

THREE NOVELS OF HENRY JAMES

PELHAM EDGAR

THE limited appeal that the fiction of Henry James has hitherto made to the reading public is emphatically not the measure of its importance. Through all the flurries of experimentation to which a form of expression so sensitive as the novel to the urgencies of growth and change must be subjected, his example will endure, and writers of a century hence will not fail to derive their profit from his theory and from his art. It is nothing to the point that Dickens and Hardy, Balzac, Tolstoi and Dostoevsky will go down to posterity as more commandingly in possession of the nineteenth century scene, or that a more numerous progeny will spring from their prolific loins. James rarely achieved or even aimed at the intensity that develops out of a tragic predicament; he failed of the lower form of intensity that may lie in exciting combinations of incident; and he scored only an occasional success with the vulgar, the primitive and the elemental. But given life at a certain necessary pitch of civilization, and men and women of quickened minds and clear perceptions, his inventiveness in types and situations is full and free. With possibly less native power than the giants I have named, he was more cunning than they to utilize every ounce of the strength he possessed. His effect therefore will be rather comparable to that which Flaubert exercised over two generations of French writers, but it will be more enduring from the fact that he was less enslaved by the superstition of art, and loved not only the shaping of the material but the elements of life themselves that obeyed the designing hand.

Aridity is almost inseparable from all discussions of method, and the books that we instinctively avoid bear such titles as *Theory of the Novel*, *Theory of the Drama*, or *Principles of the Art of Criticism*. To be forewarned of danger does not guarantee immunity from disaster, but it should induce wariness at least on the part of the individual threatened. The first precaution he must take is to admit with Henry James that there is no prescribed law for the novel, that in an art of representation any device which secures vividness is justified, and consequently that procedure will vary almost indefinitely with the temperamental bias of the writer and the nature of his theme. With an alert sense of reality much may be done, but repeated experimentation and abundant observa-

tion of the practice of other writers confirmed Henry James in the view that from lack of discrimination opportunities are more often wasted than used, and that the potential value of our fiction is too often compromised by avoidable carelessness in the ordering of its material. Illustrations of the manner in which organization may serve to enrich the theme can most satisfactorily be derived from a consideration of the three major novels that closed his career; but our conclusions will be more readily drawn if we make a brief preliminary statement of the component elements that the writer of fiction has at his disposal.

We need not concern ourselves with stories of mere incident and adventure—delightful though a master-hand can make them—where narrative invention is the supreme consideration. The type is difficult enough when pitched above the level of juvenile intelligence, but the governing principles of any form that refuses the problem of character can have no great complexity. Conrad and Stevenson move naturally in another region. And because any violent wrenching away from the proved methods of representation has still to demonstrate its permanent value, we may disregard also the eccentricities of contemporary genius—the hyper-psychology of Proust and Joyce—in order that our attention may not wander from the good old-fashioned product which in its two hundred years of evolution has arrived at some consciousness of its possibilities.

That no one has yet discovered what porridge John Keats ate, does not prevent us from noting how Balzac and his peers produce their effects. Picture and drama are the methods employed by all, but the emphasis is strikingly different from author to author. The great Russians seem to prefer to conceive their novels as a succession of vivid dramatic scenes, in which the interplay of speech carries almost the whole constructive weight. Balzac, on the contrary, is parsimonious of his dialogue, and establishes contacts among his characters only after the most extensive survey of the psychical and physical factors in the situation. Hardy is prolific in episode, and is rather pictorial than dramatic, whereas Dickens with his unique descriptive power develops his themes dramatically. These few great examples exhibit, as we have expected, a marked lack of uniformity; but this proves only the individual bent of these writers, and leaves the question still open whether the novel may not achieve its maximum effect when full value is extracted alike from the pictorial and the dramatic resource.

