4. Distance and Dramatization: Henry James on the Art of Fiction

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4.1. Two Concepts of Narrative Distance

Genette, with a somewhat different aim in mind, reformulates the Platonic opposition between diegesis and mimesis, "pure narration" and "imitative narration" in order to measure the distance between the fabula and the narrative text. Pure narrative is more "distant" than mimetic narration. But narrative, being linguistic, can imitate directly nothing but language. Genette therefore splits narrative into two modes of distance: narrative of events and narrative of words, and characterizes direct dialogue as the minimum
distance between the narrative and the fabula.

According to this view, the notion of a "dramatic" narrative is a contradiction in terms. Narrative is essentially distant, a mediation through language, and reaches immediacy only when language becomes the object of its imitation. However, there is a whole current in early modernist fiction which argues precisely the contrary: that fiction has a dramatic potential it should exploit, that it should not be content with "telling"--the domain of plain language--but should aim at "showing" its subject, giving it the immediacy that becomes a lived experience for the audience. The difference is not only a theoretical one: Genette's--and Plato's views are abstract and theoretical, they are aimed at discovering the essence of narrative, while dramatic theories of narrative are developed by practising novelists, who seek new ways to write and are comparing not so much the essence of genres as the possibilities of manipulating language in order to create specific impressions. We shall trace to some extent the development of dramatic theories of fiction in the English tradition, above all around the figure of Henry James.

4.2. The Theory of the Novel before James. Besant's Art of Fiction

The theory of the novel had been neglected during the emergence of the genre in the 17th and 18th centuries. It is not to be found in the classifications of Boileau or in the criticism of Dryden: the most interesting statements come from the novelists themselves, such as Fielding's definition of his "new province of writing" as a comic epic poem written in prose. In the 18th and early 19th centuries the critical statements which are found are usually far behind the theoretical development of the criticism of poetry. Soon, however, the novel will claim a place as an art form, in the works of Walter Besant, Henry James, or Friedrich Spielhagen. One central statement about technique in all of these theorists is that the novel should try to attain the status of a dramatic experience: that it should escape in some way the bounds of narrative
in order to provide the reader with a direct, unmediated experience. The most forceful theory in this respect comes from the German theorist and novelist Spielhagen, perhaps the first explicit proponent of the doctrine that the author should disappear behind the tale—or, more specifically, that the narrator should not be given any personality, relevance or protagonism of his own; that he should not explicitly comment on the action or impose an arbitrary structure on it; that he should not use omniscient panoramas, narrative summaries or descriptive accounts. A more moderate view, though still in the same general line, appears in Besant and James. This emphasis on dramatization, on an experiential narrative technique, is based on their conceptions of the novel as a moral force and on their realist creed. James's conceptions are more attractive and paradoxical than Besant's statements, which seem at times somewhat naive. But they probably agree on most basic respects.

Statements by Richardson, Stendhal or Dickens are interesting forerunners of these theories because of the value they set on the dramatic elements of the novel: the writer must not tell the whole of the story in his own person: he must rather show, make his characters tell the story by themselves through the use of dialogue and action. Stendhal proudly notes that all other novelists tell the story, while only he shows it to the reader. Richardson distinguishes three narrative techniques:

- 1st person narration, in which the writer tells of his own adventures;
- the narrative or epic narration: "in this the author relates himself the whole adventure," he may know everything about his characters, "he can be concise or diffuse, according as the different parts of his story require it."
- The "dramatic mode", using the characters' own words: "But his narration will not be lively, except he frequently drops himself and runs into dialogue: all good writers therefore have thrown as much as possible of the dramatic mode into their narrative" [1]

The most finished form of this dramatic narration in the 18th century will be the epistolary technique which
Richardson himself used in Pamela or Clarissa; in the twentieth century, the equivalent would be the interior monologue.

