

Unreadability, the Amateur Reader, and the Case of Henry James' Late Style

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I come to this paper with an uneasy conscience. First of all, I am a rank amateur at philosophy. I was trained to be a scholar in the field of English, which practically means that I have some expertise in the interpretation of literary texts. Over the last few years, though, I've come to feel not only disenchanted with but positively disdainful of this interpretive discipline. Outside of English departments, literary reading, where it persists at all, persists as a pleasurable practice. After teaching a couple of Introduction to Literature courses—courses which earned students who completed them the fulfillment of their Humanities gen ed requirement—I began to wonder if people who were going to read for pleasure really needed exegetes—people to assume what Robert Scholes called a “quasi-priestly” role in interpreting a canon of quasi-sacred texts. So I lost my faith in literature as a category, and have left the teaching of literature in the hands of my capable colleagues who can do the work in good faith.

I have had occasion, however, to return again and again to the scene of my apostasy. While I stand by my position that readers do not, for the most part, need exegetes to tell them how to read, one of the reasons, whether I knew it then or not, that I came to literature in the first place—reading it, writing about it, explaining it, falling in love with it—was that language itself is so interesting. And knowing about language and how it works remains an abiding interest, one that I do believe is useful and fascinating. For me, this was the great teaching of the flowering of what we came to call “theory,” which to some extent was and is a part of the “Aesthetics” branch of philosophy: literary language is language itself, perhaps writ large, but language nonetheless, and

understanding its ins and outs, the ways it both expressed and obscured meaning, how its tropes flowered forth in all their archaic patterns—all this is worth knowing about, and studying literature can help us to know it. Literature may not be a special case of language—the postmoderns show us that language behaves the same interesting ways, whether it is designated as literary or whether, as poet Marianne Moore once said, it is “plain American which cats and dogs can read!” (“England”)—but its case fascinates, in part because it aims for distinctness.

My plan is to talk briefly about Stanley Cavell’s conception of the ways that philosophical texts both invite and repel reading, draw an analogy with James’s own conception of what he was doing fictively, as well as to paint a picture for you of his late style. Finally, I’d like to draw your attention to a scene or two from *The Wings of the Dove*, which will, I hope, illustrate the whole notion of how literary language might do as much scaring away of the reader as of inviting the reader in, and how the amateur reader of literary texts might be rewarded by persisting through the defended literary text to an ongoing inquiry into what language makes possible.

The philosopher Stanley Cavell notes the centrality of language in his study *This New Yet Unapproachable America*: he suggests, “We might perhaps be ready to say that culture as a whole is the work of our life of language, it goes with language, it is language’s manifestation or picture or externalization.” (48) This is true for ordinary language, the kind we use every day, as well as for language we have categorized and set aside as special, such as literary language, and, I might add, philosophical language. Cavell foregrounds this very connection in the essay “Declining Decline” (the title itself a tight little knot of a problem to solve); his project is to sort out whether, when “Heidegger

calls the work of art (Heidegger names this work ‘letting truth happen’) . . . [is he] claiming that the fate of philosophy is joined (now? Again?) with the fate of art?” (3).

The question of language and meaning is not an easy one; perhaps some of you have run across philosophical deliberations about the nature of language in your studies. Cavell uses Heidegger to pose a question about the ways we may approach language, one that I think helps us to understand something about language, about texts, and extrapolating from that, about why we keep reading and why paying absurdly close attention to texts might matter, after all. (Perhaps none of you are wondering about that, but I often do.)

Back to Cavell: he asks: “What is the sociality or geniality of Heidegger’s text?” I excise this question away from its context of investigation into Heidegger—I am a philosophical amateur, remember—but I think justifiably, because Cavell goes on to define what he means by ‘sociality’ and ‘geniality’ in terms of all texts, and in such a way as to provocatively bring back to our attention the question of the nature of philosophical and literary (or poetic) language:

My use of ‘sociality’ is meant to problematize the idea of a work’s ‘audience,’ to suggest that, perhaps most definitively for romantic writing, the quest for audience is exactly as questionable as that for expression: it is no *given* set (assembly, class) of hearers or readers that is sought or fantasized. ‘Geniality’ I mean to problematize the idea of a work’s ‘intention,’ or an author’s taking of the reader into his or her confidence; author and reader will be like-minded, if they are congeners, generated together, of one another. . . . A further

region of ‘sociality’ and ‘geniality’ invites (unlike ‘audience’ or ‘intention’) the issue of a text’s unsociability or ungeniality, its power to repel, its unapproachability marked as its reproachfulness. . . . Here the region opens of a text’s defenses against being read, or approached, something I have touched on in speaking of a text’s counter-transferences to its desired and feared ‘readers,’ to, that is to say, their (fantasied) transferences to it.” (11-12)

This is an especially dense and suggestive passage. Cavell characterizes texts—almost personifies them—with the nominalizations he chooses for their attributes, “sociality” and “geniality,” as well as their opposites. He seems to suggest, though, that texts might simultaneously be sociable and unsociable, approachable and unapproachable—even reproachful—genial and ungenial.

