

The Novel as Practical Wisdom

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"Christian morality," the French Imperial Attorney, Ernest Pinard averred to a royal court in 1857, "stigmatizes realistic literature, not because it paints the passions—hatred, vengeance, love (the world only lives by these, and art must paint them)—but because it paints them without restraint, without bounds. Art without rules is no longer art. It is like a woman who throws off all garments."

The Imperial Attorney's analogy between "realistic literature" and a disclad female was aptly chosen; for the particular novel which served as the object of his indictment was *Madame Bovary*, the so-called heroine of which was a badly married provincial girl with a penchant for throwing off all garments. The stigma of Christian morality upon the alter-ego of Emma Bovary, Gustave Flaubert, was evident despite the mercy shown to him by his judge. Though he was censured only for "forgetting that literature, like art, if it is to achieve the good work that is its mission to produce, must be chaste and pure in its form as in its expression"—it remained clear that "Christian morality" would henceforth brook no forays, in the name of "realistic literature," into the wayward hearts of lonely provincial housewives.¹

The trial of *Madame Bovary* casts a particularly harsh light on the claim that the novel must be a form, or at least a reflection of, practical wisdom. Twenty-five years after Flaubert's public chastisement, a more oblique light was cast on the claim by an American novelist, late of Beacon Hill but now living as an ex-patriot in London, who wrote an essay for *Longman's Mag-*

¹ My source for this account of Flaubert's trial is Hugh Kenner's illuminating study of the novel's transition from naturalism to modernism: *Joyce's Voices* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1978), pp. 10–11.

azine entitled "The Art of Fiction." The essay serves as nothing less than a manifesto for naturalism, and solidified its author, Henry James, in the ranks of the great naturalists, Flaubert, Zola, Turgenev.² The essay, published in 1884, was a response to a pamphlet by a bestseller of the day, Walter Besant, who took the occasion to proclaim a "conscious moral purpose" for the novel (or at least the *English* novel, the object of Besant's immediate concern). James did not so much dispute Besant's claim as accuse him of ambiguity. "Will you not define your terms and explain how (a novel being a picture) a picture can be either moral or immoral?" Questions of art, James went on to add, are questions of "execution," while questions of morality "are quite another affair." But James, it must be said, did not himself attempt to clear up all ambiguity on the question. Instead, he offered two modest distinctions. The first was that the English novel's moral purpose was blunted by its timidity, that is, by its desire to maintain a "difference" between what can be talked of in conversation and what can be talked of in print. "The essence of moral energy," James insisted on behalf of the novel, "is to survey the whole field" of human interaction and response, a task the English novel had been, in James's view, resolute in not pursuing. "That is very well," he concluded, "but the absence of discussion is not a symptom of the moral passion."³

The second distinction was a more positive contribution to the question. Here James sought to identify 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 intelligence is fine will the novel, the picture, the statue partake of the substance of beauty and truth." To avoid superficiality, that was the principle which for James covered "all needful moral ground."⁴

Novels are like pictures: they depict, they record, with integrity and honesty, and the fineness in this act of depiction is itself the moral content of the writing. Picking up on this Jamesian point Iris Murdoch credits Tolstoy with the same "unsentimental, detached, unselfish, objective attention"

² For the purposes of this paper I see no reason to make any hard and fast distinctions between "naturalism" and "realism," and so will use these terms interchangeably. For a discussion of "The Art of Fiction" as naturalist manifesto, see Lyall H. Powers, *Henry James and the Naturalist Movement* (East Lansing, Michigan: Michigan State University Press, 1971), chapter 3.

³ The quotations in this paragraph are drawn from Henry James, "Art of Fiction," reprinted in *The Portable Henry James*, ed. Morton Dauwen Zabel, revised by Lyall H. P. Powers (New York: Viking Press, 1968), pp. 410-12.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 412.

which characterizes the moral vision of those who have emerged from Plato's cave.⁵ Fine works of art in general, Murdoch declares, are a kind of "goodness by proxy." In the same spirit Martha Nussbaum has written the following of James's late masterpiece, *The Golden Bowl*:

[T]he adventure of the reader of this novel, like the adventure of the intelligent characters inside it, involves valuable aspects of human moral experience that are not tapped by traditional books of moral philosophy. . . . To work through these sentences and these chapters is to become involved in an activity of exploration and unraveling that uses abilities, especially abilities of emotion and imagination, rarely tapped by philosophical texts. But these abilities have, at the very least, a good claim to be regarded as important parts of the moral assessment process.⁶

The fine awareness embodied by the central character in *The Golden Bowl*, Maggie Verver, is for Nussbaum exactly the sort of moral *aisthēsis* Aristotle encourages us to imitate in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. Pericles has been replaced.

