelist to do is to try and catch the colour of life itself (65) on the basis of the taste of wide knowledge (65).