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Novels and Moral Knowledge: Henry James
Evaluating Guy de Maupassant

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ABSTRACT. Jacques Bouveresse in *La Connaissance de l'écrivain* (2008) addresses the question of whether literature (novels in particular) can provide moral knowledge and of what kind. He proposes three theses: 1) that literature can serve the cause of moral truth by combating moral idealism, 2) that the reader's aesthetic experience is a characteristic contribution to moral knowledge of literature, and 3) that the power of this value for moral knowledge lies in the inseparability of form and content in novels. My aim in this paper is to focus on one of the examples that Bouveresse mentions in his book: Henry James's evaluation of Guy de Maupassant's literature, which is an ambiguous mixture of admiration and reproach. The partial objectives of my argument are: 1) to show that James's criticism of Maupassant is based, among other things, on his not being able to recognize in Maupassant's work a non-reflective form of struggle against what Bouveresse calls "moral idealism", 2) to show that Maupassant's diatribe against realist writers (as "illusionists") is contradictory to the true character of his literature, and 3) to show that the experiential role played by "negativity" in Maupassant's work is the same role as played by the reader's involvement through the array of "possibilities" in James's work, in order to build a "perspective" (Donnelly) for the reader through the appropriate form-content warp.

Jacques Bouveresse in *La Connaissance de l'écrivain* (2008) addresses the question of whether literature (novels in particular) can provide moral knowledge and of what kind, entering into a discussion with the answers of Nussbaum, Pippin, Diamond, Lamarque & Olsen, etc. about it. I will start underlining three theses proposed by Bouveresse in his book. The first thesis is that

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"the best way in which literature can serve the cause of moral truth is by combating moral lies par excellence, in other words, moral idealism"⁵⁴ (Bouveresse, 2008, 137). The second thesis is that novels are not simple mental experiments, but rather that they entail an aesthetic experience for the reader, and that their characteristic contribution to moral knowledge is based on this feature. The third thesis is that the power of this value for moral knowledge lies in the inseparability of form and content in novels.

My aim in this paper is to focus on one of the examples that Bouveresse mentions in his book and that has always intrigued me personally: Henry James's evaluation of Guy de Maupassant's literature, which is an ambiguous mixture of admiration and reproach. James admires Maupassant's "prodigy" of writing, but he reproaches him for his "alarming" negativity, in terms of his characters' lack of moral reflection and a certain delight in the "vile, petty and sordid". James's opinion of Maupassant is already intuitively explicable from James's own mood (of his taste, his personal world, his *Weltanschauung*) as opposed to Maupassant's mood. But I think that this opinion can also be explained in terms of Bouveresse's theses, delving a little deeper into the brief reflections that Bouveresse himself offers about them in his book.

The development of my argument pursues various partial objectives:

- 1) to show that James's criticism of Maupassant is based, among other things, on his not being able to recognize in Maupassant's work another form (a non-reflective form) of struggle against what Bouveresse calls "moral idealism";
- 2) to show that Maupassant's "bad doctrine" (Bouveresse says) in his diatribe against realist writers, according to which "good realists would rather be illusionists" and based on an apparently superficial perceptivism, is contradictory to the true character of his literature, which confirms Bouveresse's thesis that "Maupassant's literature is better than his bad doctrine";
- 3) to show that the experiential role ("perspective") played by "negativity" in Maupassant's work is the same role as played by the reader's involvement through the array of "possibilities" in James's work; to show that Maupassant's "illusion"

⁵⁴ My translation, also in the following quotations of that text.

is precisely literature (or even good literature), that is, a writer's ability to build a "perspective" (Donnelly) for the reader through the appropriate form-content warp.

1.

Let us go along with the first objective which is related to the first of Bouveresse's theses. Bouveresse relies on Musil to define "moral idealism" in that way: "the idealistic exploitation of names [Shakespeare, Goethe] and mythical concepts [homeland, people's health, honesty, rigour]" as "adherence to what is presented as an 'ideal' but would not actually correspond to anything of what is actually the case and what is done" (Bouveresse, 2008, 138). Well then, Bouveresse says that

It is possible that due to lack of attention to the complexity of moral life or because its means are not adapted to its representation, moral philosophy, or especially moral idealism, are condemned to enunciate as lies some truths that literature is in a position to express adequately. (Bouveresse, 2008, p. 138).