For let us examine somewhat more closely what their harmonious interplay may achieve. We grant that a novelist gains his

greatest effect of intensity when his characters are brought into sharp collision. Their reported words alone may suffice to betray their identity, and may even convey enough of the general situation to enlighten the reader. But will not the interest be deepened, with no loss of intensity, if these "scenes" have been adequately prepared? The dramatist must forego this privilege; to the novelist it presents opportunities beset with dangers perhaps, but as certainly provided with advantages that should not be too recklessly sacrificed. When the field is cleared of the actors, your only concern should be to prepare it for their reappearance. Prolixity, whether of otiose description or of author's comment in his own character, clogs the free current of the story, and this vice of which many a great author is guilty is a corrigible defect that the lesser author may readily avoid. The advantages that such golden interspaces place at his disposal are precisely those which give the novel its distinctive character. It is not necessary that here action shall cease or movement be suspended. Description being of persons, places, or things, it is clear that this part of the narrative will be more episodic than the dialogue, over which it has the obvious advantage that it is not tied down to the immediate present. James has noted that the time problem is one of the most intractable that confronts the novelist, and it is in these non-dialogued parts that while launching his characters he adjusts also the perspective of his theme. Certain subjects lend themselves rather to dramatic than to pictorial treatment, or the reverse may be true, but in the vast majority a co-operation of the two methods conduces to the best result.

This is true at least of the themes that are developed in three novels of James, *The Wings of the Dove*, *The Ambassadors*, and *The Golden Bowl*. *The Wings of the Dove* centres in the experience of Mildred Theale, an attractive American girl of great wealth, with an inexhaustible zest of living, but consciously doomed to an early death. She is in love with Merton Densher, in ignorance of the fact that he is already pledged to Kate Croy, whom he had not married for lack of means. Kate, knowing Milly's precarious state, induces Densher to transfer his attentions if not his affections to Milly, so that her death will leave them possessors of her millions. Milly before her death learns of the plot; but she still designs without conditions to make Densher her inheritor. When she is dead, he realizes the strength and beauty of her character, and Kate Croy's calculations remain unfulfilled. *The Ambassadors* relates how Lambert Strether, bachelor and fifty, comes from Puritan

Woollett, Mass., to Paris to rescue Chad Newsome from the clutches of some designing woman. The understanding is that if Strether brings him safely home, a grateful mother will marry him. Strether finds Parisian life delightful and Madame de Vionnet, the designing woman, a vivid element in that delight. Consequently other ambassadors are despatched to bring the ambassador home. But when he returns of his own volition it is as one who has learned to estimate conduct by standards that Woollett does not supply. *The Golden Bowl* is the story of a faithless husband won back without scandal by a discerning wife. Maggie Verver has married Amerigo, an Italian prince, who had had a love passage with her closest friend Charlotte Stant before Maggie and her millions had come into his life. Maggie, to save her father from unpleasant women who want to marry him, engineers a union with Charlotte who thus becomes her step-mother. We must understand that Maggie has no knowledge of Charlotte's former *liaison* with Amerigo. When they are constantly together, their old love revives. The father perceives this, and strives to keep his daughter in the dark, planning the while to return with Charlotte to her detested native land, the United States. Maggie is also fully informed, and strives to keep her father in the dark until she shall have regained her husband's love. The recriminations of a violent exposure are what each dreads. The book closes with Maggie's triumph, which is incomplete only because her father drops out of her life. He departs with a chastened Charlotte on a civilizing mission to an obscure western town.

Few of us train ourselves sufficiently in the art of reading to receive the total impression that a well-wrought book should provide. This totality of impression we readily enough gain from a picture that lies in its length and breadth before our eyes, but our memory too often refuses to record the innumerable strokes by which the novelist with a sense of design establishes his harmony. We must exercise due caution in translating the language of one art into terms of another; yet the emphasis of light and shade, perspective and balance, is an expedient which fiction employs to obtain its effects; and if these are deftly used, a kindred effect of composition is achieved. A species of aesthetic vibration is produced, comparable to that which we receive from the orchestral rendering of some great symphony. When all the notes that gave us momentary delight have ceased to sound, our mind is free to dwell on the accumulated result. But lest I become bemired in a morass of metaphor, let me extricate myself by saying that the novelist is at once musician

and orchestra, for he must both devise and execute these harmonies. Given the difficulties then of organization, and the difficulties on the reader's part of appreciation and interpretation, we should not be surprised that there are few books from which we are capable of receiving the kind of impression I have attempted to describe.

