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Henry James and the Art of Criticism
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"The only office of the critical understanding that does not stultify it is to give itself, to the last drop of its blood."¹ This is, needless to say, a metaphor, and for this occasion I want to make the noun do the work of the verb and say that, for James, criticism was a continuously metaphorizing activity. He "metaphors" to the end. Here is James's critic:

there is something sacrificial in his function, in as much as he offers himself as a general touchstone. To lend himself, to project himself and steep himself, to feel and feel till he understands, and to understand so well that he can say, to have perception at the pitch of passion and expression as embracing as the air, to be infinitely curious and incorrigibly patient, and yet plastic and inflammable and determinable, stooping to conquer and serving to direct - these are fine chances for an active mind ... just in proportion as he is sentient and restless, just in proportion as he reacts and reciprocates and penetrates, is the critic a valuable instrument; for in literature assuredly criticism is the critic, just as art is the artist ... the best kind that springs from the liveliest experience. There are a hundred labels and tickets, in all this matter, that have been pasted on from the outside and appear to exist for the convenience of passers-by; but the critic who lives in the house, ranging through its innumerable chambers, knows nothing about the bills on the front. He only knows that the more impressions he has the more he is able to record, and the more he is saturated, poor fellow, the more he can give out. His life, at this rate, is heroic, for it is immensely vicarious ... Any vocation has its hours of intensity that is so closely connected with life. That of the critic, in literature, is connected doubly, for he deals with life at second-hand as well as at first; that is, he deals with the experience of others, which he resolves back into his own ...²

He lives in the house. The house of fiction, of course, a constantly generative metaphor for James which came to a final magnificent efflorescence in the late Prefaces, those extraordinary pieces in which he

¹ Unless otherwise stated, all quotations in this chapter are taken from the two volumes of Henry James's literary criticism published by The Library of America in 1984. Essays on Literature, American Writers, English Writers - hereafter I. French Writers, Other European Writers, The Prefaces to the New York Edition - hereafter II. This quotation - I, 116
² I, 98-9
went back to live in the house of his own fiction, haunting it - again, the "accomodated haunter" - as the work of another. The main point about this image of domiciliation, I think, is this stress on effectively taking up residence in the work of another, which is also the experience of an other. And note that this vicarious activity is deemed "heroic". Criticism is not, hereby, as we are often told, the passive consumption of substitute pseudo-experience; it is, rather, the doubling of experience. You have your own experience; then you have the experience of the experience of another. Since that work will be, ideally, compounded of the experience of yet others - by the artist's practice of what James calls "transmigration" - we are confronted by an apparently endless regress or circularity. There is, somehow, somewhere, the experience of life; that experience - some of it - can be caught and represented in, or is constituted by, writing; and that experience can be re-experienced as reading. The key word in respect of the maximisation of these experiences is "saturation" - for liver, writer, reader, critic. Clearly, the distinctions between living, writing, and reading are becoming blurred (James loved to blur an only apparently clear distinction) as we can easily see in the spectacle of James spending an important part of his life passionately exposing himself to, immersing himself in, saturating himself with - i.e. reading - his own writing. Let us keep before us that image of the ideal critic. He lives in the house: the house of fiction, which is the house of writing, which is the house of the experiences of others. And this active habitation entails a sacrificial vicariousness, taken to extremes which are not less than heroic.

I am now going to set before you a number of quotations by James, in order to map out, tentatively, the terrain of his criticism. In his little book on Hawthorne, James contrasts The Scarlet Letter unfavourably with a minor novel concerning adultery called Adam Blair by John Gibson Lockhart, in these terms: "Lockhart was a dense substantial Briton with a taste for the concrete, and Hawthorne was a thin New Engander, with a miasmatic conscience". Now this, from a review of Middlemarch (1873): it is "a treasure-house of details but an indifferent whole ... Its diffuseness

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3 I, 407
... makes it too copious a dose of pure fiction. It sets a limit, we think, to the development of the old-fashioned English novel. If we write novels so, how shall we write history?"4 Next, from a letter James wrote to William Dean Howells in 1884 concerning the French writers he knew in Paris: "there is nothing more interesting to me now than the effort and experiment of this little group with its truly infernal intelligence of art, form, manner - its intense artistic life. They do the only kind of work today that I respect; and in spite of their ferocious pessimism and handling of unclean things, they are at least serious and honest".5 And this, from his 1902 essay on Flaubert: "Jane Austen was instinctive and charming, and other recognitions ... from Fielding to Pater - are obvious ... For signal examples of what composition, distribution, arrangement can do, of how they intensify the life of a work of art, we have to go elsewhere; and the value of Flaubert for us is that he admirably points the moral".6 And finally, from "The Future of the Novel" (1899) where James is complaining of the prudishness and self-emasculating propriety of the Victorian novel: "There came into being a mistrust of any but the most guarded treatment of the great relation between men and women, the constant world-renewal, which was the conspicuous sign that whatever the prose picture of life was prepared to take upon itself, it was not prepared to take upon itself not to be superficial. Its position became very much: 'There are other things, don't you know? For heaven's sake, let that one pass!' And to this wonderful propriety of letting it pass the business has been for these so many years ... largely devoted ... One of (the consequences) has been that there is an immense omission in our fiction".7

I am sure you can see the rather simple schema I am, perhaps rather crudely, suggesting. For James - younger James - America (which meant New England) was "thin". He is not, by a long way, the first American writer to complain of the dearth, paucity, or downright absence of material in America for a writer to work on. And James was only developing a

