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Peter Brooks: Henry James Goes to Paris

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Introduction

This is the story of the young Henry James—age thirty-two—deciding to make a radical break with family, Cambridge, and his native land in order to go become a novelist in Paris. Jump, for a moment, nearly to the end of the story of James’s engagement with the Parisian literary and artistic avant-garde. It’s Virginia Woolf, in her biography of the Bloomsbury artist, critic, and aesthetic theorist Roger Fry, who recounts James’s visit in 1912—he was now close to seventy—to the Second Post-Impressionist Exhibition held at the Grafton Galleries, in London. Here, in what would be a landmark exhibit for Britain, were works by Gauguin, Seurat, Cézanne, Matisse, Rouault, Picasso. Fry took James to the basement for tea, over which James expressed “the disturbed hesitations which Matisse and Picasso aroused in him,” while Fry attempted to explain “that Cézanne and Flaubert were, in a manner of speaking, after the same thing.”

Woolf’s anecdote captures a number of issues. It suggests that James by 1912 was himself considered by the artistic elite—what better representatives of that than Woolf and Fry?—to be an exemplar of the movement from Victorianism to modernism, in fact the person younger generations looked to, and now called the Master, because he led the way into a new kind of fiction. Yet, the comparison of Flaubert and Cézanne, which we may find entirely apt—especially when we think about the late work of these two restless innovators—was perhaps less reassuring to James than Fry intended, in that late Cézanne probably

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most of all triggered James's longstanding hesitations about Flaubert, offering a cautionary tale in the infringement of certain commitments to representation.

James in 1912 was a modernist master, but one who clung to a notion of representation of the real that he saw as indispensable to the very project of the novel—a project that leads him over and over again to set against Flaubert's practice the more nourishing example of Balzac. So a modernist master who is unwilling to make the leap *beyond* that we see in the work Cézanne did in Provence from 1900 to his death in 1906, and presumably even more so where the experimentation of Picasso and Matisse is concerned. Yet Roger Fry was certainly right in his comparisons. Starting in the mid-1890s, James does produce work that parallels Seurat's *pointillisme* and anticipates Picasso's cubism. It is work that eschews the direct presentation of the story—its characters and its actions—in favor of the play of interpretive consciousness on the action. As in Seurat, the solid outlines of objects give way to a kind of shimmering impression recorded by the eye and the mind. As in Picasso in his cubist phase, the observed reveals different sides and aspects as the observer moves, studying intently that which needs observation, reevaluating impressions as new angles of observation open up. Think, for instance, of the unnamed narrator of *The Sacred Fount* or of Fanny Assingham in *The Golden Bowl*, two very different observers who must try to deduce and to interpret from evidence that never stays put, both because they are moving and because the observed itself alters under the observing eye. It's a kind of radical perspectivalism that James brought to the novel perhaps more consistently than any other novelist, which he then made the basis of his theory of fiction expressed in the prefaces of the New York Edition of his works, and which the generation of Woolf and Fry gratefully made their own.

By the time James was sitting in the basement of the Grafton Galleries taking tea with Roger Fry, he was the accomplished master of the three late, great novels of what long ago was dubbed his “major phase”: *The Wings of the Dove* (1902), *The Ambassadors* (1903), *The Golden Bowl* (1904), as well as the reflective prefaces of the New York Edition (1907–9). These three novels of the major phase are all highly perspectival. They depend on the play of seeing and the unseen, of knowledge

and ignorance, as the very stuff of their dramas. What Milly Theale does not see in *The Wings of the Dove* kills her; and the knowledge of what she knows in her dying eventually sunders Kate Croy and Merton Densher. *The Ambassadors* is perhaps the most obvious example of a perceptual adventure and dilemma, a kind of detective story where the detective, Lambert Strether, eventually gets it all wrong because he's wilfully blinded himself—yet in getting it wrong discovers the perspectives in which it is all right. And *The Golden Bowl* offers a story of finding out and then repressing what you have found in order to use your knowledge in other ways, to alter the very scene of observation.

The perspectival dramas of the last three novels are acute, agonizing, played for the highest possible stakes. Nonetheless they reach us with a kind of high serenity conferred by James's late style, a finish that is perhaps more comparable to an Old Master than to a contemporary such as Cézanne. The more wrenching questions of perspective, of how one sees and how one knows, come just before the major phase, in a series of novels and tales from the mid-1890s into the beginnings of the new century. From approximately the time of *The Figure in the Carpet* (1896) through *What Maisie Knew* (1897), *The Turn of the Screw* (1898), *In the Cage* (1898), *The Awkward Age* (1899), to *The Sacred Fount* (1901)—and then, belatedly, *The Beast in the Jungle* (1903)—James's fiction appears to evidence a radical dis-orientation, a displacement of the observer from a central or frontal position to a marginal one. Following his failed experiment in the theater, he seemed to turn to what the theater could not so readily provide, something that more anticipates the cinema: a severely angled view, a moving post of observation and a shifting field of the observed.