Perhaps it is not so strange that the long naturalistic novel should be found worthy of the company of Plato and Aristotle. For is not the shared purpose of the *Republic* and the *Nicomachean Ethics* to teach us how to move, as characters in novels do, from appearance to reality? Doesn't Aristotle, no matter your interpretation of *katharsis*, affirm the role that tragedy's imitation of men in action can play in that transition? Aristotle would seem to have anticipated the naturalist credo by over two millennia. The poet, he says in the *Poetics*, "should, in fact, speak as little as possible in his own person, since in what he himself says he is not an imitator."⁷ Compare that to Flaubert's advice to be show-ers and not tellers of stories. Elsewhere in the *Poetics* Aristotle produces the following practical hint: "The poet, as he constructs his plots and is working them out complete with language, should as far as possible place the action before his eyes; for in this way, seeing the events with the utmost vividness, as if they were taking place in his very presence, he will discern what is appropriate and will be

⁵ Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good* (New York: Shocken Books, 1971), pp. 64ff.

⁶ Martha Nussbaum, "Flawed Crystals: James's *The Golden Bowl* and Literature as Moral Philosophy," in *Love's Knowledge* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 143. See also in this same volume, "The Discernment of Perception: An Aristotelian Conception of Private and Public Rationality."

⁷ *Poetics* 24.1460a9–10, trans. James Hutton (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1982).

least likely to overlook discrepancies."⁸ In hearing this one can only think of Conrad's view that his task was to make the reader *see*.

Still, the question remains of what exactly we see when we look at the reality of the human condition. What is the ethical viewpoint of the finely-tuned awareness? If Martha Nussbaum's reading of James—at least that of the later James—is correct, the reality we see just *is* the clash of appearances, the clash of what seems good and right from one perspective, with what seems good and right from another. What we learn is not what some reality is like behind the appearances, but the ineluctability of tragic conflict between those appearances. Nussbaum's observation is echoed by Graham Greene, who in one of his essays on James wrote, "He had always been strictly just to the truth as he saw it, and all that his deepening experience had done for him was to alter a murder to an adultery, but while in *The American* he had not pitied the murderer, in *The Golden Bowl* he had certainly learned to pity the adulterers. There was no victory for human beings, that was his conclusion; you were punished in your own way, whether you were of God's or the Devil's party."⁹ In the preface to *The Princess Casamassima*, James describes his ideal character as being "finely aware and richly responsible." Yet that responsibility, as Nussbaum has written, follows upon the perception of a world "where values and loves are so pervasively in tension with one another that there is no safe human expectation of a perfect fidelity to all throughout a life."¹⁰ But yet—and this is the wisdom Nussbaum would have us glean from *The Golden Bowl*—the native hue of resolution is to affirm one's love in spite of tragedy; or better, to see that love *is* tragedy: the fulfillment of one desire, the crushing of another.

Such a view of human action suggests analogies to material necessity, one of which James provides in the preface to *What Maisie Knew*: "No themes are so human as those that reflect for us, out of the confusion of life, the close connexion of bliss and bale, of the things that help with the things that hurt, so dangling before us ever that bright hard metal, of so strange an alloy, one face of which is somebody's right and ease and the other somebody's pain and wrong."¹¹ The human condition, then, is "bright hard metal," its necessary properties the elements of tragedy.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 17.1455a30–34.

⁹ Graham Greene, "Henry James: The Religious Aspect," in *The Lost Childhood and Other Essays* (New York: Viking Press, 1952), p. 30.

¹⁰ Nussbaum, "Flawed Crystals: James's *The Golden Bowl* and Literature as Moral Philosophy," p. 133.

¹¹ Henry James, *The Art of the Novel*, ed. Richard P. Blackmur (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1962), p. 143.

Grossly apparent here is the fact that reality for the realistic novelist is somehow inhospitable to our ethical concerns. C. S. Lewis, in a famous cautionary essay, explained a large part of the reason for this by way of his own material analogy. With the modern world's abandonment of a conception of human nature as naturally ordered to certain ends, we have left ourselves with a morality that is an imposture of beneficence and in reality consists in the most tyrannical executions of force. "The ultimate springs of human action are no longer . . . something given. They have surrendered—like electricity. . . ." ¹² So we now find it our business to control human nature just as we control electricity, which further suggests that what we are as human beings are bundles of impulses, of forces. Obedience to impulse, Lewis writes, is the only guideline left for human action. ¹³

Such impulsiveness often takes the form of a romantic individualism, as for example in the fiction of Ernest Hemingway. In reacting to the upcoming publication of yet another batch of fiction Hemingway did not see fit to publish in his lifetime, Joan Didion has written: "The very grammar of a Hemingway sentence dictated, or was dictated by, a certain way of looking at the world, a way of looking but not joining, a way of moving through but not attaching, a kind of romantic individualism distinctly adapted to its time and source." She then goes on to relate this observation to the opening of *A Farewell to Arms*: "If we bought into those sentences, we would see the troops marching along the road, but we would not necessarily march with them. We would report, but not join." ¹⁴ In this light we are then able to draw a straight line from the opening sentences of *A Farewell to Arms* to the famous animadversions of its "hero," Frederic Henry, to whom the ancient virtues can only be so many "shouted words":

¹² C. S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1969), p. 74.

