

HENRY JAMES'S CRITICISM ON NOVEL

S. L. Sadalagi, Associate Professor of English, S. V. E. S. Arts and Commerce College,
Harugeri-591220, Tq; Raibag, Dist: Belgaum, Karnataka

Abstract:

Henry James was an American novelist and a fine critic of his times. The experience underlying James's creative and critical work was international in scope then and now. During his childhood he had spent some years in Europe; in later life he moved to London, often visiting Italy and France. Some of his best-known novels explore intercultural connections; these include The American (1877), The Europeans (1878), Daisy Miller (1879), The Portrait of a Lady (1881), The Ambassadors (1903), and The Golden Bowl (1904). He was acquainted with the so-called realist and naturalist writers such as William Dean Howells, Gustave Flaubert, and Emile Zola. His literary tastes were influenced by Goethe, Arnold, and Sainte-Beuve.

Key Words: Novel as a form, artistic faith, literary taste.

Henry James was considered as one of most important critic of novel writing. As a response to Annie Besant's brother Walter Besant lecture on fiction at the Royal Institution, London in 1884, Henry James wrote *The Art of Fiction* which was first published in *Longman's Magazine* in 1884. James published a book of prefaces for his novels later called *The Art of Fiction*.

Henry James begins his essay *The Art of Fiction* thus: "Only a short time ago it might have been supposed that the English novel was not what the French call *disputable*. It had no air of having a theory, a conviction, a consciousness of itself behind it of being the expression of an artistic faith, the result of choice and comparison. Still the English novel is good as we can see Dickens's works." Henry James says, "Art lives upon discussion, upon experiment, upon curiosity, upon variety or attempt, upon the exchange of views and the comparison of standpoints." There is a presumption that those times when no one has anything particular to say about it, and has no reason to give for practice or preference, though they may be times of honour, are not times of development are times, possibly even, a little of dullness. The successful application of any art is a delightful spectacle, but the theory too is interesting; and though there is a great deal of the latter without the former I suspect 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. "The old superstition about fiction being 'wicked' has doubtless died out in England.

The people thought that the novel was 'make-believe.' "The only reason for the existence of a novel is that it does attempt to represent life. As a picture is a reality, the novel is a history. The analogy between the art of the painter and the art of the novelist is complete. Their inspiration is the same, their process is the same, their success is the same. The two may learn from each other. The subject-matter of fiction is stored up likewise in documents and records. Certain accomplished novelists have a habit of giving themselves away which must often bring tears to the eyes of people who take their fiction seriously. Henry James regrets about Anthony Trollope's misrepresentation in novel. They would argue, of course, that a novel ought to be "good," but they would interpret this term in a fashion of their own, which indeed would vary considerably from one critic to another. "One would say that being good means representing virtuous and aspiring characters, placed in prominent positions; another would say that it depends on 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. But they would all agree that the 'artistic' idea would spoil some of their fun. The ending of a novel is like that of a good dinner.

Henry James thinks the novel is a serious branch of literature. However, there are many good novels as there are bad ones. The good art must be free. A novel is in its broadest definition a personal, a direct impression of life: that, to begin with, constitutes its value, which is greater or less according to the intensity of the impression. The execution belongs to the author alone. 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 the painter. Henry James thinks experience is very important. 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": these are principles with most of which it is surely impossible not to sympathise.

Then the characters, the situation, which strike one as real will be those that touch and interest one most, but 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: one would expose one's self to some very embarrassing questions on the part of a pupil. Humanity is immense, and reality has a myriad forms. James thinks, "The air of reality is the supreme virtue of the novel. This creates an 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."

Henry James tells what is character but the determination of incident? What is incident but the illustration of character? What is either a picture or a novel that is not of character? What else do we seek in it and find in it? It is an incident for a woman to stand up with her hand resting on a table and look out at you in a certain way; or if it be not an incident I think it will be hard to say what it is. At the same time, it is an expression of character. The novel and the romance, the novel of incident and that of character these clumsy separations appear to me to have been made by critics and readers for their own convenience. James thinks a good novel has life. Accordingly we must grant the artist his subject, his idea, his *donnee*: our criticism is applied only to what he makes of it. The selection of plot must be good. It matters in the highest degree. James writes, "I needn't remind you that there are all sorts of tastes: who can know it better? Some people, for excellent reasons, don't like to read about carpenters; others, for reasons even better, don't like to read about courtesans. Many object to Americans. Others (I believe they are mainly editors and publishers) won't look at Italians. Some readers don't like quiet subjects; others don't like bustling ones. Some enjoy a complete illusion, others the consciousness of large concessions. They choose their novels accordingly, and if they don't care about your idea they won't, *a fortiori*, care about your treatment." Henry James writes, "Art is essentially selection, but it is a selection whose main care is to be typical, to be inclusive."

The story if it represents anything, represents the subject, the idea, the *donnee* of the novel; and there is surely no school Mr. Besant speaks of a school which urges that a novel should be all treatment and no subject. There must assuredly be something to treat; every school is intimately conscious of that. 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. Mr. Besant is

not the only critic who may be observed to have spoken as if there were certain things in life which constitute stories, and certain others which do not.

The novel is the most magnificent form of art. The most interesting part of Mr. Besant's lecture is unfortunately the briefest passage his very cursory allusion to the "conscious moral purpose" of the novel. 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. In the English novel more than in any other, there is a traditional difference-between that which people know and that which they agree to admit that they know. There is one point at which the moral sense and the artistic sense lie very near together.

Henry James thinks "But the only condition that I can think of attaching to the composition of the novel is, as I have already said, that it be sincere. This freedom is a splendid privilege, and the first lesson of the young novelist is to learn to be worthy of it. "Enjoy it as it deserves," I should say to him; "take possession of it, explore it to its utmost extent, publish it, rejoice in it. All life belongs to you, and do not 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." One must only to remember that talents so dissimilar as those of Alexandre Dumas and Jane Austen, Charles Dickens and Gustave Flaubert have worked in this field with equal glory. James's message is this: "Remember that your first duty is to be as complete as possible to make as perfect a work. Be generous and delicate and pursue the prize."

Work Cited:

1. Henry James. *Art of Fiction*, Longman Magazine, 1884.