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Review Of "Person, Place, And Thing In Henry James's Novels" By C. R. Anderson And "The Concept Of Ambiguity—The Example Of James" By S. Rimmon

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pointed out in 1972 (*Studies in Bibliography*, 25, 82–83), a source of genuine difficulty.

My reason for discussing these complaints at all is not to compromise my firm judgment that this edition makes a solid, irreversible, and impressive contribution to the study of Howells's work and of nineteenth-century American literature, but rather to suggest that such work inevitably begins discussion and argument about a text, rather than ending it. That is why it is always premature to call such editions "definitive," but it also means that their value for us must lie at least as much in what they tell about the evolution of a text, as in what they offer as the "final" readings of that text. Bennett, Nordloh, and Kleinman have made an invaluable contribution to both matters, and we must be grateful for their work.

As a postscript I record a few typographical errors—none in the text—to be clipped and pasted like an erratum sheet. The last entry on p. 543 should read "132.36–133.9." There should be an emendation recorded at 84.1, "Marcia] B; her AMS" (unless the comparable entry in Rejected Substantives is in error). The reading in Rejected Substantives at 31.7 should read "him. Yet] B; him. His".

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CHARLES R. ANDERSON, *Person, Place, and Thing in Henry James's Novels*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1977. Pp. ix + 308. $12.75.

SHLOMITH RIMMON, *The Concept of Ambiguity—the Example of James*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1977. Pp. xiii + 257. $19.00. £13.30.

Reading these two studies back to back, one glimpses a certain malaise in present-day Jamesian criticism. Charles R. Anderson's *Person, Place, and Thing in Henry James's Novels* is as unabashedly traditional in its approach (image patterns, symbolic settings, allusions, etc.) as Shlomith Rimmon's *The Concept of Ambiguity—the Example of James* is aggressively modernist and interdisciplinary (drawing on structuralist and linguistic theory). Both studies have their moments of insight, but neither, in my view, is successful. One puts them down without discovering any compelling vision of James's work, in the service of which they must have been composed. They both fail to grasp their subject in a fresh way, to show us, more than marginally, something not already seen and identified.

Anderson states clearly the object of his inquiry: "It is my purpose to show that [James's characters arrive at real relations] only indirectly, and that the process of their doing so is the whole of their story. It is not until one character understands some associated object which he as-

sumes is symbolic of another character that he comes to understand him, or thinks he does—the inherent ambivalence of the symbol being a chief complicating factor. I use the term 'object' for convenience, to include places and things of all sorts: a house, estate, or rural landscape . . . a teacup, painting, statue, or other work of art." Few would quarrel with this thesis; understood loosely, it has been a commonplace in Jamesian criticism for decades. Understood rigorously, it provides a beautifully coherent interpretation of *The Princess Casamassima*. Focusing on the smaller places like Pinnie's parlor and Muniment's attic room, as well as on the larger ones like Millbank Prison and the Strand Theatre, Anderson demonstrates that the significance of Hyacinth's drama is perfectly articulated in the scenes and settings themselves. Here and elsewhere he draws on Stephen Spender's argument (in *The Destructive Element*) that the Jamesian "scene" operates quite differently from its Dickensian or Balzacian counterpart. That is, rather than serving to release some revelatory emotion on the part of the protagonist, and thus to advance the plot, the mature Jamesian "scene" serves more quietly as a symbolic space in itself, gathering and aligning for the reader the characters' various relationships.

One may value Spender's insight and still wish that Anderson leaned on it less heavily forty years later. As the early novels are rarely "scenic" in this manner, Anderson is almost forced to upbraid them (*Roderick Hudson* and *The American*) for being immature. Another drawback of Anderson's position is shared by James himself: a tendency to believe that the mature fiction operates predominantly in "scenes," with "pictures" serving as preparation for them. An unbiased look at the novels written after 1895 will as easily show the opposite: that the "scenes" tend to punctuate the "pictures" as much as the "pictures" introduce the "scenes." To take a representative example, the Bronzino "scene" at Matcham (in *The Wings of the Dove*) rarely opens out into a paced and balanced rendering of other people (as opposed, say, to Isabel's first visit to Osmond's villa, in which all the characters seem equally "there"). The episode is less a dramatized "scene" than a moving "picture" of Milly's mind. Lord Mark and Kate and Matcham itself may enter and depart from that medium; the medium—Milly's mind—is uppermost.