¹³ "If you will not obey the *Tao* [Lewis's rhetorical term for the natural law], or else commit suicide, obedience to impulse (and therefore, in the long run, to mere 'nature') is the only course left open" (ibid., p. 79). Compare this remark with Alasdair MacIntyre's comments, gleaned from William Gass, on the significance of James's *A Portrait of a Lady*: "*The Portrait of a Lady* has a key place within a long tradition of moral commentary, earlier members of which are Diderot's *Le Neveu de Rameau* and Kierkegaard's *Enten-Eller*. The unifying preoccupation of that tradition is the condition of those who see in the social world nothing but a meeting place for individual wills, each with its own set of attitudes and preferences and who understand that world solely as an arena for the achievement of their own satisfaction, who interpret reality solely as a series of opportunities for their enjoyment and for whom the last enemy is boredom" (*After Virtue* [Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984], p. 25).

¹⁴ Joan Didion, "Last Words," *The New Yorker*, 9 November 1998.

I was always embarrassed by the words sacred, glorious, and sacrifice and the expression in vain. We had heard them, sometimes standing in the rain almost out of earshot, so that only the shouted words came through. . . . There were many words that you could not stand to hear and finally only the names of the places had dignity. Certain numbers were the same way and certain dates and these with the names of places were all you could say and have them mean anything. Abstract words such as glory, honor, courage, or hallow were obscene beside the concrete names of villages, the numbers of roads, the names of rivers, the numbers of regiments and the dates.¹⁵

A world drained of meaning. This is the world one finds when one looks at it with the cold, journalistic eye which Ernest Hemingway made famous. The "facts" of this world—"the concrete names of villages"—precisely because they can be detached from the values Frederic Henry finds so embarrassing, retain a certain dignity, as does Henry's love for his girl. And in this new world, for a time and with a measure of style, one can successfully shore such fragments against the ruins of the ancient order. But what is also well illustrated by Hemingway's fiction is the fleetingness of this success. What James refers to as "the close connexion of bliss and bale" becomes an even more menacing conflict. In Hemingway, the bale finally swallows up the bliss:

What did he fear? It was not fear or dread. It was a nothing that he knew too well. It was all a nothing and a man was nothing too. It was only that and light was all it needed and a certain cleanness and order. Some lived in it and never felt it but he knew it was all *nada y pues nada y nada y pues nada*.¹⁶

The best then one can do about the bliss, if one lives to tell about it, is to write about it, trying to recapture something of the moment that will never come again.¹⁷

In contrasting Nietzschean style, however, the clash of necessities is celebrated in the latter episodes of James Joyce's *Ulysses*. For Joyce, like Nietzsche, learned to regard the standards of his inherited culture as masks and to find joy in that discovery. The literary implication of this discovery is that all is perspective, all is the rhetoric of impulse. What is left for the

¹⁵ Ernest Hemingway, *A Farewell to Arms* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1957), pp. 177-78.

¹⁶ Ernest Hemingway, "A Clean, Well-Lighted Place," reprinted in *The Collected Short Stories of Ernest Hemingway* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1987), p. 291.

¹⁷ For these thoughts on Hemingway I have benefited greatly from Hugh Kenner's *A Homemade World: The American Modernist Writers* (Baltimore, Maryland: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1975), especially chapter 5.

writer to depict is the voices, all the voices that fill the hundreds of pages of *Ulysses* long after Joyce had left the canons of naturalism behind. If these voices have anything to say, perhaps it is what Hugh Kenner has summarized, namely that

[s]crupulous homespun prose, the plain style of narrative fidelity, was a late and temporary invention, affirming the temporary illusion that fact and perception, event and voice are separable. Far from delivering a final truth about things, as it seemed to do in the days when it was new, far from replacing the excrescences of rhetoric with "so many things, almost in an equal number of words," it corresponded . . . to a specialized way of perceiving for specialized purposes. . . . Rhetoric in all of its play is a human norm, the denotative style one of its departments merely.¹⁸

Thus in the final episode of *Ulysses*, where we hear for page after page the frivolous inertia of Molly Bloom's thoughts, we find ourselves ultimately delivered from "a final truth about things" unto a world of voices crackling like electricity in the air.

