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Judith Woolf

Excerpt

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CHAPTER I

Introduction

Difficulty can create its own difficulties. The initial stumbling-block with Henry James, for many of his readers, is not so much the fact that his novels are complex and oblique and idiosyncratic as a suspicious feeling that such complexity is wilful and unnecessary. This reaction is not, of course, by any means confined to James. Readers frequently approach writers as different from each other as John Donne from James Joyce with the same puzzled suspicion. In some of these difficult writers the difficulties, though necessary, are in a sense wilful, in that they are intended to divert or to delight, to exercise the author's ingenuity and the reader's wits, to astonish or even to tease, though they may have other and profoundly serious aims as well. To complain about this kind of difficulty is like complaining because a riddle is puzzling or because a firework is dazzling. Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*, Pope's *Dunciad*, Joyce's *Ulysses* are all examples of the kind of work I mean. However, there is another kind of difficulty, that of the mathematical expression which is difficult because it formulates precisely a difficult concept which could not otherwise be accurately expressed. To find fitting words for concepts of that order of difficulty but made shifting and changeful as well by all the myriad colourings of human life is a task that imposes its own constraints, all the more so if the truths to be expressed are of overwhelming importance to the writer. In the following chapters I shall try to tease out the complexities and display the virtues of some of James's major works; in this one I want to put James into his context in the history of the English novel, and thus to show him for what he was, a writer using an essentially

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comic medium to convey an increasingly tragic vision, and so compelled to force the language of narrative prose to carry the charge and register the subtleties of the language of poetry.

Since this is a task which would properly require the whole of a book much longer than this one, the history that I am about to offer you will be a kind of aerial view, enabling us at least to pick out, besides a few of the principal monuments, something of that patterning in the ground which shows the position of ancient forts and fields. Our aerial view, in other words, will take us back in time to the mid-eighteenth century when a middle-aged journalist and lawyer, Henry Fielding, and a middle-aged printer, Samuel Richardson, became, as the old joke tells us, the father and mother of the English novel. The novel, which seems to us so central and traditional, was then that astonishing thing, a brand new literary genre, a kind of prose narrative completely different from the chronicles and romances which preceded it and one still discovering its own scope and powers. Its rise was associated with the rise of a new kind of audience, an educated, largely urban bourgeoisie, deeply interested in its own nature and customs and excited and sometimes shocked to discover them reflected in this new form of literature.

An important forerunner of this new genre was Restoration drama, the sharp, witty comedy, with its accurate caricature of social types and tendencies, which replaced the long-outmoded tragedies of the Jacobean when the theatres opened again under Charles II. For the first time, the characters on stage mimicked, though with comically wicked exaggeration, the lives and manners of their audience. In Vanbrugh's *The Provok'd Wife*, the two heroines even discuss together the way they behave while watching a play, the joke requiring the half-reluctant laughter of an audience finding itself unexpectedly caught out.

LADY BRUTE: Tell me true – did you never practise in the glass?

BELINDA: Why, did you?

LADY BRUTE: Yes, faith, many a time.

BELINDA: And I too, I own it. Both how to speak myself, and how to look when others speak. But my glass and I could never yet

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agree what face I should make when they come blurt out with a nasty thing in a play. For all the men presently look upon the women, that's certain; so laugh we must not, though our stays burst for't, because that's telling truth, and owning we understand the jest. And to look serious is so dull, when the whole house is a-laughing.

LADY BRUTE: Besides, that looking serious does really betray our knowledge in the matter, as much as laughing with the company would do. For if we did not understand the thing, we should naturally do like other people.

BELINDA: For my part I always take that occasion to blow my nose.

LADY BRUTE: You must blow your nose half off then at some plays.
(Act III Sc. 3)

It is no accident that Fielding began his literary career as a dramatist. His greatest novel, *Tom Jones*, is a kind of exuberant puppet show with Fielding himself entering the novel as the cunning puppet-master who speaks to the audience from inside his booth, inducing us to enter into an intimate relationship with him. This close but teasing relationship between author and reader is sharply contrasted with the relationships of the characters themselves. Fielding has a serious moral purpose in writing his novel, but none of the characters change in the course of it, any more than they would in a fairy-tale. Tom, the foundling hero, simply turns out to have been all along a true member of his benefactor's family, as well as a good lad at heart, while Master Blifil, his rival and enemy, turns out to have been all along a hypocrite. People are not always what they seem, at least to the other characters, who are denied the Olympian insights the author shares with the reader, but they are always what they look like. Tom's handsome face guarantees his good heart. As in a fairy-tale, too, we can rely on the happy ending, though it may be as hard to see how Fielding is going to extract it from the ever more inextricable tangles of the plot as to see how the conjurer is going to turn the white rabbit back into the young lady assistant he earlier had sawn in half. When Oedipus discovers that he has unwittingly lain with his own mother his predicament is the archetypal stuff of tragedy and we shudder at it. When Tom Jones appears to have discovered that he has done the same thing our reaction