I stress "picture" in late James because Anderson's focus on "scenes" leads him into some unhappy dismissals of the "non-scenic." Here is the conclusion of his chapter on this novel: "As a novel of relations *The Wings of the Dove* is all but brought to a conclusion with the great Veronese scene at Palazzo Leporelli and the two slighter flanking scenes set in Piazza San Marco. The dénouement, absorbing though it may be as a piece of subtle storytelling, seems a bit long-drawn-out to the critic because its mode of presentation is discursive rather than scenic. But it serves two valid purposes. For one thing it is James's

concession to that class of readers who want to know how it all came out: what became of the fortune? since the hero did not marry the blond, did he get the brunette?" Although Anderson grants that the second purpose is to clarify Densher's relations with Milly and Kate, he still reads those last one hundred pages as concessive to the undiscriminating reader. (Earlier in the chapter he dismisses the reader curious about the nature of Milly's illness as one who merely "turns the pages": doubtless the same vulgar reader who now wants to "know how it all came out.") The critic who dismisses Books IX and X as "storytelling" and who is unconcerned about the nature of Milly's illness has more to answer for than the reader who has responded fully to these things. Milly's relation to her illness, her refusal to name it, her capacity silently to absorb its menace into her own unconquerable life-gestures—these are not peripheral matters of interest only to the uncritical reader. Further, the last hundred pages of *The Wings of the Dove* weigh and sift the huge emotional and material cost of what has gone before, intertwining love and money more tightly than Anderson acknowledges, and touching deeper elements in the reader's response than his desire to "know how it all came out."

Anderson's commentary on the five other novels is more impressive. He has apparently read every recoverable word James wrote, and he often brings just the right gloss (from obscure letter or journal or travel article) to bear on a given fictional text. These glosses, though interesting, do tend to verge on the anecdotal. The "real" chateau behind the fictional one, the sights (unmentioned in the novel) that Hyacinth might have seen crossing London, the appropriate impressionist painter as the model for certain painterly scenes in *The Ambassadors*—such background materials are of uneven value. Rarely does Anderson analyze James's creative transformation of a suggested source. What one misses, with all these glosses, is a unifying conception which might fuse inert data into imaginative theme. For example, the abundance of Anderson's painter-glosses tells us less, finally, about James's imaginative use of art objects in *The Ambassadors* than Richard Poirier's pithy generalization in *A World Elsewhere: "The Ambassadors* offers remarkably beautiful instances of the hero's effort to transform the things he sees into visions, to detach them from time and from the demands of nature, and to give them the composition of *objets d'art*. The novel is about the cost and profit for such acts of imagination." Anderson needn't quote Poirier, yet he might have profited more from the critical scrutiny that his concerns have already received. He is as frugal in citing the relevant critical literature as he is prodigal in citing little-known Jamesiana.

In sum, this is a reasonable book that travels well-trodden paths. It achieves its distinction less through its thematic and technical observations (which are fairly standard) than through its loving prolifera-

tion of tangential details: the myriad letters, essays, and journal pieces in which James expressed the inexhaustible impact of European culture—its cities, its history, its customs, its art—upon his American sensibility. Short on a commanding thesis, Anderson's appreciative study is long on informed affection for its subject. In this respect it is the opposite of Shlomith Rimmon's book, in which James is chosen as the illustrative example in a broadly based inquiry into the concept of ambiguity itself.

Rimmon's study begins admirably. The first 25 pages are devoted to defining the concept of ambiguity, and she elegantly distinguishes it from such cognate phenomena as multiple meanings, subjective meanings, indeterminate meanings, ironical meanings. Multiple meanings may enrich each other at some deeper level, and subjective meanings can largely be traced to the psychic differences of readers. Indeterminate meanings may be not merely subjective but actually "invited" by the unresolved structure of the work itself, and irony eventually establishes a correct, hidden meaning that undermines the surface meaning. Ambiguity, according to Rimmon, differs from all of these. It is multiple but with no possibility of an enriching merger. Built into the patterning of the text rather than a product of the reader's psyche, it is not subjective. Instead of being indeterminate, it "is characterized by a highly determined form, limiting the text's plurality by its organization of the data into two opposed systems which leave little or no room for further 'play.' " And it is not ironic, since there is no "tip" to the reader to guide him in crediting the covert meaning and in discarding the explicit one. " 'Ambiguity' is the 'conjunction' of mutual exclusives." Or, to put it with maximum compactness, $a \barwedge b$. As Rimmon says, "some kind of 'conjunction' is established between the exclusive disjunctions, and the incongruent '$\barwedge$' marks precisely the tension we feel between the impulse to choose and the arrest of that impulse by the realization of the equitenability of mutual exclusives." In Rimmon's fitting phrase, such a text is an "impossible object." All this strikes me as admirably succinct, indeed a definitional improvement over Empsonian pluralism. And yet this study will never replace *Seven Types of Ambiguity*. Unlike Empson, Rimmon is a better logician than literary critic. Her distinctions have a clarity that wears better in theory than in practice; irony, for example, is rarely so "well-behaved" and univocal as Rimmon claims.