4 I, 1, 958
6 II, 333
7 I, 107-8
familiar complaint when he described the "light fresh American air" as "unthickened and undarkened by customs and institutions". What America (New England) notably produced and fostered was "conscience" - but without very much to exercise that conscience on, or in. Thus, in his 1887 essay on Emerson, discussing the New England character and the thin society it inhabited, James says that you get "the impression of a conscience gasping in the void, panting for sensations, with something of the movement of a stranded fish".8 If America was "thin", England was always "dense", "substantial", "thick"; its society characterised by unfathomable depths and accretions of customs and institutions. But the English, the Anglo-Saxons, were deeply philistine, incredibly uncritical, and aesthetically illiterate - thick and dense indeed! They were very "moral" in their way, but in its rigid, uninquiring conventionality, it was a way which was ruinous for art. So you get the diffuse, judgmental, sententious swarms of George Eliot - thick with the reality of a dense society, but essentially formless. The novel could, thought James, go no further down that road. For the possibilities of form, composition, technique, style, self-conscious artistry in the novel, the young American writer has to turn to the French. They may be "unclean", but at least they are honest about the centrality of "the great world-renewal" - which was James's way of referring to sex. James's criticism works within the America-England-France triangle; there is barely one piece on an Italian writer, and James regarded Turgenev as part of the Paris literary world. I am suggesting - very simply - that James, the novelist, uses American conscience in English society in books written in emulation of the French. There is certainly some truth in this schema. The under-nourished, hungry, bewildered, fearful American conscience is vital to his fiction from first ("Madame de Mauves") to last (The Golden Bowl). The major setting of most of his major novels is invariably English society, dense to the point of fogginess and sometimes thick and dark even to impenetrability (The Bostonians is, notably, his only major novel set exclusively in America). And James's aspirations in novel writing avowedly took shape from what he appreciated in his French contemporaries. But James's criticism is the

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8 I, 259
reverse of schematic, and for the rest of the time I hope to complicate, and thus enrich, the picture, by moving into a sharper focus.

It will be well to start at the obvious place, James's one completely general essay on "The Art of Fiction". It is the nearest he ever got to making a theoretical statement, and it is worth considering it quite carefully. The date is 1884. The Portrait of a Lady is published and successful; shortly after will come The Bostonians and Princess Casamassima. James's final attempts to produce post-Balzatian panoramic social novels (we might add The Tragic Muse which came next) - or "realist" novels, as he understood realism. These were much less successful, and James's fiction duly took a turn. But in 1884 he is speaking confidently as a new "realist" novelist. Clearly, he finds discussion about the novel to be in a parlous condition. English fiction is naive, and theory about it non-existent. The general feeling is that "a novel is a novel as a pudding is a pudding and that our only business with it could be to swallow it". But he maintains that "the theory" is interesting, as well as the practice, and he senses that an "era of discussion", which will take the theory of the novel seriously, is beginning. It is just such a discussion which he here hopes to inaugurate. Remember that prior to James, apart from a few ad hoc remarks by such novelists as Fielding, Jane Austen, Scott, there had been no attempt to provide anything like a theory of fiction. What kind of "theory" James himself offers - if indeed it does not amount, finally, to an anti-theory - I will be considering.

It is probably remarkable to us, and perhaps a calculated raising of the stakes, that, from the start, James insists on the truth and reality of the novel; almost, we might say, on the non-fictionality of fiction. The only reason for the existence of the novel is that it attempts to "represent life", just like a painting: "as the picture is reality so the novel is history". They both offer representations - literally, re-presentation of the real. It is a crime and a betrayal of a sacred office, no less, for a novelist to concede, even in an aside, that he is, after all, just "making believe" (as, for instance, Thackeray does when he talks about putting his puppets back.

9 I, 44
10 I, 46
in their box). "It implies that the novelist is less occupied in looking for the truth (the truth, of course I mean, that he assumes)" - assumes? invents? this off-hand parenthesis is crucial - "than the historian, and in so doing it deprives him at a stroke of all his standing room".\(^\text{11}\) (Note that last image: one of James's highest, and most often-used, terms of praise for a novelist is that he or she sets his or her characters "on their feet". It is one of his ways of stressing the supreme importance of the illusion - necessarily an illusion, though he elides this - that a novelist's characters are free to walk their own ways.) This is part of James's insistence that the novelist must be claiming to write the same sort of truth as the historian; they share the same interest and subject-matter - representations of the actions of men and women - it is just that it is more difficult for the novelist, lacking archives, to collect his evidence. All this makes for a bold opening move, but one which proves hard to sustain. For James has soon shifted his ground. "A novel is in its broadest definition a personal, a direct impression of life" and it is valuable "according to the intensity of the impression".\(^\text{12}\) The "truth" of a novel is now its transcribed fidelity to a personal "impression" - that is, a subjective truth, not usually taken to be the same as more objective "historical" truth, though, to be sure, we now feel that these distinctions do not always seem so secure under closer scrutiny. Let me put it another way. James will recast or expand the areas of experience characterisable as "history" until Conrad could very aptly describe him as an "historian of fine consciences". James's central intention is, I think, to stress the primacy of the receptive and transformative consciousness.