Nevertheless, literature is not exempt from moral idealism. In Musil's terms:

A reasonable censorship should not have immoral writings under surveillance, but rather moral ones. [...] In my opinion, the virtue of a writer such as Hesse [Hermann Hesse] is a corpse of that kind, and there the leaving virtue becomes not less complicated and incomprehensible than the perversity.⁵⁵ (Musil, 1992, p. 1)

James himself does not hesitate in order to condemn, to a certain extent, the Anglo-Saxon prudishness, guided by morality, when Anglo-Saxon critics come to criticize the "dark" Maupassant's writings:

Nothing is more striking to an Anglo-Saxon reader than the omission of all other lights, those with which our imagination, and I think it ought to be said our observation, is familiar [...]. No doubt there is in our literature an immense amount of conventional blinking, and it may be questioned

⁵⁵ My translation.

whether pessimistic representation in M. de Maupassant's manner do not follow his particular original more closely than our perpetual quest of pleasantness (does not Mr. Rider Haggard make even his African carnage pleasant?) adheres to the lines of the world we ourselves know.

[James refers here to Rider Haggard, the author of Allan Quatermain's stories.] (James, 1019, p. 272)

2.

Maupassant attacks Realist writers by means of a strange formula. He says that

talented Realists ought to be called rather 'Illusionists'⁵⁶ (Maupassant, 1984, p. 23).

The main reason is, for Maupassant, that the aim consisting of "describing things", as Realists aspire to, runs into the fact that

to each of us, the truth is in his own mind, his own organs. [...] All the great artists are those who can make other men see their own particular illusion⁵⁷ (Maupassant, 1984, p. 24).

Even so, Bouveresse underlines the contradictory consequences of such a literary theory inasmuch as our personal way of seeing the world becomes our own illusion which seems to collide with the possibility of making and sharing a true representation of the world. Despite that, Bouveresse (Bouveresse, 2008, p. 45), following James' diagnosis, finds Maupassant's literature better than his bad doctrine, a doctrine which can be called "superficial perceptivism". In fact, Maupassant leans on the presumed relativism of senses and the subjectivity of sensory experiences in order to state that there are as so many real things as there are particular men. But, as Bouveresse remarks, even accepting that our information about the world comes down to what our senses provide us with, we would not be obliged to conclude that our knowledge about the world is deprived of all kinds of objective content.

3.

⁵⁶ My translation.

⁵⁷ My translation.

The fact that Maupassant's literature is better than his bad literary doctrine could be illustrated by means of Maupassant's mastery concerning the use of literary tools in order to build a "perspective" (I am borrowing that term from Maureen Donnelly's theories on literature). Donnelly says that

excellent literature impels the engaged reader to imaginatively transfer perspectival properties from things as they are characterized in his or her own experience to the fictional entities of the literary work. (Donnelly, 2019, p. 11).

Donnelly's "perspective" is "like a grid through which my experience is structured" (Donnelly, 2019, p. 14). Thus, for example, imaginatively engaging in the perspective(s) developed in a literary work such as Zola's "The Flood" implies that

Imagining that an event is unfolding and horrific only requires that I imagine that it is characterized by the perspectival properties events have when they are unfolding and horrific from my own perspective. (Donnelly, 2019, p. 15).

Referring to Louis, the main character of "The Flood", "I have no problem understanding this character's perspective and respecting the motivations behind his decision to remain on his farm" (Donnelly, 2019, p. 18), even though engaging with the perspective of the text does not imply at all having (or having had) an experience similar to the experience of, or endorsing the perspective of, the character; often "we must to learn to temporally set important aspects of our own perspectives on hold" (Donnelly, 2019, p. 19).