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is more like ‘oops!’ though perhaps an edge of ancient horror sharpens our laughter when she turns out not to have been his mother after all.

The tension between the puppet-like simplicity of the characters, the comic complexities of the plot and the projection of the author, and through him the cajoled and flattered and partly invented reader, into the novel itself is maintained through an alert and constantly shifting prose which runs through a range of parodic effects. There is room here for only one example, the introduction of the heroine Sophia Western at the beginning of Book iv. Fielding pauses, before ushering her in, to deliver a little lecture on ‘similes, descriptions, and other kind of poetical embellishments’, which serve the same purpose as civic processions or fanfares in the theatre, giving an illusion of importance to what follows them.

When I have seen a man strutting in a procession, after others whose business hath been only to walk before him, I have conceived a higher notion of his dignity, than I have felt on seeing him in a common situation.

We are at the back of the puppet-booth being told how the next trick is going to work before Fielding rolls up his sleeves and begins:

And now, without any further preface, we proceed to our next chapter.

Chapter 2

*A short Hint of what we can do in the Sublime, and
a Description of Miss Sophia Western*

Hushed be every ruder breath. May the heathen ruler of the winds confine in iron chains the boisterous limbs of noisy Boreas, and the sharp-pointed nose of bitter-biting Eurus. Do thou, sweet Zephyrus, rising from thy fragrant bed, mount the western sky, and lead on those delicious gales, the charms of which call forth the lovely Flora from her chamber, perfumed with pearly dews, when on the first of June, her birthday, the blooming maid, in loose attire, gently trips it over the verdant mead, where every flower rises to do her homage, ’til the whole field becomes enamelled, and colours contend with sweets which shall ravish her most.

So charming may she now appear; and you the feather’d choristers of nature, whose sweetest notes not even Handel can excel, tune your melodious throats, to celebrate her appearance.

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Mock-sublime gives way to mock-realism when Sophia is finally described:

Sophia then, the only daughter of Mr Western, was a middle-sized woman; but rather inclining to tall.

However, that deflating first sentence is followed by a detailed account of her beauties, barely tempered by minor criticisms and embellished by quotations from Suckling and Donne. By the time we reach the description of her breasts (which Fielding refuses to mention by name for fear of making his puppet blush) and learn that:

Here was whiteness which no lillies, ivory, nor alabaster could match. The finest cambric might indeed be supposed from envy to cover that bosom, which was much whiter than itself

we are back in the eulogizing world of the Elizabethan sonneteers, and Fielding has pulled off his trick. He has ushered in his heroine with 'poetical embellishments' and induced us to swallow them in spite of being forewarned; and now, after making the essential fairy-tale point that Sophia is as good as she is beautiful, he can put her back in the puppet-booth and let the show go on.

Fielding, it will be clear by now, is one of the riddling and dazzling writers, though his art is presented as artlessness; Richardson, though his greatest novel, *Clarissa*, is even more of a technical *tour de force* than *Tom Jones*, writes under the compulsion of his subject-matter. His first novel, *Pamela*, the story of a virtuous servant-girl who turns the tables on the master, who imprisons and attempts to seduce her, by ending up as his wife, is trivialized by the drive of the novel as a genre towards the happy ending. It was the urge to expose what he saw as Pamela's hypocrisy which led Fielding to write first *Shamela* and then *Joseph Andrews*, and so to become a novelist; and the lesson of *Shamela* was not lost on Richardson. In *Clarissa* he retells the story of Pamela and makes of it the first great tragic novel to be written in the English language.