James's essay was, in part, written in response to some remarks by a now-forgotten contemporary critic named Walter Besant who had offered some prescriptions to any would-be novelist. One of his bits of advice was that the novelist should always write from experience. This prompts James to one of his most famous passages. "What kind of experience is intended, and where does it begin or end? Experience is never limited, and it is never complete; it is an immense sensibility, a kind of huge spider-

\(^{11}\) I, 46-7
\(^{12}\) I, 50
web of the finest silken threads suspended in the chamber of consciousness and catching every air-borne particle into its tissues. It is the very atmosphere of the mind; and when the mind is imaginative ... it takes to itself the faintest hints of life, it converts the very pulses of revelations" - which leads to his own form of exhilarating advice to the aspiring novelist: "Try to be one of the people on whom nothing is lost!"\textsuperscript{13}

But James has to get out of that chamber of consciousness to champion the "real": "the air of reality (solidity of specification) seems to me to be the supreme virtue of the novel, the merit on which all its other merits ... helplessly and submissively depend."\textsuperscript{14} This is exactly the "reality effect" (\textit{effet du réel}) which Roland Barthes would, in due course, challenge and attack as the very mark of the mendacious bourgeois novel - its pretence of offering material presence and plenitude, its attempt to "naturalise the sign". At this time, James could still feel a great value in the scrupulous depiction of the real - the "look of things", surfaces, extensions, colours, expressions. Re-presentation is not - not yet anyway - problematic for him. I think his main objective here is to open up the field of legitimate material for the novelist - "all life solicits him ... all feeling, all observation, all vision".\textsuperscript{15} This, for at least two reasons. He wants to deprecate the "little prohibitory inscriptions on the end of sticks, such as we see in public gardens"\textsuperscript{16} - such as, I imagine, don't touch the sad, keep off the adultery, don't pick the erotic, and so on. And, he wants to challenge, blur, even do away with, prescriptive categorisations and fixed taxonomies with regard to such matters as narration, description, dialogue, character, incident ("What is character but the determination of incident? What is incident but the illustration of character?"\textsuperscript{17} and so on). James makes all the terms become fluidly interchangeable and reciprocal.

Similarly, he wants to dissolve any notions that certain subjects, certain topics, certain stories, certain kinds of experience, are intrinsically more suitable for the novel than others. The hapless Walter Besant had spoken

\textsuperscript{13} I, 52-3
\textsuperscript{14} I, 53
\textsuperscript{15} I, 59
\textsuperscript{16} I, 59
\textsuperscript{17} I, 55
of the impossibility of "fiction without adventure". This prompts James to another marvellous dismantling of conventional distinctions and differences.

And what is adventure, when it comes to that, and by what sign is the listening pupil to recognise it? It is an adventure - an immense one - for me to write this little article; and for a Boston nymph to reject an English duke is an adventure only less stirring, I should say, than for an English duke to be rejected by a Boston nymph. I see dramas within dramas in that, and innumerable points of view. A psychological reason is, to my imagination, an object adorably pictorial - I feel as if that idea might inspire one to Titianesque efforts. There are few things more exciting to me, in short, than a psychological reason, and yet, I protest, the novel seems to me the most magnificent form of art.18

Note that rather unexpected "and yet". We should remember that, at that time, psychological scrutiny and analysis was popularly deemed to be inimical to the novel. In time, James would be attacked as a dissembler (with hinted accusations of vivisection). "Adventure" was - again, at the popular level - deemed to be primarily a matter of contesting or confused externalities. James wants to destroy the notion that there is any particularly privileged locale or site of the interesting, the amazing, the narratable: "the moral consciousness of a child is as much a part of life as the islands of the Spanish Main, and the one sort of geography seems to me to have those 'surprises' of which Mr. Besant speaks as much as the other."19 Quite simply, the novel can take in anything - and everything. The strategic value and necessity of this claim, at this moment of the high-water of the Victorian age, with all that that meant by way of areas of experience which were taboo for writers, is too obvious to need urging. James wants to "ventilate" - another of his favourite words - a particularly stuffy, even suffocating, literary climate and atmosphere. He wants novels to have air and breathing space.

This is why he contests and even ridicules the demand that the novel should have a "conscious moral purpose". How can that be? What does it mean? The novel is concerned simply with depicting reality - "questions (in the widest sense) of execution".20 Moral purpose is nothing to the

18 I, 61-2
19 I, 61-2
20 I, 62
point. In fact - here James turns the tables - what is remarkable is the "moral timidity" of the English novelist. He won't really face the difficulties with which "the treatment of reality bristles" (another favourite word).21 Again he is referring to that complicitous and "cautious silence on certain subjects" - the "great world-renewal". In a striking anticipation of a Freudian formulation, he notes that in the English and American novel "there is a traditional difference between that which people know and that which they agree to admit that they know".22 This is the Freudian difference between knowledge and belief: belief is, exactly, what we agree to admit that we know, and it is used, variously, to deny, obfuscate, and otherwise mystify or occlude, knowledge. For James morality is not this collusive, consensual concealment, but on the contrary a matter of not falsifying what you see. And you should try to see everything: "the essence of moral energy is to survey the whole field".23

You will have noticed aspirations, or at least gestures, towards some kind of totality in James's essay - all life, the whole field. James wants to bring the novel as close as possible to life, to the point at which he frequently insists on the organic nature of the novel (though he's far from being a consistent "organicist"). One can well understand the motive behind the rhetoric - inclusion rather than omission, ventilation rather than asphyxiation, knowledge rather than belief - but it does pose an aesthetic problem. Even as a figure of speech it is manifestly absurd to write of the novel as covering and including everything. The condition for any work of art is selection, which means exclusion, which means simply having to leave - or keep - some things out. James runs into a bit of trouble here. "In proportion as in what it (fiction) offers us we see life without arrangement do we feel we are touching truth; in proportion as we see it with arrangement do we feel that we are being put off with a substitute, a compromise and convention .... 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 window-panes, and selection means

