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Exile and Expatriation

John Carlos Rowe & Eric Haralson (eds). *A Historical Guide To Henry James.*

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John Carlos Rowe & Eric Haralson (eds). *A Historical Guide To Henry James*. Oxford, Oxford University Press, Historical Guides to American Authors Series, 2012, 271 pages, \$99, ISBN: 9780195121353

- 1 Like all the volumes belonging to the series entitled *The Historical Guides to American Authors*, this collection of critical essays on Henry James is both “interdisciplinary” and “historically sensitive,” and combines close attention to one of the most widely read and studied American authors with a “strong sense of time, place, and history,” and a focus on issues that can still be considered as contemporary. It is indeed tantalizing to realize, as the co-editors write, that “James’s popularity is once more ascending” in spite of the fact that he definitely belongs to “a very different world and universe of discourse” (2). Events in James’s fiction “take too long to transpire for our contemporary world, where action is required”; for example, today’s Isabel Archer (*The Portrait of a Lady*) “would file promptly for a divorce from Osmond on grounds of incompatibility,” and Mrs Grose the housekeeper (“The Turn of the Screw”) “would call the authorities to have the governess committed or have the trespassers arrested” (3). Even the best film adaptations often seem artificial and anachronistic. So why read James at all?
- 2 The present collection of essays intends to demonstrate that in spite of the apparent anachronism of both social background and ethical context—not to forget the intricacies of style and language—Henry James is still being read because he remains “historically important”; he struggles with problems that are still pertinent nowadays,

like class, gender and sexual issues. Even if the formulations and solutions to these problems seem to be outdated, they help us understand “the genealogy of these issues” (4). Kendall Johnson’s biographical essay insists on the double cultural affiliation of an American-born expatriate who still thought of his origins as American but also embodied the first modern international cosmopolitan in the American literary heritage. Johnson skillfully reassesses the ambiguities “successive generations of biographers have struggled to understand,” notably about James’s sexuality, sense of national affiliation, class politics and racial prejudice. The main source of disagreement remains the interpretation of the accident the author enigmatically described as his “obscure hurt” (4). The ambiguity of James’s autobiographical account has undoubtedly “captured the imagination” of generations of literary biographers and scholars, but “to what degree James matched his intellectual and emotional intimacy to sexually physical affection remains an open question” (25). The interpretation of *The American Scene* and stories like “The Jolly Corner” as emblems of James’s ambivalence regarding racial and class prejudice constitutes another moot point. Kendall Johnson convincingly argues that the “self-critical tone” of *The American Scene* is very different, for example, from the tenor of a book like Paul Bourget’s *Outre-Mer: Notes sur l’Amérique* (1894)—“an embittered admonishment about the putative threats of race mixing” (41). Martha Banta (“Henry James and the true woman”) analyzes the incompatibilities between women’s rights activism on both sides of the Atlantic and what she describes as “the Jamesian donnée”—a focus of the essentially apolitical power of the individual spirit. If James was “passionately interested in a woman’s wish to control her own destiny” (82), he remained skeptical about the possibilities for social betterment and the success of collective action. For Martha Banta, James’s “imagination of disaster” was incompatible with the faith and optimism activism requires. “The poster-perfect New Woman had to believe her strivings would bear fruit, and in 1914 she staked her faith that history was on her side” (83). As for James, he discovered, once again, “that history is the great betrayer” (83). Stuart Culver (“Objects and Images”) reinterprets James’s ambiguous position towards the New Media. If the novelist fundamentally resented the pictorial, which he considered as detrimental to the language of fiction, he was also fully aware of the necessities of mediatization and accessibility. Stuart Culver argues that James “did not retreat from but became critically engaged with popular literary forms and new technologies” (97). He also offers an interesting analysis of the author’s exchanges with the photograph Alvin Langdon Coburn concerning the volumes of the New York Edition; their fruitful collaboration revealed “both a rethinking of photography and a reevaluation of Impressionist aesthetics” (115). Sara Blair (“Henry James, Race, and Empire”) tackles several topics associated with the notion of “empire-building”—the nation’s mission, imperial expansion, geopolitics, race, gender—and insists on the ironical treatment of those themes both in James’s fiction (*What Maisie Knew*) and non fiction (*The American Scene*). If James himself can sometimes be considered as “trading” on racist iconographies, “the ultimate effect of his doing so, however, is not a reassertion of the supremacy of whiteness or Anglo-Saxondom, but rather a calling of both into account” (140). Eric Haralson (“Henry James and Changing Ideas about Sexuality”) situates James’s “artistic prime” in the historical context of an “epistemic shift in Western societies” associated with “new sexual mythologies” (171). Like Kendall Johnson, he expresses reservations about “gay James” and insists on the “methodological risk” run by biographers and literary critics when they tend to establish a “deterministic equation” between author and character,

as well as between sexuality and artistic creativity. He also skillfully demonstrates that James's writings are better characterized as "queer" and "work to queer the repressive premises of modern culture" (188). For John Carlos Rowe ("Henry James in a New Century"), James has been extensively commodified in the context of postmodernism and contemporary globalization by "the academic and mass media veneration of his genius" (215). He would not be at home in our globalized world "but he helps us understand it" (216).

- 3 The present volume, which also provides an illustrated chronology as well as a substantial bibliographical essay, constitutes an excellent primer to the author's fiction. Skilled readers and scholars will also find food for thought with the six essays and their judicious re-readings of fundamental Jamesian issues. The only negative point worth mentioning is that the focus on the American background tends to minimize the impact of the cross-cultural contexts in which the expatriate writer has also been read. It might have been worthwhile to include a few suggestions for further reading in the bibliographical essay, notably on the question of the cosmopolitan dimension and international reception of Henry James's work.

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