This is a novel as unlike *Tom Jones* as can well be imagined. It consists of a long-drawn-out and terrifying duel between a

clever, rather priggish but essentially inexperienced girl and a compulsive seducer who becomes obsessed by the challenge she presents as the one woman he is unable to subdue and thus unable to leave. The pressure of this obsession builds up in Lovelace to the point where he drugs Clarissa and then rapes her in front of the prostitutes in the brothel where he has imprisoned her, only to find that, possessing her in this way, he has not possessed her at all. He has broken the girl herself without breaking the thing that opposes him – her will. She escapes him irrevocably into death and he is left raving of how he has loved her, the ‘pearl of great price’ for whom he has paid so much.

Her dear heart and a lock of her hair I will have, let who will be the gainsayers! For is she not mine? Whose else can she be? She has no father nor mother, no sister, no brother; no relations but me. And my beloved is mine; and I am hers: and that’s enough – but oh!

She’s out! The damp of death has quench’d
her quite!

Those spicy doors, her lips, are shut, close
lock’d,

Which never gale of life shall open more! (letter 497)

Where Fielding’s characters were free to ramble and pursue each other across England, meeting with picaresque adventures on the way, Richardson forces Clarissa into narrower and narrower confinements until all that is left to her is a coffin. It is an airless and claustrophobic world he conjures up, all the more so as the protagonists here are not puppets but fully developed and psychologically complex human beings trapped in a situation whose inexorable logic drives them always deeper in until they reach the smallest box of all at the centre of the maze. The means Richardson uses to achieve this effect are curious ones to the modern reader. It will be obvious by now that *Clarissa*, despite its interest in the morality of the contemporary bourgeoisie, owes more to Shakespearian tragedy than it does to Restoration comedy, but its technique derives from a more primitive form of the novel itself, the fiction-as-documentary of Defoe, who presented Moll Flanders and

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Robinson Crusoe to his readers as real-life case-histories. What Richardson gives us is the documents in the case, in the form of two voluminous collections of letters, one between Clarissa and her feminist friend Anna Howe and the other between Lovelace and his crony Belford, a more shrinking rake and eventually a repentant one. This handing over of the task of writing the novel to the characters themselves has several important consequences. Since we always learn of events just after they have happened, the novel gains a kind of retarded immediacy which helps to build up our anxiety for the heroine and which also adds a marvellously unexpected *frisson* to the description of Clarissa's death-bed as we suddenly realize that even as we seem to watch her dying she is already dead. It goes without saying that we gain a detailed insight into the minds of the characters; more important is the sense, illusory but powerful, that we have direct access to those minds. Richardson's technique makes him invisible, and the apparent absence of a controlling author pulling the strings makes the unstoppable nature of the tragedy more appalling, though it also left Richardson with no recourse but anxious footnotes when the earliest readers, failing to recognize the psychotic nature of Lovelace's obsession, persisted in falling in love with him.

As with Fielding's method in *Tom Jones*, the success of *Clarissa* depends on the richness and variety of the language, though here that language is mimetic, like the language of the playwright who must persuade us that it is not Shakespeare but Iago or Desdemona who speaks. Again there is space for only one example. Here, Clarissa, crazy with the after-effect of the drug and the discovery that she has been raped, writes piteously to Lovelace:

Oh Lovelace! if you could be sorry for yourself, I would be sorry too – but when all my doors are fast, and nothing but the keyhole open, and the key of late put into that, to be where you are, in a manner without opening any of them – O wretched, wretched Clarissa Harlowe!

For I never will be Lovelace – let my uncle take it as he pleases.

Well, but now I remember what I was going to say ...

Alas! you have killed my head among you – I don't say who did it

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– God forgive you all! – But had it not been better to have put me out of all your ways at once? You might safely have done it! For nobody would require me at your hands – no, not a soul – except, indeed, Miss Howe would have said, when she should see you, What, Lovelace, have you done with Clarissa Harlowe? And then you could have given any slight gay answer – Sent her beyond sea; or, She has run away from me as she did from her parents. And this would have been easily credited; for you know, Lovelace, she that could run away from *them*, might very well run away from *you*.

But this is nothing to what I wanted to say. (letter 261.1)

This is prose of an almost Shakespearian subtlety, very different from the passage we examined from *Tom Jones* where the language had a fine comic sweep which aimed at bold and sharply contrasted effects. The Freudian imagery with which Clarissa gropes, in her drug-induced confusion, towards the almost ungraspable horror of sexual violation,

but when all my doors are fast, and nothing but the keyhole open, and the key of late put into that...

the equation of rape with murder in the double connotations of that haunting question, ‘What, Lovelace, have you done with Clarissa Harlowe?’ the echo of *Othello* (‘She has deceived her father, and may thee’) which establishes Clarissa as a modern Desdemona, are all achieved without any sacrifice of naturalness. We feel as we read that it is not the conscious mind of Richardson but the subconscious mind of Clarissa herself which is making these connections and allusions. It will be evident by now that it is from Clarissa Harlowe and not from Sophia Western that Isabel Archer and Milly Theale take their descent.