In a letter to a prospective lady writer, Dickens makes a similar point:

> It strikes me that you constantly hurry your narrative (and yet without getting on) by telling it, in a sort of impetuous breathless way, in your own person, when the people should tell it and act it for themselves. My notion always is, that when I have made the people to play out the play, it is, as it were, their own business to do it, and not mine.\[^2\]

In connection with the doctrine that literature must be direct and dramatic we may also remember Aristotle's and Lessing's praise of Homer's dramatic style and Coleridge's denunciation of Wordsworth's "ventriloquism." But as late as the Romantic age the theorists are concerned almost exclusively with poetry. Even those who are sympathetic to the novel, like John Stuart Mill, consider it as a minor and somewhat childish genre. Only in the second half of the 19th century do we find a purposive aesthetic theory of the novel. Flaubert, Maupassant, Henry James and Zola put forward the view that the novel is a serious form of art. In England, the most important essays in the defense of the novel are two essays called "The Art of Fiction," the first by Walter Besant, the second a riposte by Henry James.

For Besant, a novel is a genre which gives a fuller experience of life than the other arts, because its privileged material is human psychology and relationships, "men and women in action and passions", and its effect the development of human sympathy:

> The modern sympathy includes not only the power to pity the sufferings of others, but also that of understanding their very souls; it is the reverence for man, the respect for his personality, the recognition of his individuality, and the enormous value of the one man, the perception of one's man relation to another, his duties and responsibilities.\[^3\]

This is the aim of realistic techniques, of observation, of note-taking, which feature prominently in Besant's essay: through precision and verisimilitude to produce conviction, and through conviction to provide a
fuller experience of life than we would otherwise enjoy, to endow us with the "power of vision and of feeling" (Besant 14).

Besant also anticipates to some extent James's organic concept of the novel, in his insistence that all elements of a novel must contribute to that experiential quality, that none is to be irrelevant. Every part of the novel must accomplish its explicit function while it prepares the ground for other elements, creating in the reader by means of a skilful art the impression of something lively, consonant and spontaneous:

In romance, while nothing should be allowed which does not carry on the story, so everything as it occurs must be accentuated and yet deprived of needlessly accessory details. The gestures of the characters at an important juncture, their looks, their voices, may all be noted if they help to impress the situation. . . .

In Fiction the power of selection requires a large share of the dramatic sense. Those who already possess this faculty will not go wrong if they bear in mind the simple rule that nothing should be admitted which does not advance the story, illustrate the characters, bring into stronger relief the hidden forces which act upon them, their emotions, their passions, and their intentions. All descriptions which hinder instead of helping the action, all episodes of whatever kind, all conversation which does not either advance the story or illustrate the characters, ought to be rigidly suppressed.

(Besant 15, 24)

This conception, James will complain, is plot-centered and smacks too much of a ready-made recipe; but still it introduces an organic standard which James himself will use.

Besant further specifies his dramatic ideal with an explicit image of theatricals and with a reference to the audience--the test for dramatic presentation is to be full in the interest aroused in the audience:

Closely connected with selection is dramatic presentation. Given a situation, it should be the first care of the writer to present it as dramatically, that is to say as forcibly, as possible. The grouping and setting of the picture, the due subordination of description to dialogue, the rapidity of the action, those things which naturally suggest themselves to the practised eye, deserve to be very carefully considered by the beginner. In fact, a novel is like a play: it may be divided into scenes and acts, tableaus and situations, separated by the end of the chapter instead of the drop-scene: the writer is the dramatist, stage-
manager, scene-painter, actor, and carpenter, all in one; it is his single business to see that none of the scenes flag or fall flat: he must never for one moment forget to consider how the piece is looking from the front. (Besant 24-25)