A useful question any reader might ask—even a philosophical reader—would be, Why would a text (personifying again) want to be ungenial, unsociable, unapproachable, even reproachful? Why, in a word, would a text want to repel a reader? Why would a text want to defend itself from being read?

As I was considering what I might say about Henry James, this query of Cavell’s kept returning to me. As you may know, Henry James wrote his novels over a long span of time, and his early novels are quite different than the late ones in terms of style. This is so pronouncedly the case that expositors of James talk about the “late style,” an appellation that’s not necessary for many novelists, no matter how many novels they write, because their style doesn’t change as much. The sources of James’ late style have been discussed among his critics and biographers—at some point, James began to

dictate rather than to write hand-on-paper; this, many think, had the effect of turning out prose that various readers have identified as “impenetrable, manneristic, and downright exasperating” (Britto 1) to “deliberate excess – a wheeling and circling towards the meaning” (Iyer). This style was famously parodied in Max Beerbohm’s satiric piece “The Mote in the Middle Distance,” which exaggerated, although not by much, the obliqueness and circularity of the style as a means to make an argument that it masked an ultimate triviality. Here’s just the first two sentences of Beerbohm’s parody:

It was with the sense of a, for him, very memorable something that he peered now into the immediate future, and tried, not without compunction, to take that period up where he had, prospectively, left it. But just where the deuce *had* he left it? The consciousness of dubiety was, for our friend, not, this morning, quite yet clean-cut enough to outline the figures on what she had called his "horizon," between which and himself the twilight was indeed of a quality somewhat intimidating.

All the trademarks are there—the intricate and embedded syntax, the floating pronoun that you’re not quite sure you know the referent of, the insertion of certain genteel vulgarisms (“where the deuce”), and the love of abstractions like *consciousness of dubiety*. If the style “wheels and circles toward meaning,” you might wonder if James will ever let you arrive there, and moreover, if you do arrive, will you know it when you get there?

James was a self-reflexive writer. Late in his life, he published what is known as the New York edition of substantially everything he’d ever written. Each of these

volumes came with a new Preface, written in the late style, in which James reconsidered the work (which was sometimes lightly, sometimes more thoroughly edited, also in the late style). He also wrote a treatise called “The Art of Fiction,” from which I’d like to take an excerpt, because James had a fairly thoroughly articulated conception of what he was about, if not always the strongest sense of its immediate effect upon readers. In “The Art of Fiction,” James describes the novel like this:

A novel is in its broadest definition a personal impression of life; that, to begin with, constitutes its 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. . . . Then, in a word, we [readers] can enjoy one of the most charming of pleasures, we can estimate quality, we can apply the test of execution. The execution belongs to the author alone; it is what is most personal to him, and we measure him by that. The advantage, the luxury, as well as the torment and responsibility of the novelist, is that there is no limit to what he may attempt as an executant--no limit to his possible experiments, efforts, discoveries, successes. Here it is especially that he works, step by step, like his brother of the brush, of whom we may always say that he has painted his picture in a manner best known to himself. His manner is his secret, not necessarily a deliberate one. He cannot disclose it, as a general thing, if he would; he would be at a loss to teach it to others.

If James were conversing with Cavell, I think they might understand one another, as James here defines his own geniality and sociality—that is, he sees the novelist as having

the ultimate freedom to feel and say—and then we, the readers, may “estimate quality.” The writer writes; the reader approaches and “estimates quality.” Moreover, the writer’s “manner is his secret, not necessarily a deliberate one,” one which “he cannot disclose . . . [even] if he would.” Perhaps, then, the writer cannot even quite approach himself, his own mind or method, except in the aftermath?