It is this impression that James with almost extravagant effort sought to convey, and the three books I have named are those in which he laboured most ambitiously and most successfully to that end. With many readers he fails to establish the necessary co-operation, but the reward of attention is there for those who are willing to essay the conquest of a difficult kind of beauty. Confining our attention then to these books, it may profit us to observe how James manipulated the elements which we have seen to lie at the novelist's disposal.

When we call a book well written we imply more things than are immediately evident. There are first the larger compositional aspects to be considered—the cunning adjustment of the parts to arrive at that effect of totality which has seemed to us so rare and so desirable. In this respect our books are in the highest degree masterly, and they reveal moreover a degree of flexibility in the ordering of the material which we might not expect from a writer whose method we wrongly assume to be monotonous because it is deliberate. The handling of the dialogue, too, offers abundant opportunity for success or failure. Here one must speak with certain reservations as to the merits of James. He is obviously anxious not to overdo the function of the spoken word, and to reserve for it a proper saliency when after due preparation its time arrives. He has a care also that the speech shall always blossom from the theme, and this is an admirable safeguard against the blemish of discursiveness. Still we feel that the conversations are less dramatic than he intended them to be, and they generally succeed better in illuminating a situation than a character. They are merged in the uniform tone of a too refined civilization; and we miss quaintness, we miss humour. An ironic and often a sympathetic observer of the play of life, he has an astonishing faculty for failing to perceive the fun of the spectacle. It is in the inter-spaces of the dialogue that James's powers of expression find their fullest scope. While not a competitor of Balzac's in the amplitude and specific exactness of his references, he recognizes sufficiently the need of establishing the medium in which his characters are to move, and there are both freedom and precision in the strokes of his pictorial brush. Few of the American scenes are well rendered;

but where in modern literature are we to find so adequate an account of places that have been enriched by history and by art? It is description, if you like, in the grand manner, with much of the quaintness and oddity missed as it was in his report of the human scene, lacking all savour of the wild as that too is wanting in primitive quality, yet lyrical in its enthusiasm, and rising not seldom into the region of poetry. Of course he has laid aside the guide-book manner, with many other of his early indiscretions; and if it is London or Venice that he describes as in *The Wings of the Dove*, or Paris as in *The Ambassadors*, we see these places with the vision of the characters, or are made ourselves to move familiarly in the scene.

In most novels characters are described by giving an itemized register of their physical appearance and moral qualities, with a further development of these latter as their exhibitions are multiplied in the story. James avails himself of this method only where his minor personages are concerned, and prefers to present his important people in action and by a gradual process of revelation. When he employs the direct method of the catalogue, as in his several descriptions of Mrs. Lowder, he is competing successfully with many another novelist. When he resorts to the method of indirection and progressive revelation, he is occupying ground peculiarly his own. This is James's most positive contribution to the art of exposition, and it is well to test its value while the opportunity serves. Milly Theale, of *The Wings of the Dove*, will serve admirably for reference. She is the character in all his work whom James was most anxious to establish with every resource at his disposal, for she represents a figure of his own youth, Minnie Temple, whose memory he came to love as we surmise he would have loved the girl herself had she lived. Now the curious thing about Milly is that she exists almost throughout in the reflected light of other people's vision of her, and that the two books which prepare her arrival on the scene do not even inform us of her existence. When she finally appears, all the essential antecedents of her life and the preliminary indications of her character are conveyed to us through the medium of Mrs. Stringham's reflections, that is to say by that process of "indirection" which James conceived to be at once the subtlest and most effective method of presentation—"that magnificent and masterly *indirectness*," he once wrote to Mrs. Ward, "which means the *only* dramatic straightness and intensity." But twice in the book, namely at Mrs. Lowder's first dinner-party and after the second visit to Sir Luke Strett, are we permitted to participate at length in the operations of Milly's own consciousness, and our

participations even in her conversations are sparingly multiplied throughout the story. "I note," his preface tell us, "I go but a little way with the direct—that is with the straight exhibition of Milly; it resorts for relief, this process, wherever it can, to some kinder, some merciful indirection; all as if to approach her circuitously, deal with her at second hand, as an unspotted princess is ever dealt with; the pressure all round her kept easy for her; the sounds, the movements regulated, the forms and ambiguities made charming. All of which proceeds obviously from her painter's tenderness of imagination about her, which induces him to watching her, as it were, through the successive windows of other people's interest in her." One seems to remember that it was somewhat after this fashion that Homer described the beauty of Helen.