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21 I, 63
22 I, 63
23 I, 63
picking a bouquet for Mrs. Grundy."\(^{24}\) When selection simply means omission and falsification and keeping Mrs. Grundy happy, it is of course to be opposed. But, at a higher level, how can art be at once "inclusive" and "selective"? In fact, James has an answer and it is a good one, though he makes little of it - an art work can aim for the "typical". But the problem here adumbrated by James occupied him, fruitfully be it said, all his writing life. What - for a novelist - might be the criteria for exclusion, the principles of curtailment? How, when, could a novelist stop since, as James rightly said, relations properly speaking stop nowhere? James himself, notoriously, found it difficult to stop - though I would say that what he found difficult to stop was writing, not "including". But to stay with the immediate problem. James admired, and sought to emulate, the copious inclusiveness of Balzac. But he also admired the tactful economy and impeccable selectivity of Turgenev, which he also aspired to follow. And, of course James wanted "arrangement" in a novel. His objection to Middlemarch was precisely that it was so unarranged, so diffuse, so formless. "Arrangement" at the level of contrived happy endings and the sudden arrival of fairy gold he clearly wanted to avoid. But the "arrangement" of a Flaubert was something which James admired very much indeed. Art is by definition exclusive: life is by definition inclusive. For James, at this point in his writing career, art - the novel - should look like life, exactly as teeming and unarranged. But art should also look like art; should be like the exquisite "crystal box" of Flaubert, and not a "loose and baggy monster" like Tolstoy. This is not to try to catch James out in contradictions - a sterile, not to say pointless, ambition. It is, rather, to try to point up the generative and fertilising aesthetic problems which were occupying him as he attempted to draw up a new manifesto of "realism" for the English novel.

James purports, or seems, not to see any difficulty in locating or defining the "real", any more than he sees difficulties in deciding the kind of "truth" - historical? psychological? - a novel should tell, or represent. Is it in the crowded milieux of the world? Is it in the chamber of consciousness? Is it, perhaps, primarily in the bedroom, not that James

\(^{24}\) I, 58
would ever put such a question so directly? James’s answer, I suspect, would, quite cheerfully, be that the real and the true are to be found in all three, and that anyway such divisions and distinctions are false or misleading. But how is the novelist to set about his task? To be advised to start anywhere and exhorted to look everywhere is a permission rather than a clue. James is here deliberately challenging all prescriptions for novel-writing, so his own must, perforce, be of the most general - try to be one of those on whom nothing is lost. The result is inspirational - it is a great essay. But it contains no formal hints. Rather it "bristles" and "blooms" with images - from spider-webs to nosegays - as James "metaphors" serenely along. This method, or rather avoidance of method, marks all his criticism, and it allows him to mingle generosity and discrimination (inclusion and exclusion) as he elicits and extolls, and appreciatively evokes, the varying qualities he responds to in any writing which struck him as, in some way, achieved. He responded to any work in which, as he says advisedly - the thing is really done. Which all makes for the most civilised criticism of the novel ever to have been written. James’s critical writing discovers and demonstrates the hopeless inadequacy of any theory to account for and describe the countless, unaccountable ways in which writing can attract, take, and hold us. Criticism is not, and cannot be, a theory. It is an art.

For the rest of my time, I want to look a little more closely at his criticism of four writers by whom he constantly, if differently, took his bearings - George Eliot, Turgenev, Balzac, and Flaubert. There is so much he palpably respects and admires in the work of George Eliot. In "Daniel Deronda: A Conversation" (1876), Constantius allows the epithet "Shakespearean", because of the "overflow of observation", and the variety of character which flows from a "much-peopled mind". Theodora says of the novel - "one lives in it, or alongside it". They both applaud in particular the portrait of Gwendolen, for the "wealth of psychological conscience is traced" (which surely makes us think of his own Isabel Archer). In general, says Constantius, "the book is full of the world", and, as we have seen, you cannot offer much higher praise than that as far as
James is concerned. As he said in his own voice, in another review of Daniel Deronda: "The 'sense of the universal' is constant, omnipresent. It strikes us sometimes perhaps as rather conscious and over-cultivated; but it gives us the feeling that the threads of the narrative, as we gather time into our hands, are not of the usual commercial measurement, but long electric wires capable of transmitting messages from mysterious regions." James is "metaphoring" here to brilliant effect; it is one of his most felicitous images.