Let us choose some examples from Maupassant's short stories. Nested stories and symbolic objects are used by Maupassant very often as narrative strategies purposed to involve the reader in even very extreme situations and characters. In *Châli*,

Admiral de la Vallee, who seemed to be half asleep in his armchair, said in a voice which sounded like an old woman's:

"I had a very singular little love adventure once; would you like to hear it?"

He spoke from the depths of his great chair, with that everlasting dry, wrinkled smile on his lips, that smile *à la Voltaire*, which made people take him for a terrible skeptic. (Maupassant, 1909, p. 117)

And his “little love adventure” turns out to be the very tragic love of a child in the harem of an Indian Raja, finally punished with the execution of the child, Châli, and the confession that he has “never loved any woman but Châli”.

Let us examine an example of the use of symbolic objects and spaces. Very often, the spaces are charged by Maupassant with human characteristics, bringing the reader closer to the perspective of a character or of an act or event, even when it comes to a character carrying out horrible actions or there is a case of awful events. Maupassant does not always succeed, and it is even likely that often, in many of his shorter stories, Maupassant simply wants to leave the reader on the threshold of a story that is nothing more than a far-fetched and shocking journalistic chronicle. I think that this is not the case in *Little Louise Roque (La petite Roque)*. A postman discovers the corpse of a girl in the forest. It is suspected that the murderer is someone local, but they cannot find him. The mayor of the town is distressed: he raped and murdered the girl by a sensual impulse driven by her widowhood and his brutal character. Maupassant describes the fall of leaves in the grove, owned by the mayor, where the crime was committed:

And the almost elusive whisper, the floating, incessant, sweet and sad murmur of this fall, seemed a moan, and those leaves still falling, seemed tears, great tears shed by the great sad trees that wept day and night over the end of the year, on the end of the warm dawns and soft twilight, on the end of the warm breezes and clear suns, and also perhaps on the crime they had seen committed under their shadow, on the child raped and killed at their feet. They wept in the silence of the deserted and empty grove, of the abandoned and dreaded grove, where alone, the soul, the little soul of the little dead girl, must wander.⁵⁸

⁵⁸ My translation from the French original: “Et le murmure presque insaisissable, le murmure flottant, incessant, doux et triste de cette chute, semblait une plainte, et ces feuilles tombant toujours, semblaient des larmes, de grandes larmes versées par les grands arbres tristes qui pleuraient jour et nuit sur la fin de l'année, sur la fin des aurores tièdes et des doux crépuscules, sur la fin des brises chaudes et des clairs soleils, et aussi peut-être sur le crime qu'ils avaient vu commettre sous leur ombre, sur l'enfant violée et tuée à leur pied. Ils pleuraient dans le silence du bois désert et vide, du bois abandonné et redouté, où devait errer, seule, l'âme, la petite âme de la petite morte.” (*Œuvres complètes de Guy de Maupassant*, XVI.divu, Paris: Louis Conard, 1909, p. 33,

Significantly, the grove itself will be the object of a kind of symbolic self-castration, with a suicide attempt, when the mayor orders the grove to be cut down.

It is time to compare, from the outside, the literary procedures of both writers and to evaluate their different strategies to avoid moral idealism (in Bouveresse terms). As we know, James criticizes the lack of moral reflection in Maupassant's characters:

M. de Maupassant has simply skipped the whole reflective part of his men and women -that reflective part which governs conduct and produces character. (James, 1919, p. 285)

Henry James shows that literary complexity through the deployment of possibilities in the moral reflection of the complex psychology of his characters, and also in the difficult balance between principles, affections, judgments, decisions, and actions that his characters face⁵⁹. Maupassant does it in a very different way: through the role of instincts, of social condition, of the characters' motivations in stories that strike the reader because of their crudeness, their brutality, or their sarcasm. These stories are elaborated literarily in a more sophisticated style than it might at first seem, through the symbolic use of objects or of descriptions of nature, the management of narrative perspectival strategies (nested stories, for example), etc. In other words: James does not fall into "moral idealism" because he is able to express literarily the complexity, that is a high grade of indetermination which may be found, for example, in the open ending of their novels demanding that the reader reach his own conclusion regarding the complex moral shape of their characters. Maupassant avoids "moral idealism" literarily through a different kind of complexity: that of instinct, drive, desire, and their phantasms, but also of through their interaction with social determinations.

