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The Art of Fiction: Henry James and Robert Louis Stevenson

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In a short satire on the nature of literary debate in the 1890s, novelist J. M. Barrie imagines a conversation between British and American novelists and the great writers of the past. It concludes with a stern warning from the ghost of William Makepeace Thackeray to the American writer that, “if you thought and wrote less about your styles and methods and the aims of fiction, and in short forgot yourself now and again in your stories, you might get on better with your work” (Barrie 849). Barrie’s parody of the theoretical nature of American fiction can be read as both rebuke to Henry James and confirmation of James’s own assertion in “The Art of Fiction” that in English literary circles, there had been “a good-humored feeling abroad that a novel is a novel, as a pudding is a pudding, and that this was the end of it” (Smith 54). In Barrie’s fellow-Scot, Robert Louis Stevenson, however, Henry James found a writer whose willingness to debate the nature of realism and “the art of fiction” would make him a stimulating conversationalist, a theoretical combatant, and a close personal friend.

Initial contact between the two men came in 1884, when Stevenson responded to James’ essay “The Art of Fiction,” published in *Longman’s Magazine* in September, with “A Humble Remonstrance” in the same periodical in December of that year.¹ The beginning of a long correspondence ensued. When they first met in 1885, both had a number of significant novels to their name; both were keen to continue debating the purpose and nature of the novel form. James was a frequent visitor to Stevenson and his wife when they lived in Bournemouth—one of the few genuinely welcome there—and after Stevenson left for the United States in 1887, ending up in Samoa, James continued to be a source of literary and personal support to Stevenson. After Stevenson’s death in 1894, to which James responded, “One feels how one cared for him—

what a place he took; and as if suddenly *into* that place there had descended a great avalanche of ice”—he continued to be interested in the reputation of his friend and the lives of his family, even if his own delicacy and reluctance to be embroiled in their debates led him to refuse the role of executor (Smith 24).

As Janet Adam Smith, whose editing of *Henry James and Robert Louis Stevenson: A Record of Friendship and Criticism* brought the full significance of this literary dynamic to critical attention, notes, “there is never a sign of provinciality in their criticism” (Smith 24). The two men shared a similar frame of reference: both had read widely in and written about European literature; both moved with fluency between the language of art and literature: they were, as Smith suggests, “the two most conscious novelists of their time in England” (Smith 24). While disagreeing about fiction and its relationship to life, they respected each other’s opinions and the very different kinds of novels they wrote. James, indeed, sent *The Tragic Muse* out to Samoa in order to “put the book under the eye of the sole and single Anglo-Saxon capable of perceiving—though he may care for little else in it—how well it is written” (Smith 27). They also shared some dislikes, with a particularly damning exchange on Thomas Hardy’s *Tess of the d’Urbervilles*. As Smith perceptively suggests, although the two men worked very differently in terms of conceptualizing their fiction and seeing their subjects, both were highly aware of difference in literary forms and genres and both worked meticulously, drafting and redrafting. The richness and significance of their published debate on the art of fiction and its epistolary continuation emerges from this communality of interest and difference of approach.

“The Art of Fiction,” a “conceptual turning point in the development of James’s thinking on aesthetic matters” (Davidson 50), itself was, in fact, written in response to another British novelist, Walter Besant, whose lecture on that subject—delivered at the Royal Institution in April 1884—was subsequently published in pamphlet form by Chatto and Windus (Besant). It should also be understood in the context of earlier debates over the nature and purpose of the novel in which American novelist and moralist William Dean Howells—

certainly not a friend of Stevenson—had aligned James with a particularly American “new kind of fiction,” stressing his “analytic” methods and noting that “The art of fiction has, in fact, become a finer art in our day” (Howells 27–9).² While claiming the novel as art, Besant responds to the Howells’ line of argument by suggesting that readers seek stories rather than analysis and will assess fiction on the basis of its “fidelity.” Fiction, Besant suggested, should be considered as one of the Fine Arts, but as an Art, it should be governed by general laws, which may be taught even if the success of a work is also dependent on “natural” gifts. Besant’s key argument was that novelists should never go beyond personal experience; instead, they should develop powers of observation, selection and dramatic presentation because “everything in Fiction which is invented and not the result of personal experience and observation is worthless” (Besant 15). Henry James welcomed Besant’s attempts to theorize the novel form, seeing his essay as advancing the English novel from a position in which (unlike its French counterpart) there was “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” (Smith 54). But now, thanks to Besant, “the era of discussion would appear to have been to a certain extent opened” (Smith 54).