What are his reservations based on, then? For one thing, he notes that in her works "passion" is invariably "feebler than conscience", and, thus, in "morals and aesthetics" she is "essentially a conservative". Then, she is clearly too insistently sententious for James. He purports to admire the "luminous brooding" of her mind, but when he remarks on her "exemption from cerebral lassitude" we may infer that he deprecates the "excess of reflection" in her work. Other things are missing or unbalanced. There is too much "erudition" as opposed to "saturation of the senses". Her mind lacks "spontaneity" and "is not often - perhaps often enough - found at play" (we should never forget that, behind a straightish face, James is the most ludic of novelists). Romola, for instance, is evolved from "a moral consciousness encircled by a prodigious amount of literary research". And, although he can speak appreciatively of the "fragrance of moral elevation" which rises from her work, he is aware of a chill. "The philosophic door is always open, on her stage, and we are aware that the somewhat cooling draught of ethical purpose draws across it." Windows are one thing in James's house of fiction; open doors may be quite another, particularly if they let in moral

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25 I, 977, 990-3
26 I, 974
27 I, 915
28 I, 932
29 I, 1000
30 I, 1007
31 I, 1000
32 I, 1006
33 I, 994
34 I, 1005
35 I, 1010
36 I, 1003
draughts, or draughts of morality. In the conversation about Daniel Deronda, the participants discuss the different ways in which George Eliot and Turgenev create characters. Constantius says - "Turgenev is a magician, which I don't think I should call George Eliot. One is a poet, the other is a philosopher. One cares for the aspect of things and the other cares for the reason of things."37 But there is more to Turgenev’s magic than that.

In 1884, James was praising Turgenev for his care, exactly, for "the air of reality".38 But, as Turgenev himself admitted, his work lacked "architecture", and James seems to agree. "The great thing of course, is to have architecture as well as precious material, as Walter Scott had them, as Balzac had them."39 James then, interestingly, goes on to say: "It is not open to us yet to discuss whether a novel had better be an excision from life or a structure built up to picture-cards, for we have not made up our mind as to whether life in general may be described."40 Fairly confessed, and if the terms are simple, they are revealing - is a novel a select series of picture-cards, or a great chunk of life itself ? Given James’s commitment to the notion of the novelist as a painter of pictures, if not of picture-cards, his uncertainty is striking and honourable (because of course he knew that you cannot really get the thing itself onto the page, only an im-pression of it). What he esteems in Turgenev’s works is this. "They give the impression of life itself, and not an arrangement, a réchauffé of life."41 Again, this is the pejorative sense of "arrangement" (for what is "architecture" if not "arrangement")?. "Arrangement", here is a warming up of - what? - old left-overs of previous representations? In any case, there it is. With Turgenev, you get the impression, both that you are reading (art, with its cunning, concealed arrangings), and, at the same time, getting the thing itself (life), just as it, all unarranged, comes. And more than that. Turgenev doesn’t just give you the "air of the real", "the aspect of things" - there is always "something behind"42 (that word again):

37 I, 983
38 II, 1011
39 II, 1022
40 II, 1022
41 II, 1023
42 II, 1015
"above all, the great back-garden of his Slav imagination ... into which the
door stood permanently open." A door open to the garden of the Slav
imagination is clearly infinitely to be preferred to door open to an English
moral draught.

But it is in his 1896 essay that James best defines what he values, and
loves, in Turgenev. He is a "novelist's novelist" - a phrase he would also
use of Flaubert, but of no others. And this, because of the great delicacy
of Turgenev's art. So unlike Tolstoy - and note the terms. "The perusal of
Tolstoy - a wonderful mass of life - is an immense event, a kind of
splendid accident, for each of us: his name represents nevertheless no
such eternal spell of method, no such quiet irresistibility of presentation,
as shines, close to us and lighting our steps, in that of his precursor.
Tolstoy is a reflector as vast as a natural lake; a monster harnessed to his
great subject - all human life! - as an elephant might be harnessed, for the
purposes of traction, not to a carriage, but a coach house." But this is
surely rather surprising. "All human life!" - exclamation mark; as if to
point up the inanity of the ambition? But that was just what James had
been asking for - at least in 1884. A lot has happened in twelve years. But
why can't James ever write the name "Tolstoy" without writing the word
"monster"? And if Tolstoy is elephantine, in what way, in heaven's name,
is Balzac not? These are rhetorical questions: I have no answers.

But, whatever else, Turgenev was the reverse of "monstrous", and his
work is marked by a blessed "consision", while his "control" is as great as
his "curiosity" (these two, working in conjunction, are central to James's
own art). One senses that, among other things, James is responding to
the supreme goodmanners of Turgenev's writing, its fine decorum and
impeccable tact. One feels that James likes the more nuanced and sober
tonalities in Turgenev, the subtle soundings of the lower frequencies.
Two, final, appreciative comments may serve to bring us close to what
James most appreciated to in Turgenev. "His vision is of the world of
color and feeling, the world of the relations life throws up at every

43 II, 1012
44 II, 1029
45 II, 1029-30
46 II, 1031
hour and on every spot ... his air is that of the great central region of passion and motive, of the usual, the inevitable, the intimate - the intimate for weal and woe."47 One might have thought that Tolstoy was tolerably conversant with the great central region of passion and motive, but I suppose he was hardly as quiet, as discreet as Turgenev. Turgenev, for James, had a wonderful sense for "the spark kindled by the innermost friction of things" - his subject, says James, is always "as interesting as an unopened telegram" - and these are his concluding words on Turgenev. "The genial freedom - with its exquisite delicacy - of his approach to this 'innermost' world, the world of our finer consciousness, has in short a side that I can only describe and commemorate as nobly disinterested; a side that makes too many of his rivals appear to hold us in comparison to vulgar things."48 The exquisitely delicate approach to the innermost world of our finer consciousness - that is what appeals to James. By comparison, Tolstoy must certainly have seemed violent - perhaps, to the fastidious James, even vulgar.

But why then wasn't Balzac?