Basically, James sees Maupassant's moral anti-idealism, although he is torn between admiration for that mixture of impeccable licentiousness which is so French, and a brutality, a

https://fr.wikisource.org/wiki/Page:%C5%92uvres_compil%C3%A8tes_de_Guy_de_Maupassant,_XVI.djvu/43, accessed 30/05/2021). The passage has been misconstrued in the most common English translation (by Albert M.C Mac master B.A, A.E. Henderson, B.A., Mme. Quesada & Others).

⁵⁹ I have defended the role of possibilities in James literature in Rubio Marco, Salvador: "Imagination, Possibilities and Aspects in Literary Fiction", in Vaughan, C. & Vidmar, I. (eds.) *Proceedings of the European Society for Aesthetics*, vol. 11, 2019, pp. 506-521, <http://www.eurosa.org/wpcontent/uploads/ESA-Proc-11-2019-Rubio-Marco-2019.pdf> (accessed 31/05/2021) and Rubio Marco, Salvador: "Aesthetic Values, Engaging Perspectives, and Possibilities in Literature", in Moura, V. & Vaughan, C. (eds.) *Proceedings of the European Society for Aesthetics*, vol. 12, 2020, pp.122-152. http://www.eurosa.org/wp-content/uploads/2020-Rubio_ESA.pdf (accessed 31/05/2021).

cynical streak, and pessimism that repel him. He says, concerning the short story *L'héritage* (*The Legacy*): “The story is a model of narration, but it leaves our poor average humanity dangling like a beaten rag.” (James, 1919, p. 291)

As shown before, Maupassant defends himself against the literary critics of his time by displaying a radical perceptivist subjectivism (internalist and relativist, by force at the end) that contradicts its own literary “communicability”. Furthermore, beyond Maupassant’s bad doctrine, there is an evident way to “make other men see their own particular illusion”, following Maupassant’s own definition of “illusion”, and that way it could be called simply “literature” (or better, “good literature”). Because good literature is successful in providing a “perspective”. Properly sharing the adventure of the characters involves, for Donnelly, “to grasp enough of their perspectives to see that their values, goals, knowledge, and so on have the right sort of structure to support their actions” (Donnelly, 2019, p. 19). Bouveresse insists on the difference between novels and mental experiments, and one crucial element of that difference is precisely the work on that ability to build a perspective, and the moral consequences of such a work. A good novel is, then, much more than a philosophical mental experiment. Another way to explain what makes good literature lies in underlying the intimate link between form and content. The fact that both Maupassant and James avoid moral idealism (even in two very different ways) is a good test to show how both writers are able to overcome the mere content by means of a specific elaboration of literary form. Even though, to speak of “mere content” implies already a certain degree of compromise with moral idealism as far as moral idealism is a kind of “contentism” that ignores that the actual resulting content cannot be anything other than a mixture of form and content. (And the philosophical problem takes on here a fractal appearance).

Finally, we are now in a good position to assess some conclusions attempting to validate Bouveresse’s thesis alluded to previously by means of its application to the case of the James-Maupassant relationship, and, in turn, providing a better understanding of James’s assessment of Maupassant from the view of Bouveresse’s theoretical position.

Ultimately, those conclusions are intended to be:

- 1) that both the literature of James and Maupassant can be understood as forms of combat against moral idealism (in the sense proposed by Bouveresse-Musil);

- 2) that the success of the building of a “perspective” (Donnelly) through very different narrative strategies (in both James’s and Maupassant’s works) is the key to the functioning of texts as aesthetic experiences for the reader (rather than mere thought experiments); and
- 3) that the value of the moral knowledge of these works lies precisely in the peculiar link between narrative form and narrative content, which is at the heart of the literary way of building James’s and Maupassant’s literary styles in each case.

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