

Leavis's Mis-emphasis in Henry James

Having just put an end to one long correspondence about Leavis perhaps I may be able to start another. But let's begin, as is still the fashion, with Nietzsche. ". . . there is *art* in every good sentence—art that must be grasped if the sentence is to be understood! A misunderstanding of its tempo, for example: and the sentence itself is misunderstood!"¹ Wittgenstein says somewhere that understanding a sentence is more like understanding a theme in music than we suppose. (Don't expect me to supply all the refs. in a weekly column.) The enlightenment phase of modern English prose gave numerous examples of prose as art even when, as with Sprat's *History of the Royal Society*, the prose was arguing that its function was just to convey information. Henry James and Joseph Conrad, in their different achievements, took English prose as far as it can imaginably go in one direction of art-speech.

Henry James's prose remains prose but is surely poetry, a making in language: as much a mode of art-speech as Shakespeare's blank verse though, as used to be well known, in the late works of both the mode sometimes becomes an end in itself, an engine buzzing away out of gear, disconnected from the driving wheels. One sign in Shakespeare is the over-use of the hendecasyllable, for instance in parts of *Cymbeline*. With James, prose for prose's sake goes with a tendency to make the beautiful replace the moral.

But not for much of the 1890s. "And that *What Maisie Knew* is a happy example of marked moral intensity no admirer will question," as Leavis rightly says, without any implication that it is not also a work of art.² If I had to pick James's best novel I think it would be *The Awkward Age* (1899): the art-prose used for the intense creation of human passions! Leavis unerringly says that "The dialogue (and *The Awkward Age* is nearly all dialogue) is marvellously good, an amazing exhibition of genius."³ He doesn't mention the—what to call them, stage directions?—the linking bits of narrative between the speeches, which are both equally living art-speech and the sign that James needed the novel, not the stage-play. (His plays are astonishingly crude.) Perhaps if blank verse is one mode of art-speech, *commented prose dialogue* is another. Another thing I have no time to check just now: was it about *The Awkward Age* that somebody upset James by asking what the characters did when they were not in the drawing room? You might as well ask what Hamlet does offstage. The life of the Brookenhams, Mr Longdon, Mitchy, the Duchess, Vanderbank, is concentrated into the dialogue.

I recently re-read *The Portrait of a Lady* straight after *The Awkward Age*. *The Portrait of a Lady* is a good novel (which is not faint praise), with one bad flaw, but so much more *ordinary*, so much less invigorating a work of genius! Lord Warburton, for instance, though well done, is so much more an example of a type of the English noble than Lord Petherton, even allowing that the latter is rather a cad.

The bad flaw in *The Portrait of a Lady* was pointed out long long ago in an article by John Newton in *The Cambridge Quarterly* and subsequent correspondence, in the decade of the great quarrel between Leavis and *The Cambridge Quarterly* people. My own contribution, though it did not incur the wrath of Leavis, pointed out that one essential development in the story is just missing. As I put it, "the essential steps of Isabel's falling for Osmond are just omitted."⁴ Leavis's argument was that *The Portrait of a Lady* is "a variation on *Gwendolen Harleth*"⁵ not Dorothea Brooke. Why did he so clearly see an influence from *Daniel Deronda* but did not notice the one from *Middlemarch*? For though in the relevant parts of the novels George Eliot has a far better idea than James of what has to be done and what can be left to the unaided imagination, it is surely the marriage to Casaubon that is closer to Isabel Archer than the marriage to Grandcourt? In *Middlemarch* we are spared much detail about the honeymoon, but there is no unclarity about why Dorothea marries Casaubon. James does without both the courtship and the first year of the marriage. The suspicion must be that he could not depict Isabel's being taken with Osmond long enough to get them married without going back on what he had shown us (often, of course, very convincingly) of her character.

Leavis was so good not only at establishing the Great Tradition of the English novel, but also at discriminating within the *oeuvres* of the great novelists. It was Leavis who insisted on the later George Eliot

1 *Beyond Good and Evil* 246; transl. R. J. Hollingdale 2 F. R. Leavis, "Anna Karenina" and Other Essays, 1967, p. 83

3 *The Great Tradition* (1948) 1955, p. 170 4 *The Cambridge Quarterly* II.3, 1967, p. 273

5 *The Great Tradition*, ed. cit., p. 126; the relevant discussion is in the preceding chapter, on George Eliot.

(and twenty years later, the later Dickens) not the earlier, who saw that the greatest things in Lawrence are *The Rainbow* and *Women in Love* and whose list of the Conrad classics is just about unchallengeable. (Worth saying for the sake of those who still think *Lord Jim* is one of them.) He is also centrally right about the work of the last decade of James's creative life. Why then did Leavis not see that *The Awkward Age*, which he *does* recognise as a great novel, treats the theme of the marriageability of the intelligent and serious girl (Nanda Brookenham) much more deeply, originally, and in a much more complete way than *The Portrait of a Lady*? Any offers of explanation?

The question arose for me afresh as I was re-reading *The Spoils of Poynton* (1897), perhaps a pivotal tale, perhaps not. *The Spoils of Poynton*, though authentic mature James, is in any case a lesser work than *What Maisie Knew* or *The Awkward Age* or, I would say, *In the Cage*, because of a flaw in the fable. Too much depends on the rather novelly sense of honour that prevents Fleda from carrying out Mrs Gereth's instructions to detach Owen from Mona. Outside a novel, surely, two honest young people would have realised that it is more honourable to put an end to a mistaken engagement than to go through with it into a wretched marriage. To think otherwise is not necessarily very refined: it can take us into the world of actions for breach of promise of marriage. The interesting question is whether Fleda's rather spiced conscience is a sign of a too aesthetic attitude to life. Just before he declares himself in love with Isabel Archer, Osmond reminds her that "one ought to make one's life a work of art."¹ What he means by that is clear from the fable: he is a sort of dishonest Walter Pater, cultivating the aesthetic. This makes him a bad judge of art as well as immoral. There is no hint that the author sympathises. In *The Awkward Age* I think one can claim that the art of conversation is, in all its fineness and funniness, not an aesthetic end in itself but a mode of discovering truth. But what about the treasured works of art that make up the greater work of art, Poynton, which Mrs Gereth steadily refers to in the language of religion? Is that the novelist's device for telling the story of Fleda Vetch's love, or is the novelist raising the deep question of the relation of art and human seriousness, or is he himself now inclining a little towards the confusion of art and religion? Alas! to get this column up on schedule I, being jet-lagged, can only raise the question. Anyone who would like to answer it will be very welcome.

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