From first to last, Balzac was James's ideal of the novelist - not, ever the novelist's novelist, just THE novelist. From 1875, when he admiringly genuflected before Balzac's "all-compassing, all-desiring, all-devouring love of reality",49 to 1913 when he was still adulating Balzac's "infatuated grasp of the environment",50 James kept coming back and back to Balzac. He is the "parental presence",51 "the father of us all",52 and "every road comes back to him".53 Not exactly a "monster", he was an "ogre"54 with an "insatiable voracious appetite for facts". His "active intention was ... a beast with a hundred claws, and the spectacle is in the hugging process of which, as energy against energy, the beast was capable".55 He is, of

47 II, 1031
48 II, 1034
49 II, 67
50 II, 149
51 II, 91
52 II, 120
53 II, 139
54 II, 93
55 II, 103
course, thick, dense, solid, vivid, and his works are "organic whole[s]" which "put[...] people on their feet". And, again, there is always something "beneath and behind". The question James keeps coming back to is how did Balzac have, or where did he get, the experience which must have fed and enabled the writing? Where was the material quarried? "Out of what mines, by what innumerable tortuous channels, in what endless winding procession of laden chariots and tugging teams and marching elephants, did the immense consignments required for his work reach him?" The elephants are back you will notice, but this time not to the desaparagement of the voracious beast they serve. Though, at times, it does seem as if James feels threatened by total submersion in the Balzatian "flood", by his incredible attempt at a "reproduction of the real on the scale of the real." James's answer to his own question - how on earth did Balzac live, where did all his material come from? - is central to James's developing conception of the writer. "He did not live - save in his imagination ... his imagination was all his experience; he has provably no time for the real thing. This brings us to the rich if simple truth that his imagination alone did the business." Just what was "the real thing" when it came to experience and art, living and representing, was to become profoundly ambiguous and indeterminable for James, as the 1892 story with that title suggests. What James is here stressing is that, in the case of Balzac, perhaps in the case of all great novel writing, you cannot distinguish the experience from the imagination of the experience. Or, if you like, what Balzac experienced was his imagination. And there is a suggestion that Balzac attempted to take on (or imagine) too much, because he implicitly insisted that "the whole thing" was "treatable" - "all the connections of every part of his matter and the full total of the parts". But it was just such an impossible totality that James had once

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56 II, 41
57 II, 95
58 II, 107
59 II, 124
60 II, 124
61 II, 107
62 II, 107
yearned for, and you can sense his heart going out to his great father in his valiant, indeed Promethean, but doomed attempt.

Yet there is something stifling about Balzac. As early as 1875, James is complaining about "the absence of fresh air", and not only does that mean that the reader is sometimes in danger of being "suffocated" by "things" - or, as James puts it, having his "mouth stopped ... by a choking dose of bricks and mortar", but also that Balzac himself is somehow immured in his own work. We seem to see him, says James, as some "rare animal in captivity, between the bars of a cage". He returns more than once to the image of Balzac as "caged", "built in", "roofed over" by his material, with no possibility of escape. "We feel his doom to be his want of a private door"- doors are, after all, indispensable. All of which lies behind the use of a crucial image towards the end of the 1902 essay. It comes when James is discussing Balzac's preoccupation with "the patrician consciousness". James's basic question is - when Balzac takes it upon himself to describe, transcribe, this consciousness, has he got it right, or does he make it up?

His imagination lives in it, breathes its scented air, swallows this element with the smack of the lips of the connoisseur; but I feel that we never know, even to the end, whether he be here directly historic or only quite misguidedly romantic. The romantic side of him has the extent of all the others; it represents in the oddest manner his escape from the walled and roofed structure into which he had built himself - his longing for the vaguely-felt outside and as much as might be of the rest of the globe. But it is characteristic of him that the most he could do for this relief was to bring the fantastic into the circle and fit it somehow to his conditions. Was his tone for the duchess, the marquise but the imported fantastic, one of those smashes of the window-pane of the real that reactions sometimes produce even in the stubborn? or are we to take it as observed, as really reported, as, for all its difference from our notion of the natural - and, quite as much, of the artificial - in another and happier strain of manners, substantially true? (He cites an episode and comments) this is either a magnificent lurid document or the baseless fabric of a vision. The great wonder is that, as I rejoice to put it, we can never really discover which, and that we feel as we read that we can't, and that we suffer at the hands of no other author this particular helplessness of immersion. It is done - we are always thrown back on that; we can't get out of it; all we can do is to say that the true itself can't be more than done and that if the false in this way equals it we must give up

63 II, 33
64 II, 99
65 II, 99
66 II, 99
looking for the difference. Alone among novelists Balzac has the secret of an insistence that somehow makes the difference nought. He warms his fact into life ..."67

Now this really spells the end of his earlier notions of "realism". If everything comes out of his imagination, how indeed can you tell the historic from the romantic, the observed from the fantasised, the documentary from the visionary? In such a writing, how can you distinguish the natural from the artificial - by what calibration? And what, in writing, is true or false? True or what? Certainly, one may feel that the depiction of certain incidents, decisions, motivations, consciousnesses makes them more - what? - plausible, than others. But then who are we to say? If our own experience - actual or imagined - is to remain the measure of what is and is not true in art, then we will remain terminally impoverished and deprived, and art reduced to a mirror of the already familiar. And, of course, "truth" is not really to the point. James is attesting to the compelling power of the writing, which is seamless. It is not true or false. It is done. But note the crucial image. Balzac smashed the window-pane of the real. Now if "the real" is such a roofed-over, locked-up prison of a building, then indeed any creative energy is bound, one would think, to break out of it, not only for air and space, but also to sample and explore whatever lies outside this boxed-up "real". Of course, "the real" used in this sense, implies that empirical, positivistic, as it were verifiable, realism which purported to adhere and limit itself to the material surfaces of the world, as perceptible to the senses. As we have seen, an earlier James in part subscribed to this sort of realism - or thought he did. But there was always something in him that wanted to go, not only "behind and beneath", but through, out, and indeed, up.68