To this point we may follow James in agreement as to the virtue of obliquity for particular effects and in particular cases. But it is not evident that the method can have any wide application in its stricter form, and it would appear rather that everything is to be gained by a judicious interchange of the direct and the indirect device. The form of indirection that we have noted in his almost constant refusal to lay bare his heroine's consciousness is again of doubtful value. The privilege of "going behind" a character, when not abused by indiscriminate application, should count as one of the distinct advantages of the novelist who does not confine himself to a strictly dramatic presentation. In a much earlier book James had refrained from laying bare the reflections of the Princess Casamassima, and she remains in consequence one of the most enigmatic of his characters. In *The Ambassadors*, whose composition immediately preceded that of *The Wings of the Dove*, James limited himself to the analysis of one mind only, and whether to reject or to utilize the device would seem to be with him a matter of instinct rather than a definite principle. His merit is to have experimented so intelligently; and whether the example of such a book as *The Ambassadors* will stand as an inspiration or as a deterrent, it is something to have succeeded once at least in straining the whole action of a long and intricate novel through the mind of one of its characters.

There is still another trick of indirection developed by James in his latest style that puzzles us to decide whether the effects achieved outweigh the effects foregone. The superstition of the "scène à faire" and the climax-compelling exigencies of serial issue had established the "great situation" as a settled practice of our English novel, and it was perhaps partly his aristocratic disdain of

vulgar custom that induced James to seek out a quieter and subtler method for securing his results. In *The Portrait of a Lady* we are accorded the old-fashioned pleasure of participating in the last interview between Isabel Osmond and Ralph Touchett. In *The Wings of the Dove*, when the dying Milly—aware of the stratagems practised upon her—has summoned Densher to her *palazzo*, a situation fraught with greater dramatic possibilities presents itself; but the occasion is refused, and we must perforce content ourselves with the pallid after-report. It is a severe method indeed that sacrifices its opportunities when the novelist is in such ample possession of the capacity to exploit them, and it is for the reader to decide whether this cheating of his natural human curiosity is fully compensated by the imaginative appeal which in the developed art of James is the substitute offered for the cruder vibrations of immediate sensation. We are flattered, but are we satisfied? Is the shadow more significant than the substance that throws the shadow, and are the reverberations of events in the human consciousness more vital than the events themselves? These are problems that everyone must answer according to his wit, and towards their solution this wonderful book will yield abundant material.

The Golden Bowl cannot be described as an easy book, but it is constructed on a freer plan than its immediate predecessors, with a flexible interplay of the direct and indirect methods that we have been discussing, and with a judicious alternation of picture and drama. The revelation of Maggie's character is its special triumph; and since this was arrived at by a fusion of processes which James in his more stringent practice refused to blend, we are led by the author himself to decide in favour of the freer method.

The freedom, of course, is by relation not to other writers but to James himself in his severer mood. It would seem bondage indeed to a genius of easy abundance like Scott or Dickens, whose creativeness was never curtailed by a search for the right word, nor hampered by a nice sense of adjustment and balance. But we should be cheating ourselves with a false impression if we consented to the idea that James's solicitude for form obscured his perception of reality. To certain tracts of life that others traverse at will, he was denied access; indeed he seemed not to suspect even that doorways of approach existed which would lead him into the region of the elemental, the primitive, or the wild. His consciousness of life was therefore somewhat cloistral and confined; he missed a good deal of the fun of the world, and had no relish for its savagery.

What I wish to affirm on the positive side is that James, with all these limitations, did profoundly know his own world which was still vast and varied and entertaining, and that no novelist of our time has more securely followed the promptings of his own genius. That genius was essentially exploratory and experimental; and having submitted itself with sufficient docility for years to the accredited methods of narration, it claimed the license to expand at last by the law of its own growth. Mr. Guedalla had perhaps the laughs with him when he established a line of succession passing through James the First and James the Second to the Old Pretender, but happily our author's reputation does not lie at the mercy of a witty phrase. Let us set it to the credit of the Old Pretender of history that he refused to achieve popularity by the sacrifice of his faith, and let us try to discover the same virtue, with more effectiveness, in our author's pretence.