

The Theoretical Dimensions of
Henry James

J · O · H · N · C · A · R · L · O · S · R · O · W · E



The Theoretical
Dimensions of
Henry James

**The Wisconsin Project
on American Writers**

A series edited by
Frank Lentricchia

*In Defense of Winters: The Poetry
and Prose of Yvor Winters*
by Terry Comito

*A Poetry of Presence: The Writing
of William Carlos Williams*
by Bernard Duffey

*"A White Heron" and the Question
of Minor Literature*
by Louis A. Renza

*The Theoretical Dimensions
of Henry James*
by John Carlos Rowe

The Theoretical
Dimensions of
**Henry
James**

John Carlos Rowe

The University of Wisconsin Press

Published 1984

The University of Wisconsin Press
114 North Murray Street
Madison, Wisconsin 53715

The University of Wisconsin Press, Ltd.
1 Gower Street
London WC1E 6HA, England

Copyright © 1984
The Board of Regents of the University of Wisconsin System
All rights reserved

Printings 1984, 1985

Printed in the United States of America

Designed by Richard Hendel

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data
Rowe, John Carlos.

The theoretical dimensions of Henry James.
(The Wisconsin project on American writers)
Includes index.

1. James, Henry, 1843-1916—Criticism and interpretation. 2. Influence (Literary, artistic, etc.)
3. Feminism and literature. 4. Psychoanalysis and literature. 5. Communism and literature. 6. Phenomenology and literature. 7. Reader-response criticism.

I. Title. II. Series.

PS2124.R6 1984 813'.4 84-40158

ISBN 0-299-09970-9

ISBN 0-299-09974-1 (pbk.)

For my mother, Gloria Rowe,
who introduced me to the
writings of Henry James

Nevertheless, as a privileged moment of individuation in the history of ideas, knowledge, and literature, or in the history of philosophy and science, the question of the author demands a more direct response. Even now, when we study the history of a concept, a literary genre, or a branch of philosophy, these concerns assume a relatively weak and secondary position in relation to the solid and fundamental role of an author and his works.

— Michel Foucault, “What Is an Author?”

Contents

	Preface xi
CHAPTER 1	Henry James and Modern Criticism: Some Versions of Literary Mastery 3
CHAPTER 2	Literary Influences: 29 Part I: James's <i>Hawthorne</i> and the American Anxiety of Influence 30 Part II: James, Trollope, and the Victorian Anxiety of Influence 58
CHAPTER 3	Feminist Issues: Women, Power, and Rebellion in <i>The Bostonians</i> , <i>The Spoils of Poynton</i> , and <i>The Aspern Papers</i> 85
CHAPTER 4	Psychoanalytical Significances: The Use and Abuse of Uncertainty in <i>The Turn of the Screw</i> 119
CHAPTER 5	Social Values: The Marxist Critique of Mod- ernism and <i>The Princess Casamassima</i> 147
CHAPTER 6	Phenomenological Hermeneutics: Henry James and Literary Impressionism 189
CHAPTER 7	Forms of the Reader's Act: Author and Reader in the Prefaces to the New York Edition 219
	Phantoms 253
	Notes 261
	Index 285

Preface

The Theoretical Dimensions of Henry James addresses the problem of the “single author,” which in its grandest formulation is the problem of the “Master” or of literary mastery. Foucault’s question “What Is an Author?” is central to the humanistic activity of interpretation, insofar as the status of the subject interpreted and interpreting governs any situation involving writing and requiring reading for its use and understanding. This book is also concerned with the power of certain contemporary theories of interpretation, each of which not only has its own conception of the “author” but makes its own bid for authority in the midst of competing claims. Henry James is thus used as a point of reference for exploring the particular claims for authority made by recent theories of literary criticism based on the psychology of influence, feminism, psychoanalysis, Marxism, phenomenology, and reader-response or *Rezeptionstheorie*.