James’s first response to Besant is to acknowledge his argument that fiction should be taken as seriously as any of the other arts; indeed, he expresses surprise that the argument has to be made at all. This initial salvo comes couched in a dispute with the notion that novels, as being less serious than life, are somehow wicked. Instead, he acknowledges, the “old Evangelical hostility to the novel” is more accurate: “The only reason for the existence of the novel is that it *does* compete with life” (Smith 56). Yet while agreeing with Besant over the need to take fiction (as art) seriously, he challenges Besant’s notion of rules and laws and instead defends the organic nature of the novel form. The point of fiction, he argued, is that it is non-regulated: it is revelatory and intense, as is experience. Rather than being based upon observation and avoiding invention: “A novel is in its broadest definition a personal impression of life; that, to begin

with constitutes its personal value, which is greater or less according to the intensity of the impression. But there will be no intensity at all, and therefore no value, unless there is freedom to feel and say” (Smith 62). James further defends the novel form against Besant’s ideas of rules and methods by pointing out that “a novel is a living thing, all one and continuous, like every other organism, and in proportion as it lives will it be found, I think, that in each of parts there is something of each of the other parts” (Smith 69).

While his argument about the organic nature and freedom of the novel is important, it is a prelude to James’s more significant attestation of the relationship between fiction and life and influential definitions of realism in literary form. The novel should not only be organic in terms of the relationship between its parts, but also in the capacity to “guess the unseen from the seen, to trace the implications of things” (Smith 67). “Experience,” he asserts, “is never limited and never complete; it is an immense sensibility, a kind of spider-web, of the finest silken threads, suspended in the chamber of consciousness and catching every air-borne particle in its tissue” (Smith 67). It is by this process of creating “an atmosphere of the mind,” which “converts the very pulses of the air into revelations” that the novel can “compete with life” in ways that exceed the “importance of exactness—of truth of detail” which dominates Besant’s thinking (Smith 67–7). James here sets out a manifesto of realism as underpinned by “vision” and goes on to defend “psychological reason” as possessing an excitement equal to the more conventional notions of “plot.” The purpose of fiction—and here the novels James was to publish in this middle period, *The Bostonians* (1886) and *The Princess Casamissima* (1886) reinforce this sense of an agenda—is to catch “the very note and trick, the strange irregular rhythm of life, that is the attempt whose strenuous force keeps Fiction upon her feet” (Smith 75). In its envisaging of the depth of experience offered by fiction, James moves beyond defining a craft and instead suggests a purpose for fiction, which, in its illuminating of life through an intensity, a realism, that is greater than fidelity to the everyday, transforms it into an “art.” It is vision and illumination that makes the form speak to its readers, shaping

their responses: “As people feel life, so they will feel the art that is most closely related to it” (Smith 75).

“The Art of Fiction” had, as Scott Hames notes, a long-lasting dominance in its commitment to “a realist metaphysics of fiction,” which asserts realism as an literary impulse rather than genre” (67). It is, however, this central tenet of James’ essay that Robert Louis Stevenson was quick to pick up on. Stevenson begins “A Humble Remonstrance” by swiftly redefining James’ terms: both he and Besant, Stevenson asserts, are not writing about fiction, but rather about the art of “narrative.” This term, now dominant in critical vocabulary, suggests how Stevenson was, in many ways, ahead of his time in his understanding of the reading process. Narrative, he suggests, is everywhere: in history, painting, poetry. His second question was even more fundamental in that he challenges the idea that art competes with life: “No art [...] can successfully “compete with life;” and the art that does so is condemned to perish.” This is because “Life goes before us, infinite in complication” (Smith 89). While James, he suggests, holds in his mind “a becoming fervor on the sanctity of truth to the novelist,” Stevenson views “truth” as “a word of very debatable propriety” (Smith 89). Respectful from the outset of both Besant and James, characterizing the latter as “the very type of he deliberate artist,” he then proceeds to set out his own manifesto on the nature of fiction and art. Although James later claimed in a letter to Stevenson that “we agree, I think, much more than we disagree” (Smith 101), and Stevenson’s acknowledgement of the “constructed” nature of literature positions him alongside James in a number of ways, the differences of view are also significant.