The depiction of character deserves special mention: it is the test for the dramatic ability of the writer. Clumsy writers will tell us about their characters, without allowing us the direct experience of their personality. Or they will give flat characterizations (here Besant anticipates Forster's classification of characters into flat and round) by means of a single trait of personality which allows the reader to recognize the character, albeit in a mechanic way. The ideal is to describe full characters through their spontaneous action, to let themselves act in front of the reader so that he will get to know their personality, instead of being informed about them. In good dramatic characterization,

there is not a single word to emphasize or explain the attitude, manner, and look of the speakers, yet they are as intelligible as if they were written down and described. That is the highest art which carries the reader along and makes him see, without being told, the changing expressions, the gestures of the speakers, and hear the varying tones of the voice. . . . The only writer who can do this is he who makes his characters intelligible from the very outset, causes them first to stand before the reader in clear outline, and then with every additional line brings out the figure, fills up the face, and makes his creature grow from the simple outline more and more to the perfect and rounded figure. (Besant 27-28)

4.3. James and the Art of the Novel

Henry James (1843-1916) has been called "the best reader of Henry James." A great deal of his best criticism is found in the prefaces to his novels, in which he comments on the works and the technique of the novel.

James' main statement on this subject is his essay "The Art of Fiction" (1884). He knows that he
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James opposes abstract theoretical analysis of the elements in the novel. He sees the novel as an organic
whole: for him there is no sense in dividing action from character, or description from dialogue, etc.: they are all fused as the flesh and the blood in a living being; they melt into each other:

A novel is a living thing, all one and continuous, like any other organism, and in proportion as it lives will it be found, that in each of the parts there is something of each of the other parts. The critic who over the closed texture of a finished work shall pretend to trace a geography of items will mark some frontiers as artificial, I fear, as any that have been known to history. . . . (666)

You cannot divide, as other critics were doing, a novel of characters from a novel of incidents. In all good novels, character and incident define one another. As James says in one of the famous prefaces he wrote for a later edition of his works,

I might envy, though I couldn't emulate, the imaginative writer so constituted as to see his fable first and to make out its agents afterwards: I could think so little of any fable that didn't need its agents positively to launch it; I could think so little of any situation that didn't depend for its interest on the nature of the persons situated, and thereby on their way of taking it.[5]

And in "The Art of Fiction":

There are bad novels and good novels, as there are bad pictures and good pictures, but that is the only distinction in which I see any meaning, and I can as little imagine speaking of a novel of character as I can imagine speaking of a picture of character. When one says picture one says of character, when one says novel one says of incident, and the terms may be transposed at will. 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? (665)

James opposes Besant's reductive definition of the novel as something ultimately concerned with telling a good story full of action, as well as Trollope's idea that character is all in the novel, that the plot is something unimportant, and something which is not necessarily linked with character. The relationship between action and character is defined as an organic one, but perhaps it could best be defined as a
relation of organic subordination of action to character. Here James is arguing not only for an adequate description of the unity of a novel, but also for the novel of character and psychology against a narrow notion of the novel of action:

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 . . . . The other arts, in comparison, appear confined and hampered; the various conditions under which they are exercised are so rigid and definite. (668)

The novel (unlike drama) can reveal to us the inner life of characters, and this is the essence of the genre, which otherwise must follow, in James' opinion, a dramatic ideal of concentration (cf. Aristotle on tragedy). But the novel is a free form, he says. It has no grammar which can be defined, no rules that can be taught. "A novel is in its broadest definition a personal, a direct impression of life " ("Art" 664). The intensity of the impression and the execution are the grounds of its value, and they cannot be defined. They stem directly from the personal way each novelist sees life. This in some contrast with all we have said of his criticism of the Victorian novels. His own novels are thoughtful, concentrated, calculated works of art, while Victorian novels are "loose, baggy monsters" without technique or design. James thinks there are no rules, but he also thinks his own way is superior, his own technique more refined, his own vision more adequate. Still, we have here a profession of tolerance and catholicity.

4.5. Point of View

It is an irony of destiny that the theory of the novel should have profited so much from James' own analyses of his novels, given the little faith he has in theoretical definitions and analysis. In his prefaces, we
find some of the most clear and influential statements of the nineteenth century on point of view and narrative voice, as well as on action and character.