Knowledge had of course always been important in James's fictions, which were indeed often centrally dramas of knowledge—perhaps most notably *The Portrait of a Lady*, where Isabel Archer's discovery of the latent meanings of her disastrous marriage constitutes the core of the drama. Bafflement leading to recognition was perhaps always the principal Jamesian scenario. What seems new in the fiction of the mid-to late 1890s is the emphasis on the bafflement itself, and the difficulty or even impossibility of assuring that the recognition is real, rather than the product of a partial, misinformed, or even unhinged imagination.

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James is forced to reflect on the use of perspective in ways that seem to take him beyond Balzac, to the most radical innovations of Flaubert, and toward the painting he never could really appreciate. James's biographer, Leon Edel, notes that after 1895 James seems already to have left the nineteenth century behind, and to be moving toward the fictional experimentation of Joyce, of Woolf, of Proust.

James the modernist is by now so accepted a figure that his earlier work—such novels as *Roderick Hudson* (1875), *The American* (1877), *The Europeans* (1878), *Washington Square* (1880), even the masterful *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881) and *The Bostonians* (1886)—often does seem to belong to a different century, not only literally but symbolically as well. What happened in between this work and the experimental fiction of the mid-1890s—work marked by what we might call a kind of epistemological anguish, the anxious difficulty of figuring out what one knows about other people and the world, and how to know it? Many things of course happened, including, notably, James's attempt to write for the stage, and the bitter disaster in which it ended, in 1895, also the death of his friend Constance Fenimore Woolson by suicide in 1894, and the loss of others, such as Robert Louis Stevenson and his beloved invalid sister, Alice; even the trial and conviction of Oscar Wilde should be factored in as an element in James's psychological evolution. I don't think any biographer has or probably ever will "explain" how James transforms himself during these difficult, often depressed, but also enormously productive years.

As any reader of James, or of Woolf, or of Freud, knows well, chronology is not necessarily straightforward. Things happen, are apparently forgotten, or repressed, and then stage a return to consciousness, a belated influence. It's not my primary intention in what follows to argue that James's transformation in the 1890s is caused by his Paris experience twenty years earlier: I don't believe that this kind of cause and effect are fully determinable in the life and work of a writer. But it is striking that James in Paris in 1875 and 1876—aged thirty-two and thirty-three—encounters the very crucible of the modernism he will later come to represent, even embody. It's even more striking that when he first encounters such emblematic works of nascent modernism as Flaubert's *Bouvard et Pécuchet*, Monet's impression of the

sun rising over the Seine in Le Havre, or Whistler's nocturnes, he doesn't like them. He rejects them in favor of something much more conventional and, to our retrospective eyes, far less valuable. He is not yet prepared to see what this work is doing, and the lessons it may hold for his own. To some degree, he will never fully accept it. If he later speaks in high praise of Monet, late Flaubert always makes him uncomfortable. Rightly so, one might say, because he no doubt correctly detects that there is in a book like *Bouvard et Pécuchet* a more radical challenge to the whole enterprise of the novel as representation than James wants to take on. James's modernism will always be tempered by this commitment to a form of representation he tends to exemplify in the person of another French novelist who had died in 1850: Balzac.

Nonetheless, much that he experiences in Paris in 1875–76 will stage a kind of return of the repressed in his work from the mid-1890s on. It's as if it lay for some twenty years in what James called "the deep well of unconscious cerebration" before he was ready for it—before he saw that it could be of use to him, that it was trying to do something similar to what he now felt he needed to do. The wealth of material that James encountered in Paris during his year there may have been too much to absorb at the time. Paris, following the trauma of defeat by Prussia and then the uprising and suppression of the Paris Commune, in 1871, was in a moment of feverish creativity, and James encountered the prime examples of it, in such as the Second Impressionist Exhibit at Durand-Ruel's, and in mixing with writers he worshiped—Turgenev—and others he admired in some descending order: Flaubert, Zola, Maupassant, Goncourt, Daudet. He encountered as well the possibility of a close, possibly erotic friendship with a young Russian artist, aesthete, and devotee of Wagner—whose influence on European music and letters had just been given the consecration of the Festspielhaus in Bayreuth. James missed much of what he experienced—but missed it, I think, only for the time being. It would be back, to shape his own writing in crucial ways.

As I suggested, however, it's not an argument about James's evolution and its causes that most interests me here. It is rather the telling of a story: the story of that year in Paris, from the point of view of the man who at that point was still "Henry James, Jr." Narratives tend to be de-

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terminated by their endings, what they are headed toward. It may be salutary to try to forget for a moment that Master, and to walk again the streets of Paris with the man who has just seen *Roderick Hudson* to bed and has now hatched the idea for *The American*. Or rather—since it is impossible truly to forget James as he would become—it may be well to try to recreate the experience of the young man in a kind of stereoscopic view, including the Master as a kind of hovering figure. In any case, what I have tried to do is first and foremost tell the story—the novel of the young Henry James in the somewhat treacherous, but enchanting, world of Paris in 1875–76.