67 II, 112-13
68 It is interesting to note another occurrence of the image. This, from "The Future of the Novel" (1899): "nothing is more salient in English life to-day, to fresh eyes, than the revolution taking place in the position and outlook or women - and taking place much more deeply in the quiet than even the noise on the surface demonstrates - so that we may very well yet see the female elbow itself, smash with final resonance the window all this time most superstitiously closed. The particular draught that has been most deprecated will in that case take care of the question of freshness. It is the opinion of some observers that when women do obtain a free hand they will not repay their long debt to the precautionary attitude of men by unlimited consideration for the natural delicacy of the latter." (I, 109) This may fairly be said to be prophetic (I note that Kate Chopin's The Awakening was published
This passage anticipates a more famous passage from the Prefaces, which I must again quote at length.

(The real represents to my perception the things we cannot possibly not know, sooner or later, one way or another; it being but one of the accidents of our hampered state ... that particular instances have not come your way. The romantic stands, on the other hand, for the things that, with all the facilities in the world, all the wealth and all the courage and all the wit and all the adventure, we never can directly know; the things that can reach us only through the beautiful circuit and subterfuge of our thought and our desire.) ... The only general attribute of projected romance that I can see, the only one that fits all its cases, is the fact of the kind of experience with which it deals - experience liberated, so to speak; experience disengaged, disembroiled, disencumbered, exempt from the conditions that we usually know attach to it ... The balloon of experience is in fact of course tied to the earth, and under that necessity we swing, thanks to a rope of remarkable length, in the more or less commodious car of the imagination; but it is by the rope that we know where we are, and from the moment that cable is cut we are at large and unrelated: we only swing apart from the globe - though remaining as exhilarated, naturally, as we like, especially when all goes well. The art of the romancer is "for the fun of it" insidiously to cut the cable.69

The imagination can, thus, travel a long way from the surface of reality - the earth. It is just that, sometimes we feel we are still in touch, however remotely, and sometimes we feel we no longer are. That "rope" is thus our sense of relative plausibility - "our general sense of the 'way things happen'".70 But it may be a very tenuous rope, and, if we follow the image, it may prove very hard to say whether the rope is cut or not. As James recognises, in another parenthesis, with another image. "It is as difficult ... to trace the dividing-line between the real and the romantic as to plant a milestone between north and south; but I am not sure an infallible sign of the latter is not this rank vegetation of the 'power' of bad people that good get into, or vice versa. It is so rarely, alas, into our power that anyone gets!"71 It is, of course, not difficult to plant that milestone between north and south; it is impossible. Or rather, it is arbitrary, and decreed and controlled by convention; either imposed by

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69 II, 1062-4
70 II, 1065
71 II, 1067
authority, or agreed by consensus. But it is even more interesting that James should here relate romance to the matter of power, as he had earlier made it the site and product of desire. Most of James's fiction - perhaps most fiction - deals with "the great relation between men and women", and in that relation matters of power and desire are rarely absent. To be really real, the novel - as James himself shows - must be, by his own terms, romantic. Which is why his writing puts us in its power.

But if Balzac occasionally has to break the window of the closed residence of the real, it is nevertheless on the wondrous extent of his house, or other mansions, of fiction, on which James dwells. "It is a question of penetrating into a subject ... we thus walk with him in the great glazed gallery of his thought; the long, lighted and pictured ambulatory where the endless series of windows, on one side, hangs over his revolutionised, ravaged, yet partly restored and reinstated garden of France, and where, on the other, the figures and the portraits we fancy stepping down to meet him climb back into their frames, larger and smaller, and take up position and expression as he desired they shall look out and compose."72 One of the qualitites in Balzac which James most admired, apart from all the facts, the things, the money, the interiors, the costumes, the furniture - those "conditions" with which Balzac was so incomparably "saturated", - was his mastery or gift of "the very spirit and the secret of transmigration", as he ended his 1902 essay.73 In 1905, this is spelled out: "what he liked was absolutely to get into the constituted consciousness, into all the clothes, gloves and whatever else, into the very skin and bones, of the habited, featured, coloured, articulated forms of life that he desired to present".74 As James claims: "How do we know given persons, for any purpose of demonstration, unless we see it from their point of vision, that is from their point of pressing consciousness or sensation?"75 - from, exactly, their point of view. And from this stems Balzac's absolute respect for his characters. Whereas English novelists, says James, sometimes lecture us, and sometimes manipulate, punish, and

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72 II, 127-29
73 II, 115
74 II, 132
75 II, 132
abuse their characters. "It all comes back, in fine, to that respect for the liberty of the subject which I would be willing to name as the great sign of a painter of the first order."76 One feels that, as an American, James attached particular importance to this respect for the freedom of the individual, which Balzac so supremely showed. (Though it is debatable, and has indeed been debated, just how much liberty, say, Isabel Archer and Nanda Bookenhams finally enjoy.)