My interest in these theories is integrally related to my commitment to the study of American literature and culture from a comparative perspective that enables us to understand “America” in terms of the international forces shaping modern literature and culture. From this standpoint, Henry James, who is the prototypical modern and American expatriate, is an especially appropriate figure for the study of the impact of contemporary theory on our ideas of the author, American literature, and international modernism. Such literary concerns are also, I think, matters of social and political importance, especially in the study of American history. In the most prevalent of our cultural mythologies, the radical individualism of self-reliant man serves at once to sustain and contradict the social and communal utopianism of American democracy. It is just this sort of cultural paradox that motivates the confusion of literature, politics, and philosophy in the American tradition.

This confusion of disciplines leads me to another important claim this book makes for the study of literature in its social and historical contexts. Although I acknowledge the important functions literature may serve in anatomizing social ills and offering new ideals, I contend that literature also serves the social ideology by giving intellectual and expressive credibility to the norms of that culture. Literature

may often accomplish this work against its will, beyond the “intentions” of its authors or readers, and it is for this very reason that the critical reading of such “service” is all the more pressing. In terms of the peculiarly “American” discrepancy between individual and social man in our cultural mythology and political practice, I argue that the nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century novel in particular has focused on the “education” and “self-consciousness” of its central characters principally to reconcile the contradictions of individual and society. By granting the individual a certain “literary” freedom, which in James is apotheosized in the ultimate “ordeal of consciousness,” these novels have helped disguise and idealize the alienation, fragmentation, and isolation so characteristic of modern life. In this regard, then, the American novel has served a conservational purpose in the American ideology: mystifying and idealizing the material circumstances of our history in the name of art, myth, and symbol. It goes without saying that the criticism established institutionally to celebrate such literary subtlety has served some of the same purposes, even when the individual acts of such criticism have assumed politically liberal and radical means.

In a very specific sense, the issue of the single-author study is important in the revision of the American literary tradition, because it gives us an occasion to evaluate the extent to which literary “heroism” continues to control our historiography and the ways in which the myth of such heroism involves itself in the individualism so central to our cultural reality: from free enterprise capitalism to avant-garde literature. Despite the apparent eclecticism of method in this study, my own approach to the question of James’s “mastery” both as novelist and as American writer is informed principally by Michel Foucault’s understanding of an “author” as a particular formation of discursive practices. As Foucault points out, the old questions concerning an author—“Who is the real author?” and “Have we proof of his authenticity and originality?”—are replaced by new questions once we understand how social conventions shape those discursive practices we take to be a unified “author”:

“What are the modes of existence of this discourse?”

“Where does it come from; how is it circulated; who controls it?”

“What placements are determined for possible subjects?”

“Who can fulfill these diverse functions of the subject?”¹

These are some of the questions asked in the following chapters; they are the organizing principles of this study, since they establish the approximate horizon for the concept of the author as a discursive force with social and textual power: that is, the nexus of “author” and “authority.”

I should point out here that the relation of the theories of interpretation addressed to the subject of Henry James in this book derives its logic from a certain strategy of intertextuality, from what I would term the “germinal” potential of certain crossings of theory and practice, of criticism and art. In some cases, these theories of literature may address the writings or the personality of Henry James as a primary or secondary subject of their own theoretical claims; in other cases, the theorists considered have nothing explicit to say about Henry James. This book is not designed to be a “summary” of recent criticism of Henry James, useful as such a study would be for our understanding of Henry James. This book proposes instead to read the theoretical potential of Henry James. That potential is realized in the act of interpretation and thus could never be “purely” abstracted from some *idea* of “Henry James, the Master.” On the other hand, such actualization is the effect of different forces, and it would be futile to attempt some “assignment” of what I have termed the capacity of literature to germinate, to cause a certain contagion, among the various subjects who do its work: observers, interpreters, scholars, critics, historians. All of us have our different but particular needs for the Author.

Like most books, this one seemed to emerge from the dark, lonely labors of a writer who had severed his ties with the world. Like most books, it is written in a library and culled from pages the writer kept turning in quest of something. In my library there are voices as well as books, because I turn my ear to the conversations I have had with friends and colleagues over the years. Few of them knew that this book had any reality, so some will be surprised to find their names acknowledged here.

