

THE ART OF FICTION

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The Art of Fiction by Henry James

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HENRY JAMES

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OF FICTION**

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WALTER BESANT 1806-1877

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ART OF FICTION

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1885

THE ART OF FICTION:

A LECTURE

DELIVERED AT THE ROYAL INSTITUTION, APRIL 25, 1884.

I DESIRE, this evening, to consider Fiction as one of the Fine Arts. In order to do this, and before doing it, I have first to advance certain propositions. They are not new, they are not likely to be disputed, and yet they have never been so generally received as to form part, so to speak, of the national mind. These propositions are three, though the last two directly spring from the first. They are:—

1. That Fiction is an Art in every way worthy to be called the sister and the equal of the Arts of Painting, Sculpture, Music, and Poetry; that is to say, her field is as boundless, her possibilities as vast, her excellences as worthy of admiration, as may be claimed for any of her sister Arts.

2. That it is an Art which, like them, is governed and directed by general laws; and that these laws may be laid down and taught with as much precision and exactness as the laws of harmony, perspective, and proportion.

3. That, like the other Fine Arts, Fiction is so far removed from the mere mechanical arts, that

no laws or rules whatever can teach it to those who have not already been endowed with the natural and necessary gifts.

These are the three propositions which I have to discuss. It follows as a corollary and evident deduction that, these propositions once admitted, those who follow and profess the Art of Fiction must be recognized as artists, in the strictest sense of the word, just as much as those who have delighted and elevated mankind by music and painting; and that the great Masters of Fiction must be placed on the same level as the great Masters in the other Arts. In other words, I mean that where the highest point, or what seems the highest point, possible in this Art is touched, the man who has reached it is one of the world's greatest men.

I cannot suppose that there are any in this room who would refuse to admit these propositions; on the contrary, they will seem to most here self-evident; yet the application of theory to practice, of principle to persons, may be more difficult. For instance, so boundless is the admiration for great Masters such as Raphael or Mozart, that if one were to propose that Thackeray should be placed beside them, on the same level, and as an equal, there would be felt by most a certain shock. I am not suggesting that the art of Thackeray is to be compared with that of Raphael, or that there is any similarity in the work of the two men; I only say that, Fiction being one Art, and Painting another and a sister Art,

those who attain the highest possible distinction in either are equal.

Let us, however, go outside this room, among the multitudes by whom a novelist has never been considered an artist at all. To them the claim that a great novelist should be considered to occupy the same level as a great musician, a great painter, or a great poet, would appear at first a thing ludicrous and even painful. Consider for a moment how the world at large regards the novelist. He is, in their eyes, a person who tells stories, just as they used to regard the actor as a man who tumbled on the stage to make the audience laugh, and a musician as a man who fiddled to make the people dance. This is the old way of thinking, and most people think first as they have been taught to think; and next as they see others think. It is therefore quite easy to understand why the art of novel-writing has always been, by the general mass, undervalued. First, while the leaders in every other branch of Art, in every department of Science, and in every kind of profession, receive their share of the ordinary national distinctions, no one ever hears of honors being bestowed upon novelists. Neither Thackeray nor Dickens was ever, so far as I know, offered a Peerage; neither King, Queen, nor Prince in any country throughout the whole world takes the least notice of them. I do not say they would be any the better for this kind of recognition, but its absence clearly proves, to those who take their

opinions from others, that they are not a class at all worthy of special honor. Then again, in the modern craze which exists for every kind of art—so that we meet everywhere, in every household, amateur actors, painters, etchers, sculptors, modellers, musicians, and singers, all of them serious and earnest in their aims—amateur novelists alone regard their Art as one which is learned by intuition. Thirdly, novelists are not associated as are painters; they hold no annual exhibitions, dinners, or conversazioni; they put no letters after their name; they have no President or Academy; and they do not themselves seem desirous of being treated as followers of a special Art. I do not say that they are wrong, or that much would be gained for Art if all the novelists of England were invited to Court and created into a Royal Academy. But I do say that for these three reasons it is easy to understand how the world at large does not even suspect that the writing of novels is one of the Fine Arts, and why they regard the story-teller with a sort of contempt. It is, I acknowledge, a kindly contempt—even an affectionate contempt; it is the contempt which the practical man feels for the dreamer, the strong man for the weak, the man who can do for the man who can only look on and talk.

The general—the Philistine—view of the Profession is, first of all, that it is not one which a scholar and a man of serious views should take up: the telling of stories is inconsistent with a well-

balanced mind; to be a teller of stories disqualifies one from a hearing on important subjects. At this very day there are thousands of living people who will never understand how the author of "Coningsby" and "Vivian Grey" can possibly be regarded as a serious statesman—all the Disraeli literature, even to the comic cartoons, expresses the popular sentiment that a novelist must not presume to call himself a statesman: the intellect of a novelist, it is felt, if he have any intellect at all, which is doubtful, must be one of the most frivolous and lightest kind; how can a man whose mind is always full of the loves of Corydon and Amaryllis be trusted to form an opinion on practical matters? When Thackeray ventured to contest the city of Oxford, we know what happened. He thought his failure was because the people of Oxford had never even heard of him; I think otherwise. I think it was because it was whispered from house to house and was carried from shop to shop, and was mentioned in the vestry, that this fellow from London, who asked for their votes, was nothing but a common novelist.

With these people must not be confounded another class, not so large, who are prepared to admit that Fiction is in some qualified sense an Art; but they do this as a concession to the vanity of its followers, and are by no means prepared to allow that it is an Art of the first rank. How can that be an Art, they might ask, which has no

lecturers or teachers, no school or college or Academy, no recognized rules, no text-books, and is not taught in any University? Even the German Universities, which teach everything else, do not have Professors of Fiction, and not one single novelist, so far as I know, has ever pretended to teach his mystery, or spoken of it as a thing which may be taught. Clearly, therefore, they would go on to argue, such art as is required for the making and telling of a story can and must be mastered without study, because no materials exist for the student's use. It may even, perhaps, be acquired unconsciously or by imitation. This view, I am sorry to say, largely prevails among the majority of those who try their chance in the field of fiction. Anyone, they think, can write a novel; therefore, why not sit down and write one? I would not willingly say one word which might discourage those who are attracted to this branch of literature; on the contrary, I would encourage them in every possible way. One desires, however, that they should approach their work at the outset with the same serious and earnest appreciation of its importance and its difficulties with which they undertake the study of music and painting. I would wish, in short, that from the very beginning their minds should be fully possessed with the knowledge that Fiction is an Art, and, like all other Arts, that it is governed by certain laws, methods, and rules, which it is their first business to learn.