James makes a distinction between voice and point of view in his novelistic practice as well as in his theoretical statements. This distinction comes from his concern with the ability of the novel to depict experience and psychological life. First-person novel will not do for this, because James is not looking for a conscious revelation of the person, or for a kind of novel based on recollection of past experience, which is what 1st person narrative implies. His novels are usually written in the 3rd person, which is less "intrusive," more "dramatic." Where James does otherwise, he makes sure that the result will be equally dramatic—for instance, using an unreliable narrator in the main narrative of The Turn of the Screw. The action should in any case unfold in a transparent way, without the writer stepping in to make his own comments. We are shown its development through significant scenes, we are not simply told. Percy Lubbock will develop in his The Craft of Fiction (1922) some of James' insights in this particular. Lubbock analyzes the practice of James and gives it more explicit theoretical formulation. He privileges scenic presentation and the use of an unified point of view. His central tenet will be highly influential:

The art of fiction does not begin until the novelist thinks of his story as a matter to be shown, to be so exhibited that it will tell itself. . . . The thing has to look true, and that is all. It is not made to look true by simple statement. [6]

There is, according to James and Lubbock, an ideal way of "showing" in third person narration which is at once dramatic and psychologically immediate. This is what James usually calls narration through "centers of consciousness" (preface to The Portrait of a Lady), "vessels of sensibility" or "reflectors" (preface to The Wings of the Dove), and which we now usually call focalizer characters. The scenes usually act on a perceiving character, an reflector or focalizer, whose psychological reaction, the development of his understanding of the action, helps give the plot an organic unity. This is the role of Strether in The Ambassadors, of Maisie in What Maisie Knew. James does not require, as some of his followers, that there be no changes of perspective during the narrative; but he does seek to cut the story into perspectival
blocks that are internally coherent. For instance, in *The Wings of the Dove*, the story of Milly Theale is seen mainly through the eyes of two characters, Merton Densher and Kate Croy, as well as her own. Every change or apparent incoherence of point of view, James says, has its aesthetic justification, its dramatic coherence:

> There was the "fun", to begin with, of establishing one's successive centres- of fixing them so exactly that the portions of the subject commanded by them as from happy points of view, and accordingly treated from them, would constitute, so to speak, sufficiently solid blocks of wrought material, squared to the sharp edge, as to have weight and mass and carrying power; to make for construction, that is, to conduce to effect and to provide for beauty. . . .

> Do I sometimes in fact forfeit the advantage of that distinctness? Do I ever abandon one center for another after the former has been postulated? From the moment we proceed by "centres" and I have never, I confess, embraced the logic of any superior process—they must be, each as a basis, selected and fixed; after which it is that, in the high interest of economy of treatment, they determine and rule. There is no economy of treatment without an adopted, a related point of view, and though I understand, under certain degrees of pressure, a represented community of vision between several parties to the action when it makes for concentration, I understand no breaking-up of the register, no sacrifice of the recording consistency, that doesn't scatter and weaken.[7]

Just as in Aristotle we found that an action or praxis had to be treated artistically before it became the plot or mythos, we find in James a distinction between the "subject" and the "wrought material" or novel, and in Tomashevski we found a related opposition between fabula and siuzhet. A series of rules on the use of point of view define which is the relationship between the material and the finished novel. We see that James conceives of these "rules" he formulates on the use of point of view as organic, internal rules, which spring from the very nature of the psychological material of the novel. They will be transformed by some critics in the 20th century into external, a priori rules to decide on the quality of any novel, irrespective of its internal economy. The influence of James's ideas is readily apparent in most important twentieth-century writers on point of view: Percy Lubbock (*The Craft of Fiction*, 1921), Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren (*Understanding Fiction*, 1943), Jean Pouillon (*Temps et roman*, 1947), F. K. Stanzel (*Typische*...

James also experimented with a concept of dramatic narrative which would be closer to the idea of inmediacy held by Genette. A novel like *The Awkward Age* consists almost entirely of dialogue, the narrator being completely unobstrusive and limiting himself to introducing the words of the characters and sparingly describing some of their actions in the way they are described in a play's stage directions. Here the distance between novel and drama--at least, closet drama--is at its minimum.