I’d like to compare this more general statement of artistic aim and process, to a more specific one, taken from the Preface to *The Wings of the Dove*, one of the last late novels. Perhaps first it would be useful to briefly summarize the plot of *The Wings of the Dove* for those who haven’t read it: Milly Theale, an American heiress, comes to London. She’s introduced into society by Kate Croy and her rich aunt, who hopes to marry Kate successfully, i.e., to a rich man. However, Kate is secretly engaged to Merton Densher, who is poor. Milly finds out that she is very ill, and Kate conceives of a plan—that Merton Densher, with whom Milly has silently fallen in love, woo her, marry her, and, when she dies, inherit her fortune. For a while, Milly is unaware of this scheme and feels she can grasp happiness; when she finds out, through a third person, that Kate and Merton have been connected all along, she “turns her face to the wall,” dies, but still leaves Densher her money. The money divides Densher and Kate, and they end up parting.

Now, to the Preface:

If, as I had fondly noted, the little world determined for her was to
"bristle"--I delighted in the term!--with meanings, so, by the same token,
could I but make my medal hang free, its obverse and its reverse, its face
and its back, would beautifully become optional for the spectator. I

somehow wanted them correspondingly embossed, wanted them inscribed and figured with an equal salience; yet it was none the less visibly my "key," as I have said, that though my regenerate young New Yorker, and what might depend on her, should form my centre, my circumference was every whit as treatable. Therefore I must trust myself to know when to proceed from the one and when from the other. Preparatively and, as it were, yearningly--given the whole ground--one began, in the event, with the outer ring, approaching the centre thus by narrowing circumvallations. There, full-blown, accordingly, from one hour to the other, rose one's process--for which there remained all the while so many amusing formulae. (para. 6, "Pref")

James is quite explicit here about his circular method. At the heart of his novel, he says, is the heroine, his "regenerate young New Yorker," the girl who falls ill who nonetheless wants to live, but the "circumference," that is, all the life going on around her, is also "treatable." And so, he will circumambulate the story, narrowing in on the center—and there, "full-blown . . . rose one's process." James wants us to see his heroine, he wants us to appreciate her, as well as to sympathetically appreciate the world of characters and meanings beyond her; the circularity of his method, however, also rhymes with the circularity of his style, and there lies the difficulty.

Does James want to approach the reader, to meet him or her? or does he want to circle round the reader, perhaps warily, possibly even to ward him off? I believe that the matter of James's style—that is, the way he puts words, sentences, paragraphs, chapters, together—speaks directly to this question. I would like now to consider a beautiful scene

of meeting placed right at the middle of *The Wings of the Dove*, compare that with another scene of meeting, then conclude with a few speculations afterward. In this scene, the three main characters come together in an art gallery. Milly Theale, the American heiress, has been admiring the painting and the people. She is conscious of the fact that here, she does not have to face any questions about her condition, and feels the freer for it. She overhears three women talking about something—at first, Milly thinks the subject of their conversation is a painting, but then deduces that they are speaking of a person, a man:

This was a gentleman in the middle of the place, a gentleman who had removed his hat and was for a moment, while he glanced, absently, as she could see, at the top tier of the collection, tapping his forehead with his pocket-handkerchief. The occupation held him long enough to give Milly time to take for granted--and a few seconds sufficed--that his face was the object just observed by her friends. This could only have been because she concurred in their tribute, even qualified; and indeed "the English style" of the gentleman--perhaps by instant contrast to the American--was what had had the arresting power. This arresting power, at the same time--and that was the marvel--had already sharpened almost to pain, for in the very act of judging the bared head with detachment she felt herself shaken by a knowledge of it. It was Merton Densher's own, and he was standing there, standing long enough unconscious for her to fix him and then hesitate. These successions were swift, so that she could still ask herself in freedom if she had best let him see her. She could still reply to this that she

shouldn't like him to catch her in the effort to prevent it; and she might further have decided that he was too preoccupied to see anything had not a perception intervened that surpassed the first in violence. She was unable to think afterwards how long she had looked at him before knowing herself as otherwise looked at; all she was coherently to put together was that she had had a second recognition without his having noticed her. The source of this latter shock was nobody less than Kate Croy--Kate Croy who was suddenly also in the line of vision and whose eyes met her eyes at their next movement. Kate was but two yards off--Mr. Densher wasn't alone. Kate's face specifically said so, for after a stare as blank at first as Milly's it broke into a far smile. That was what, wonderfully--in addition to the marvel of their meeting--passed from her for Milly; the instant reduction to easy terms of the fact of their being there, the two young women, together. It was perhaps only afterwards that the girl fully felt the connexion between this touch and her already established conviction that Kate was a prodigious person; yet on the spot she none the less, in a degree, knew herself handled and again, as she had been the night before, dealt with--absolutely even dealt with for her greater pleasure. A minute in fine hadn't elapsed before Kate had somehow made her provisionally take everything as natural. The provisional was just the charm--acquiring that character from one moment to the other; it represented happily so much that Kate would explain on the very first chance. This left moreover--and that was the greatest wonder--all due margin for amusement at the way

things happened, the monstrous oddity of their turning up in such a place on the very heels of their having separated without allusion to it. The handsome girl was thus literally in control of the scene by the time Merton Densher was ready to exclaim with a high flush or a vivid blush--one didn't distinguish the embarrassment from the joy--"Why Miss Theale: fancy!" and "Why Miss Theale: what luck!"