Not only did Balzac hug the earth with bear-like energy, he flew some exhilaratingly high-flying balloons - which is just what Flaubert did not do. Here is James on Education Sentimentale: "the whole thing being, for scale, intention and extension, a sort of epic of the usual ... it affects us as epic without air, without wings to lift it; reminds us in fact more than anything else of a huge balloon, all of silk pieces strongly sewn together and patiently blown up, but that absolutely refuses to leave the ground."77 Given his great admiration for Flaubert - the "novelist's novelist" whose Madame Bovary is "the flag of the guild", 78 and given that, when it came to "intensity of illusion",79 Flaubert, says James in 1876, began where Balzac left off - then it becomes particularly interesting to consider James's reservations about Flaubert and, after all, incomparable art. When it comes to "rendering" things, says James, then the novelist must do it as a painter - and here, Flaubert is incomparable. But - "there is something else, beneath and behind, that belongs to the realm of vagueness and uncertainty, and into this we must occasionally dip."80 This is 1876: by the end, that occasional dip into the "beneath and behind" would become almost total immersion as James's work increasingly concerned itself with those realms in which all is "vagueness and uncertainty".

Then, there is what Flaubert writes about. We do indeed "live" in the detail of Madame Bovary, says James, and by the end it is absolutely "horrible".81 More than that, there is something positively "cruel" in his

76 II, 133
77 II, 328
78 II, 329, 332
79 II, 168
80 II, 170
81 II, 173
"perverted ingenuity" which has "somehow killed the spiritual sense".\textsuperscript{82} Flaubert also had trouble with doors. "He hovered forever at the public door, in the outer court, the splendour of which very properly beguiled him, and in which he seems to stand as upright as a sentinel and as shapely as a statue. But that immobility and even that erectness were bought too dear. The shining arms were meant to carry further, the other doors were meant to open. He should at least have listened at the chamber of the soul."\textsuperscript{83} In 1902, James salutes the man who, above all others, was born, lived, and died "a novelist".\textsuperscript{84} What James concentrates on is the discrepancy, indeed the manifest opposition, between, in Madame Bovary, the "vulgar elements" of the material and the "unsurpassable form" of the art.\textsuperscript{85} The novel is "ideally done", and the "eternal beauty" is, of course, in the "doing".\textsuperscript{86} It is a triumph of style. We have in our hands "a shapely crystal box ... seen when opened ... to contain innumerable compartments, springs and tricks."\textsuperscript{87} Since James's most honorific images for the novel are usually organic, this praise might be considered just a little equivocal.

Why did Flaubert have to choose such "abject human specimens"\textsuperscript{88} to write about? Why lavish so much art on what he hated most - the bourgeois? James points the apparent paradox of the man, the writer, "the comparatively meagre human consciousness ... struggling with the absolutely large artistic; and the large artistic half wreaking itself on the meagre human and half seeking a refuge from it, as well as a revenge against it, in something quite different."\textsuperscript{89} James is now coming close to identifying, or recognising, a new aesthetic; as when he writes of Flaubert's sense that "beauty comes with expression, that expression is creation, that it makes the reality ... that we move in literature through a world of different values and relations, a blest world in which we know nothing except by style, but in which also everything is saved by it, and in

\begin{footnotes}
\item[82] II, 181-2
\item[83] II, 313-4
\item[84] II, 315
\item[85] II, 325
\item[86] II, 325
\item[87] II, 335
\item[88] II, 326
\item[89] II, 336-7
\end{footnotes}
which the image is thus always superior to the thing itself.\textsuperscript{90} This is very different from a writing which purports, or aspires, to give us an exact representation of the thing itself - to be simply a copy, identical and co-extensive with the real. Flaubert's writing is, thus, three things at once, perhaps four. It is a revenge on, a refuge from, and a consolation for, the unbeautiful reality of contemporary life. And perhaps, in some strange way, it is also a redemption - a saving - of it. Think of what Proust would make of his unlovely snobs and perverts. Or Joyce, of dirty Dublin. James is articulating here, not art for art's sake, but a crucial feature and principle of what would be called modernism, whereby the image is always superior to the thing itself. Part of James is still in the nineteenth century and looking back, as his vocabulary of "soul" and "spirit" attests. And he really does think that Emma Bovary is a wretched little baggage to have so much exquisite art lavished on her. He surmises that Flaubert "never approached the complicated character in man or woman ... or the really furnished, the finely civilised\textsuperscript{91} because - well, frankly the man wasn't up to it. James maintained, moreover, rightly enough, that "style never totally beguiles ... since even when we are so queerly constituted as to be ninety-nine parts literary we are still a hundredth part something else.\textsuperscript{92} It is part of his greatness as a critic that he never forgot that one hundredth part of us which is neither constituted nor controlled by literature; that part which, inevitably precedes the writing and the reading - indeed, the part which prompts us, in the first place, to open the book, take up the pen. Nevertheless, the magic of Flaubert's style - what James referred to as the secrets of the kitchen, the workshop, the laboratory, the inner shrine - is inestimably precious. This is 1902. James was about to embark on his last three great novels. Then he would return to the house of his own fiction, with all its doors and windows and corridors and galleries and kitchens and gardens - by which time it becomes hard indeed to distinguish living from writing, and writing from reading. And this happy condition may

\textsuperscript{90} II, 340
\textsuperscript{91} II, 338
\textsuperscript{92} II, 340
implicitly extend to us all, for, as James concluded his last essay on Flaubert - "are we not pretty well all novelists now?"93
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Januar 1994