Literature, according to Stevenson, offers a reorganization and shaping of particular elements of life: his metaphoric model is not the organic analogy of a web, but instead that of geometry, which turns its eyes “from the gross, coloured and mobile nature at our feet, and regard[s] instead a certain figmentary abstraction” (Smith 91). Betraying his own interest in the anthropological, Stevenson asserts that the important function of the writer is not so much to make stories true, but to make them typical, the same aim of “the

first men who told their stories around the savage camp-fire” (Smith 91).³

Stevenson’s credo, that “a novel is not a transcript of life, to be judged by its exactitude; but a simplification of some side or point of life, to stand or fall by its significant simplicity” (Smith 100), goes beyond a defense of the romance form—a genre in which he had made his name and which he, as a reader, loved—but rather raises a more important question about the valorization of realism. He challenges both the value attached to its stylistic mechanisms and the assumption that realism somehow offers access to underpinning truths about life. Instead, he suggests, readers turn to fiction because art does not compete with life: “Man’s one method, whether he reasons or creates, is to half-shut his eyes against the dazzle and confusion of reality” (Smith 91). Life, according to Stevenson, is “monstrous, infinite, illogical, abrupt and poignant; a work of art, in comparison, is neat, finite, self-contained, rational, flowing and emasculate” (Smith 92). The novel works because of “its immeasurable difference from life.” Henry James, as John Carlos Rowe argues, identifies the difference between life and art and then uses that difference as part of “the energy of realism.” His dialectical model of realism is later developed in the prefaces to the New York Edition into a “repeated crisis of discontinuity between consciousness in its forms and the vast flux of life” (Rowe 232–3).⁴ It should also be noted that, in the light of this exchange, James altered “compete” to “attempt to represent” in the 1888 reprinting of the essay in *Partial Portraits* published by Macmillan (Jones 130).

Stevenson’s ideas on the novel were not invoked by “The Art of Fiction” alone: the debate encouraged by James gave further voice to arguments that he had expressed on earlier occasions, but without the focus provided by his opponent. In earlier essays on literature, such as “A Gossip on Romance” (1882) and “A Penny Plain and Twopence Coloured” (1884), he had drawn on the child’s imagination to assert the importance of a story that “can repeat itself in a thousand coloured pictures to the eye. It was for this last pleasure that we read so closely, and loved our books so dearly, in the bright troubled period of boyhood” (Norquay 53). In his vivid

evocation of the world of Skelt's Victorian melodrama in "A Penny Plain and Twopence Coloured," he had examined the ways in which the child's imagination is ignited by language, image, and anticipation rather than any "representation" of real life. Pleasure for him as a child purchasing paper theatre figures lay not so much in the recreation of a drama, but in dreaming of the purchase, coloring in the figures, and thinking of the words used to describe those colors: "With crimson lake (hark to the sound of it—crimson lake! The horns of elf-land are not richer on the ear)" (Norquay 74). His gentle rejoinder to James's observation on enjoying *Treasure Island*, which he finds "delightful but speaks less to him because "I have been a child, but I have never been on a quest for buried treasure" (Smith 80–81) carries further significance than a droll rebuke: "if he has never been on a quest for buried treasure, it can be demonstrated that he has never been a child." While this serves as a teasing observation on James himself—"so precise of outline, so cunning of fence, so scrupulous of finish"—it is also a reminder that, for Stevenson, the pleasures of the childhood imagination not only fueled his own writing, but served as a model of literary engagement analogous to that of the "primitive" audience of storytellers (Smith 94; 86). His recognition of the power of textuality is combined with a strongly psychological interest in children's play worlds and their significance, consistent with conceptual developments of his time, while also anticipating later theorizations of fiction.⁵ His essay "The Lantern Bearers" (1888), written in Saranac Lake in 1888 when he was thinking much about the experiences of his boyhood, continues this revisiting of childhood pleasures.

These essays, as with "A Humble Remonstrance" demonstrate not just competing perspectives on the "art of fiction," but also the stylistic differences between James and Stevenson as critics. Most obviously, James sustains a relatively subdued tone, identified by critics as the brilliant rhetorical strategy of an "affected timidity" (Davidson 52) or a precarious "game of balancing "endorsement and censure" so that they become almost indistinguishable (Jones 128). Stevenson, in contrast, offers a gaiety of tone. Secondly, while both draw on personal experience, as in James's discussion of reading

Flaubert and de Goncourt and Stevenson on reading James himself, as in “The Author of *Beltraffio*,” James is analytic, ruminative, and quietly assertive:

For myself (since it comes in the last resort, as I say, to the preference of the individual, the picture of the child’s experience has the advantage that I can at successive steps (an immense luxury, near to the “sensual pleasure” of which Mr. Besant’s critic in the *Pall Mall* speaks), say Yes or No, as it may be, to what the artist puts before me. (Smith 80)