This contrast between possible models, the comic novel with its obtrusive author manipulating his cast of puppets and the tragic novel with its apparently absent author superseded by his characters, presented the novelists of the nineteenth century with a challenge and a choice. (I am here omitting Sterne, who was one of the ancestors of modernism and whose methods and inventions were only really taken up again at the start of the present century.) There was a challenge, too, in what these earlier novelists failed to do. Fielding and Richardson were

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alike in writing big discursive novels with no very tight organizing principle; Fielding because he wanted to preserve the spontaneity and freedom of the picaresque narrative, Richardson because of the scope the epistolary method gave him for minutely detailed investigations into the psychology of his characters, but also both of them because the idea of a tightly organized novel had not yet been invented. The development of a narrative technique which combined a new degree of formal control with a flawless appearance of naturalism was the striking achievement of Jane Austen, though it was an achievement bought at a price which makes her work something of a cul-de-sac in the history of the English novel. Where her immediate predecessors Fanny Burney and Maria Edgeworth had felt free to draw on a range of human experience wide enough to include blackmail, suicide, abduction, lesbianism and breast cancer, Jane Austen can admit no material more dangerous than accidents, elopements, misunderstandings and unfulfilled bad intentions. She submits so completely to the tendency in the novel to seek the happy ending that she can even use its inevitability to tease her readers:

The anxiety, which in this state of their attachment must be the portion of Henry and Catherine, and of all who loved either, as to its final event, can hardly extend, I fear, to the bosom of my readers, who will see in the tell-tale compression of the pages before them, that we are all hastening together to perfect felicity.

(*Northanger Abbey* ch. 16)

Though that sentence in itself is enough to display Jane Austen, despite the narrow compass of her material, as a highly sophisticated writer, she does not demand an answering sophistication in her readers, providing as she does a homogeneous moral universe in which we are unobtrusively guided to the correct solution to all moral problems – Emma is wrong to be rude to Miss Bates; Fanny Price is right to refuse Henry Crawford; Anne Elliot, tricky case, was correct to follow Lady Russell's advice to break off her engagement, but Lady Russell was injudicious in offering it. This deftly unobtrusive provision

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of an internally consistent world full, as the real world is not, of moral certainties may at least partly explain the appeal of her novels to people who do not otherwise read imaginative literature at all, like the First World War soldiers in Kipling's short story 'The Jancites' whose shared game of joking references to the novels opposes a fragile barrier of civilization to the nightmare actuality which surrounds them and in which most of them eventually die. 'There's no one to touch Jane when you're in a tight place', exclaims one of them at the end of the tale. 'Gawd bless 'er, whoever she was.'

Jane Austen, in other words, is not a difficult writer – or not until we pause to consider how she brings off her effects. For Henry James, in whose later novels those confident moral values of *Highbury* and *Mansfield Park* shimmer and disintegrate, the notion that 'the tell-tale compression of the pages' must promise the arrival of 'perfect felicity' is one he strains at in *The Europeans* and has already completely subverted by the time he writes *Washington Square*, almost an anti-version of *Persuasion* with the exemplary patience of the heroine rewarded only with a final twist of the knife. James's business with Jane Austen (or rather, with an idea of the novel of which her work is the crystallization) is finished early, leaving him to take up more directly the challenge offered by those great Victorian successors to Fielding and Richardson, Dickens and George Eliot.

Dickens, like Fielding, is the novelist as puppet-master. Once again we have the wide-ranging, capacious narrative controlled and dominated by the distinctive voice of the author, once again we have the cast of marionettes; but where Fielding's puppets were stereotypes – the ne'er-do-well with a heart of gold, the sanctimonious hypocrite, the beautiful young girl – Dickens's puppets are grotesques. The Sophia-figure is still there but she has become a pallid wax doll, Florence Dombey or Ada Clare, whose human proportions make her look almost like a freak among the misshapen creatures that surround her. The wide landscapes of Fielding's England are still there, but they have become shrouded and ominous. Fog in the streets of London, mist on the Essex marshes, smoke from the factory