The friends meet, and James skirts the question of their treachery—"Kate was but two yards off—Mr. Densher wasn't alone"—and Milly's innocence of it. This is a moment in which Milly almost finds out what there is to know; perhaps when she does find out what the true state of affairs is between Densher and Croy, this moment recalled would make her discovery all the more devastating. What strikes me most about this scene is the whirling quality of it—the way James represents the successive moments of consciousness, not only Milly's, but Densher's and particularly Kate's. That he manages this while telling it from Milly's point of view, a character who doesn't yet know what is afoot, and signaling to us without stating the import of it explicitly, is surely an indicator of James' great artistry. Yet there is something also here that disinvents—that represents and yet obscures. We must get very close, in other words, to a text that doesn't seem particularly to mind if we don't get it. The scene, it seems to me, is genial in Cavell's sense—that is, it makes the reader a co-generator of the text's meaning, especially as the text invites the reader to approach it—and also ungenial—it defends itself from being approached through its difficult, occult, baroque and circular style.

Let me contrast this briefly with one of several scenes in which Kate Croy and Merton Densher play out the endgame of their deception. Millie Theale has died, but

Densher must play his part to the finish so that he can inherit her money and he and Kate can have the means to marry. These conversations are for the most part fraught and elliptical, but also with a quality of frankness quite striking—they “bristle,” to use James’ word, with an earthly, venal energy. At the end of one of these conversations, Kate says that she would willingly announce their engagement tomorrow at “an idea--I mean an idea straight FROM you, I mean as your own, given me in good faith. There, my dear!”--and she smiled again. "I call that really meeting you."

Here, the idea of meeting implies gamesmanship, of having met Densher’s terms. I’ve been surprised on my rereading of the second book of *The Wings of the Dove* at the degree of frankness in the conversations between Kate and Merton—at least, “frankness” Henry James-style. At one point, Densher demands, quite bluntly, that Kate come to his rooms—i.e., have sex with him—before he will take the dramatic step of pursuing Milly. James never says the words “have sex,” of course, or even the word “want,” I don’t think, but these passages are like gangsta rap in Jamesworld. Through these characters and their relative directness, we see, I think, what’s at stake for James in making his text indirect: direct language is the language of the bargain, the negotiation, the quid pro quo. It is an immoral language, therefore, or it risks immorality; thus, would the writer, in seeking to more directly court the reader, in becoming more genial and more sociable with the reader, risk falling into a simulacrum of these same bargains, by which a fortune is gained but the soul is lost? I think, finally, of the biblical injunction of Jesus, who, upon delivering one of the first parables, said, “Who hath ears to hear, let him hear” (Matt. 13:9). James’s style wards off anyone without the patience to persist through his stylistic wheelings and circlings, his “circumvallations.” These stylistic traits reveal and

conceal in equal measure, but the concealment seems to be central to James's construction of his own enterprise. He wants us to observe the obverse and reverse of the medallion that is his story, and even to fall in love with it; but to observe the finer markings on it, the reader must draw close, not allow what seems to be unreadable to repel his reading.

The word "amateur" comes ultimately from the Latin for "lover." (The sense of the word as a "dabbler" or a non-professional comes later.) Remember James's description of the novelist's methods: "His manner is his secret, not necessarily a deliberate one." This may imply that the writer's manner may be secret even to himself, if the secret is not deliberate. Might this suggest, then, that the writer is in a sense an amateur, a lover, of his own art, both directly responsible for it but also mesmerized and mystified by it? By the same token, I would like to speak for the persistent but amateur reader. You can listen to the professional interpretations of others for as long as you live, but the virtue of reading accrues only when the reader practices a loving, persistent drawing-near the text. This is the only way a reader can, with the text, congene, to use Cavell's word—can generate—a never-ending inquiry into the way words work, which is what is worth knowing about any kind of writing.

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