Stevenson’s mode of criticism, in contrast, tends towards the performative. He both enacts his own enthusiasms and draws the reader into them: “Character to the boy is a sealed book; for him, a pirate is a beard in wide trousers and literally bristling with pistols. The author, for the sake of circumstantion and because he was himself more or less grown up, admitted character, within certain limits, into his design; but only within certain limits” (Smith 95). While, as novelist, James is indeed interested in the “art of fiction,” he writes as a theorizer and advocate of the novel form: as a reviewer of his work in 1896 noted, “When Mr. James writes fiction you scent the critic, and when he writes criticism you feel the novelist underneath” (Macdonnell 76). Stevenson represents himself rather as a reader and writer: this construction does not mean that he is theorizing any less, but that he is enacting the desires of fiction and drawing his readers into experiencing, becoming alert to, and understanding, their own desires for fiction. Discussing the differences between the fiction of these two writers, Janet Adam Smith suggests that, “While James would always work on a subject from the outside, Stevenson would immerse himself, and draw the readers in with him” (42). The same might equally be said of their approach to the role of critic.

This is not to say that both are not interested in the role of the reader, but rather that they approach it from different perspectives. James criticizes Besant for assuming that readers’ expectations should be met in facile ways: “The only obligation to which in advance we may hold the novel, without incurring the accusation of being arbitrary, is that it be interesting” (Smith 62). Stevenson

moves beyond the notion of obligation to a consuming reader; rather, he represents the reader as activating the text in ways which might anticipate Roland Barthes' later theorization of "writerly texts" (Barthes). In "A Gossip on a Novel of Dumas," for example, he describes his sense of ownership of *Le Vicomte de Bragelonne* and his reciprocal relationship with its fictional characters: "Perhaps I think that d'Artagnan delights to have me read of him, and Louis Quatorze is gratified, and Fouquet throws me a look, and Aramis [...] yet plays to me with his best graces" (Norquay 120). The relationship envisaged between reader and writer contains little obligation, but rather a shared delight.

From the first, James recognized these performative and stylistic aspects of Stevenson: writing back to him the day after he has read the article in *Longman's*, he admits that "the current of your admirable style floats pearls and diamonds" (Smith 101) and remarks on "the native gaiety of all you write" (Smith 102). The pleasure of reading Stevenson, as novelist or critic, is a consistent theme with James. In his initial response to Stevenson's essay, he makes clear that he does not want to engage in "words of discussion, dissent, retort or remonstrance," but instead enjoys the luxury of encountering "some one who *does* write—who is really acquainted with that lovely art" (Smith 101). Stevenson's letters to James are less fragmented, more crafted than those he sent to friends such as Sidney Colvin: indeed, James complained on occasion that there was too little of the personal in Stevenson's letters to him and describes having to rely on Colvin for practical accounts of Stevenson's adventures. The carefully constructed—though always warm and often exuberant—nature of Stevenson's letters to James indicates the important role this correspondent served as a means of articulating complex thoughts and his more abstract questions about fiction and creativity.⁶

Stevenson, in turn, welcomes James' mention of a sequel to their debate, for the exchange has given him a rare opportunity to discuss method and philosophy, rather than concentration on "stuff" (Smith 102). While his request that James add incidents of "a more empathic key" to his writing appears to run counter to

James's claim that psychological reasons can hold their own plot excitement, Stevenson does not underestimate the power of James's writing and finds himself as "a lout and a slouch" in comparison. In these exchanges both men deploy the differences between them as a means of articulating their own artistic and aesthetic standpoint.

This mutual understanding fuels not only their debates on fiction, but their critical accounts of the other. In his April 1888 essay on Stevenson in the *Century Magazine* 35 (869–79), celebrating him as a "writer with style—a model with a complexity of curious and picturesque garments," James indulges in his own stylistic flourishes: "the dictionary stands for him as a wardrobe, and a proposition as a button for his coat" (Smith 126). More importantly, he defends his friend against William Archer's accusation that style is his chief achievement, making a strong case for the value of readerly engagement, which Stevenson produces: when reading *Treasure Island* "we seem to read over his shoulder, with an arm around his neck" (Smith 154). James pinpoints Stevenson's motivations with accuracy: "the idea of making believe appeals to him much more than the idea of making love" (Smith 132), showing an appreciation of the emphasis Stevenson places upon play. But as part of this defense he presents a rather more Jamesian suggestion that all of Stevenson's work is underpinned by a "feeling" (which, in his case, is "a direct apology for boyhood" (Smith 131). Stevenson rarely articulates his interests in such organic terms, avoiding notions of an underlying artistic vision; instead he tends to present his literary career as fragmented, both conceptually and in terms of his outputs.