4.6. The Revaluation of Narrative

Reaction against the dramatic ideal for the art of fiction takes the form of a revaluation of the figure of the narrator and the full range of effects which can be achieved through evaluation, directness, explicit comment and other forms of mediation. The narrator comes to the fore again and is appreciated as an important constuctive element in storytelling. At the same time, there is a certain reaction against the favourite techniques of modernist fiction: neutrality, ambiguity, restricted use of viewpoints, etc. The classical novel--Victorian or eighteenth-century--is celebrated again together with its outspoken and obstrusive narrators. This reaction appears in Germany as early as 1910 in Käte Friedemann's *Die Rolle des Erzählers in der Epik*, but the Anglo-American tradition has to wait until 1960 and Wayne C. Booth's *Rhetoric of Fiction*.

Booth's main tenet is that narrative cannot show, that showing is just a way of telling, and
consequently that the opposition between them is misguided. According to Booth, the concept of showing is used in a vague and impressionistic way by James's followers. He points out that there is to start with a difference between a situation which is dramatic and a dramatic presentation of a situation. There are, he argues, two ways to show a scene in a dramatic way:

€ "To show characters dramatically engaged with each other, motive clashing upon motive, the outcome depending on the resolution of motives."
€ "To give the impression that the story is taking place by itself, with the characters existing in a dramatic relationship vis-à-vis the spectator, unmediated by a narrator and decipherable only through inferential matching of word to word and word to deed."[8]

There would be, then, a dramatism of the fabula and a dramatism of the presentation, of the story. Booth exemplifies the limitations of the Modernist concept of "dramatism" through an analysis of Joseph Andrews (I.12) where there is an obvious dramatism of the first kind in spite of the obvious presence of the narrator and the indirect presentation of the characters' attitudes.

However, if we examine that passage, we see that its dramatism is not so intrinsic, and that it owes much to its presentation. That is, there are different kinds of dramatic presentation, to the extent that we can speak of "showing" a scene in spite of the absence of direct speech, detailed presentation, or subjective focalization on the part of the characters. Fielding, or Fielding's narrator, in spite of being a prominent presence who mediates and summarises the situation, deliberately avoids any explicit value judgments, and simply mentions the attitudes of the various characters towards Joseph. Of course, the value judgments are implied since the passage is highly ironic, but the reader is left to evaluate the situation and reach a conclusion, and even to construct the different characters and the narrator's attitude towards them. Characters are not explicitly described in their moral being: they perform dramatically to some extent when the reader knows them from their actions.
Therefore, all kinds of actions, verbal or otherwise, can be presented dramatically as long as the reader is given an interpretive role, as long as there is a possibility of greater significance coming from greater attention to the situation. The meaning of acts is not self-evident and univocal, but contextual: the same act, or the same speech act, can assume different senses depending on the situation in which it is performed. And, just as drama can be said to be a narrative genre in one sense, narrative is aptly described as dramatic in the sense that its unfolding requires constant interpretive attention.

4.7. Distance: Conclusion

We have chosen a less analytical essay to illustrate the concept of distance, and this is partly due to the difficulty of giving a univocal definition of narrative distance. If we define it provisionally as the greater or lesser dramatic quality of the novel we are still left with the task of defining those techniques or elements which have a bearing on distance. Actually, we have already witnessed some implicit distinctions at work in the essays by James or Besant. Distance increases as the narrator is more arbitrary, obstructive or manipulative, and decreases when the story is presented in a non-evaluative way, and if possible through the perspective of the characters themselves. Distance decreases the more we are given a scenic, experiential approach to characterization and event. The more experiential the reading of the story, the lesser the distance. It increases the more a story is conventional, and decreases with the "feel" of reality. In conclusion, we cannot but say that distance is an effect, not a technique or a specific structure. It is the result of the whole texture of the narrative and the way it is experienced by the reader.
[1] Samuel Richardson; excerpt in Allott, Novelists on the Novel 258.