The one who did know of the substance of this book is Frank Lentricchia, who has had much to do with its production. His influence on my own work extends far, backward and yet forward, in the best sense of a productive anxiety; that I acknowledge such anxiety is, I think, some measure of its power over me. Next in order of my grati-

tude must be my friends on the editorial staff of the *Henry James Review*, especially Daniel Mark Fogel and Bainard Cowan. They encouraged my work on Henry James by giving me the opportunity and the freedom to explore some of the still-unmapped regions of his country. Carren Kaston, founder and former president of the Henry James Society, contributed much to this book by way of her own interest in my work and her own intelligence regarding Henry James. Leonard Tennenhouse and Nancy Armstrong at Wayne State University also did much to motivate this book, especially in their engaging efforts to provoke the completion of Chapter 6—a chapter much more central to this book than may at first appear.

I acknowledge with thanks permission from the *Henry James Review* to reprint material that first appeared in its pages and now forms part of Chapters 1 and 2, as well as permission from the editors of *Criticism* to reprint as Chapter 6 material that first appeared in their journal. The reproduction of Donald Barthelme's "Henry James, Chief" collage in the first chapter of this study is made with the permission of "Artists' Postcards." My thanks to Ms. Pat Falk for providing copies of the collage for reproduction. I owe special thanks to the staff at the University of Wisconsin Press, who showed special care in copyediting and genuine interest in the subject. Susan Tarcov, who edited the manuscript, deserves particular thanks for what must be judged her substantial contribution to the work's clarity and economy. Allen Fitchen, Director of the Press, has shown the confidence in my work that has motivated me to complete it. I am grateful for his encouragement and for his patience.

As ever I owe much to such enduring friends as Homer Brown, Joseph Riddel, and Edgar Dryden, each of whom has done more for my work here than they know or I shall be able to recount or repay. Our friend, Eugenio Donato, contributed directly to this book, especially in long and helpful discussions of classical and Renaissance rhetoric that shaped the argument of Chapter 6. His writings will continue to inspire me with their learning and by their example; they have what James found in Flaubert's *Salammbô*: "the historical imagination." My thanks again to my friend and colleague Robert Montgomery, who also helped me with the rhetorical materials in Chapter 6 by translating gracefully the Latin and Italian of Tesauro. That chapter, as it turned out, drew the most extensive collaboration, including the help of Alexander Gelley, whose influence on my work

is powerful. Students over the years have studied Henry James with me and kept him alive to the critical imagination; I would mention only a few: Philip Kuberski, Robert Gregory, Nina Schwartz, Dennis Foster, Lois Cole, Joseph Church, and Catherine Vieilledent. Our friends, James and Linda Mc Michael, had a hand in this book as well; Kristin and I delight in their company and wit. All my books are first and foremost for my wife, Kristin, and my children, Sean, Kevin, and Mark, but I want to dedicate this one particularly to my mother, Gloria Rowe, who introduced me to the writings of Henry James and to the magic of language. She remains my best teacher.

Newport Beach, California

The Theoretical
Dimensions of
Henry James

Chapter I **Henry James and
Modern Criticism**
Some Versions of
Literary Mastery

“Is it going to be bad for me?” he said.

“Find out for yourself!”

“Break the seal?”

*“Isn’t it meant to break?” she asked with a
shade of impatience.*

*“Isn’t it an ivory tower, and doesn’t living
in an ivory tower just mean the most distin-
guished retirement?”*

—Henry James, *The Ivory Tower*

*There is no keener pleasure than to study and
deepen the things we know, to relish what
we taste, just as when you behold again and
again the people you love; purest delight of
the mature mind and taste. It is then that this
word classic assumes its true meaning, and
is defined by the irresistible and discerning
choice of every man of taste.*

—Sainte-Beuve, “What Is a Classic?”