Literary émigré that he was, James is also alert to the importance of place for Stevenson, observing that all his happiest works are about his native country for "the colour of Scotland has entered into him altogether": here his attempt at an overarching interpretation of Stevenson's *oeuvre* carries more conviction (Smith 140). James' first essay on Stevenson was written after the publication of *Kidnapped*. His opinion was reinforced by the subsequent publication of *The Master of Ballantrae* (1889), another Scottish work, although one which ends in America. Stevenson feared that James might find the ending too extreme, but James praises it as "a pure hard crystal, a

work of ineffable and exquisite self” (Smith 185). While both men respect each other as critics of their own work and look to each other for approval, James offers a more consistent overview of Stevenson than the latter does of his friend: his own critiques of James’s novels, which offer glowing praise for *Roderick Hudson* and dislike of *The Portrait of a Lady* engage James’s attention, but puzzle him with their absence of an underlying artistic rationale (Smith 167).

Some critics have argued that Stevenson’s literary development was towards a greater realism; certainly, James valued the later novels and short stories. He was undeterred by what Stevenson referred to as the “grimness” of *The Ebb-Tide*, enthusiastic about *Catriona*—it “reels and hums with genius” (Smith 238)—and was full of praise for “The Beach of Falesá” (1892), recognizing again that Stevenson’s focus was different from his own but of continuing value in terms of the “truth to life” debate. The short story, set in the South Seas, was “art brought to perfection and I delight in the observed truth, the modesty of nature of the narrator. Primitive man doesn’t interest me, I confess, as much as civilized—and yet it *does* when you write about him” (Smith 231). By way of reinforcing the trajectory into realism, James was prominent among those who praised Stevenson’s last unfinished novel, *Weir of Hermiston*; in review of the posthumous work he wrote:

The beauty of the thing had the effect of rendering doubly heart-breaking, as one read, the extinction of a talent that could still give one such a sense of freshness and life, of not yet having played, as it were, its highest card. I got from it a sense of new resources altogether; of his striking a new chord. (Scribner’s advertisement in the *Literary World* 27 [June 1896]: 1)

After Stevenson’s death James continues to make an important contribution to the shaping of critical perceptions of his literary career.

In his own fiction, Henry James was fascinated by the processes of literary creativity and the nature of authorship; in his novels and short stories, Stevenson rarely engages explicitly with literary creation or with writers as characters. James struggles to work out

his “obligations” to both life and his readers. Stevenson, even in his literary essays, presents less distance between novelist and reader and often imagines them striving for the same gratifications. Perhaps because of this dynamic, James allows himself to write as a reader when corresponding with Stevenson: Stevenson writes back as to a fellow author, writes as a writer perhaps more than he does with any other correspondent. The respect, admiration and liberation both men found in their relationship infuses all their writing. When Stevenson’s stepson Lloyd visits James in 1891, the objects he brings back from Samoa produce a strongly emotional reaction: “My heart beats over them—my imagination throbs—my eyes fill” (Smith 197). Stevenson’s presence, his attitudes to fiction and his writing effected a similar release for James: he could become a reader, he could almost become a child. Stevenson found in James a writer with a wide frame of reference; a commitment to the novel form; and, unlike many of his other friends and mentors, a willingness to recognize change and experiment in his writing. Their exchanges advanced a wider understanding of both realism and romance, challenging the terms as oppositional, and opened conversations on the dynamics between experience and aesthetics that are still being played out in both literary theory and fiction.

Notes

1. Henry James. “The Art of Fiction.” *Longman’s Magazine* (4 Sept. 1884): 502–21; Robert Louis Stevenson. “A Humble Remonstrance.” *Longman’s Magazine* (5 Dec. 1884): 139–47. All page references in this essay are to Janet Adam Smith *Henry James and Robert Louis Stevenson, a Record of Friendship and Criticism*. London: R. Hart-Davis, 1948. 9–48.
2. For an extended discussion of this context see Jones.
3. For Stevenson’s interest in the anthropological and narrative see Reid.
4. For *Prefaces* see: James and Blackmur.
5. See Farr on child psychology; for Stevenson’s links with modernism and parallels with Barthes and Bakhtin see Hubbard; Sandison.

6. As an example of such playfulness, see his poetic experiments on “Adela Chart” to James in a letter of May 1892 (Booth & Mehew 292–3).

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