"[W]ith the death of James," Graham Greene wrote in his essay on François Mauriac,

the religious sense was lost to the English novel, and with the religious sense went the importance of the human act. . . . Even in one of the most materialistic of our great novelists—in Trollope—we are aware of another world against which the actions of the characters are thrown into relief. The ungainly clergyman picking his black-booted way through the mud, handling so awkwardly his umbrella, speaking of his miserable income and stumbling through a proposal of marriage, exists in a way that Mrs. Woolf's Mr. Ramsay never does, because we are aware that he exists not only to the woman he is addressing but in a God's eye. His unimportance in the world of the senses is only matched by his enormous importance in another world.¹⁹

Trollope's ungainly clergyman exists in a *God's eye*. The significance of his action is thus taken not from himself alone, but as his action is measured by something beyond himself. James, according to Greene, was the last of England's great "religious" novelists in the sense that he was the last to manifest a larger context of good and evil against which his characters moved. (Alas, if Greene is right, James's religious sense was also tragic; the power of evil was, for him, always something stronger than the power of good.) Here we might mark the privation which typifies the modern novel's peculiar understanding of itself as practical wisdom. What it

¹⁸ Kenner, *Joyce's Voices*, pp. 94–95.

¹⁹ Graham Greene, "François Mauriac," in *The Lost Childhood and Other Essays*, p. 69.

lacks—indeed what it abjures—is a sense of human nature as a measured measure. At the end of his famous essay “Tradition in the Individual Talent,” T. S. Eliot distinguishes between the *significant* emotion and the emotion which is merely a moment in the psychology of the poet. To adapt this distinction: what the modern novel tends to reject is the expression of *significant* action, of action which puts one’s soul in the balance, as opposed to the action which is merely impulsive, without resonance in any life existing beyond the psychology of the character.²⁰ Whether, contra Greene, James’s own novels fail to portray significant action is a question worthy of consideration. In any event, it is significant action, revealing man as a measured measure, which separates in Greene’s mind, for example, the writing of a Mauriac from that of a Woolf. “It is true to say,” Greene quotes Eliot’s essay on Baudelaire, “that the glory of man is his capacity for salvation; it is also true to say that his glory is his capacity for damnation. The worst that can be said of our malefactors, from statesmen to thieves, is that they are not men enough to be saved.”²¹

To close with a few qualifications on this notion of significant action. First, to call attention to this notion is not to condemn whole-cloth either the techniques of naturalism or the techniques of high modernism. It is rather to call attention to the way in which these novels reveal a different understanding of human action. The rigors of maintaining point of view, or the disruption of linear time, can produce effects extremely moving in themselves. What is missing is the “backdrop” of time and point of view against which “characters have the solidity and importance of men with souls to save or lose.”²²

Second, this is not a call for devotional or baldly didactic fiction. Graham Greene’s use of the word “religion” is quite broad, referring to a transcendent principle but not necessarily to any particular dogma or institution. Moreover, the claim is not that such “religious” fiction was not written by nineteenth and early twentieth-century authors. What the notion of significant action does entail, however, are traditions built on the virtues. Homer’s warriors take significant action, not because Zeus is watching

²⁰ Compare this with Jacques Maritain’s statement, “Any man who, in a primary act of freedom deep enough to engage his whole personality, chooses to do the good for the sake of the good, chooses God, knowingly or unknowingly, as his supreme good; he loves God more than himself, even if he has no conceptual knowledge of God” (*The Responsibility of the Artist* [New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1960], p. 31).

²¹ *Selected Prose of T. S. Eliot*, ed. Frank Kermode (Orlando, Florida: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1975), p. 236.

²² Greene, “François Mauriac,” p. 70.

them but because of their honor, the Homeric principle of transcendence. This principle has an analogous relationship to what compels Fanny Price's rejection of Mr. Crawford's offer of marriage in Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park*. We can see the analogy breaking down, two centuries later, in *A Farewell to Arms*.

Finally, while the notion of significant action no more collapses the distinction between art and prudence as does James in "The Art of Fiction," it does imply that a nuanced version of that distinction must be developed. The good of the novelist remains the good of the work, but now we must ask: What does the good of the work consist in? Aristotle calls for the imitation of men in action, which is to say *significant* action, and this situates us squarely in an ethical world which Hemingway's Frederic Henry does not inhabit.

The judge who condemned *Madame Bovary* but acquitted its author called for a fiction that was as "chaste and pure in its form as in its expression." He was right in this: the novelist who aspires to portray significant action must possess the virtues of chastity and purity. He must be respectful of the dignity of human action, not simply for the sake of "Christian morality" *qua* religious authority, but because he sees that human action is directed to an order that no novelist can make.