Difficulties emerge in the second chapter, in which Rimmon attempts to apply her abstract formula of ambiguity to the actual units of literary discourse. Here her study is at once most recondite, most eclectic, and most disappointing. She proliferates categories which she fails to define adequately, and which the subsequent chapters of practical criticism largely ignore. The problem is aggravated by her drawing on the not quite compatible vocabularies of Russian Formalism, French Struc-

turalism, and Chomskian linguistics in finding labels for her categories. As if the critical apparatus were not already vertiginous, Rimmon concedes that "the [Chomskian] term 'deep structures' is used more or less metaphorically" and that she intends to give such terms "a slant of my own." The result is that chapter 2 is peppered with a promiscuous gathering of names, concepts, and definitions representing different disciplines and insufficiently integrated by the author.

Practical criticism of four Jamesian texts rounds out Rimmon's study. Beginning with "The Lesson of the Master" and "The Figure in the Carpet," she proceeds to longer chapters on "The Turn of the Screw," and *The Sacred Fount*. Her analyses are competent, but even the simplest piece considered, "The Lesson of the Master," is sinuous beyond the angular capacities of Rimmon's binary framework. She reduces the two finalized hypotheses in that story to "*a*, 'St. George tricks Paul'; *b*, 'St. George saves Paul,' and their combination yields the basic formula of narrative ambiguity, namely $a \barwedge b$." But it is plausible that these hypotheses are complementary (rather than exclusive) at a deeper level: that St. George, having relinquished his pure-minded artistic calling, is sincere in urging Paul to a life of monastic commitment, even as he is in character (a worldly character, now) in marrying Marian Fancourt when he becomes free. His behavior simultaneously tricks Paul and saves him, and the coherent contradiction thus effected reveals the conflicted nature of both worldly life (with its morally flawed riches) and artistic commitment (with its Spartan and forbidding purity). The story may end in wry wisdom rather than impenetrable ambiguity. I offer this alternative reading—and there are other plausible ones—to underline the appealing naïveté of Rimmon's hope that her study "will stop the endless debates among critics." She intends to end our bickering by identifying *the* finalized hypotheses in each ambiguous work, but we continue to bicker about the hypotheses themselves.

One needs special justification for venturing further commentary on "The Turn of the Screw" and *The Sacred Fount*. Rimmon writes: "the challenge of grappling with a work ["The Turn of the Screw"] so famous for its ambiguity provides a good test for the tools and categories proposed; an analysis based on categories of clues rather than on narrative episodes is capable of a higher degree of systematization of the various findings; and the perspective gained by the application of the *same* system to various ambiguous works allows us to see where and how each work differs from the others." Readers may disagree as to the generic value of Rimmon's proposed taxonomy, but few will find her local analyses of these much studied texts significantly new. Major critics have long known them to be irresolubly ambiguous. Moving through narrative and verbal ambiguities, attentive to singly and doubly directed clues, focusing on narrative "gaps," she demonstrates amply how and why the reader is baffled. The demonstration is largely supererogatory.

Finally, one misses in Rimmon a sustained interest in the imaginative (as opposed to logical) meanings of ambiguity. What does this concern with ambiguous narratives tell us about Henry James's fictional world? Edmund Wilson, Laurence Holland, Charles Samuels, and Ruth Yeazell, among others, have confronted the same technical phenomenon, and they each end, not, indeed, by "solving" it, but by assimilating it into their construction of the Jamesian imaginative universe. They generalize its expressive significance in his oeuvre. Even Empson insists on the expressive uses of ambiguity: "An ambiguity, then, is not satisfying in itself, nor is it, considered as a device on its own, a thing to be attempted; it must in each case arise from, and be justified by, the peculiar requirements of the situation. On the other hand, it is a thing which the more interesting and valuable situations are more likely to justify."

What are those "more interesting and valuable situations" in James's novels that require ambiguous expression? Rimmon's individual chapters do not raise this larger question, nor does her brief conclusion focus synoptically on the Jamesian imagination. Rather, she connects, cryptically but suggestively, the ambiguous forms of modern art with some premises of modern aesthetics: the need to break habitual perceptions, the inevitability of subjective bias, the unreliability of mimetic and symbolic codes. In this "deconstructive" realm ambiguity is indeed a privileged entity. Rimmon's ambitious first book tells us enough about it to make us wish for more. But we are still awaiting the major study that will interpret both James's proliferation of such tantalizing "impossible objects" and their place in a modern aesthetics of playful disbelief.

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RUSSELL M. AND CLARE R. GOLDFARB, *Spiritualism and Nineteenth-Century Letters.* Rutherford, Madison, and Teaneck: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press; London: Associated University Press, 1978. Pp. 208. $12.00.

The thesis of this brief study may be summarized as follows: since "virtually every major or minor literary figure of the nineteenth century had immediate experience with spiritualism" (p. 139), an awareness of this pervasive cultural phenomenon enriches our understanding of even the most familiar nineteenth-century works. "Not only do metaphors, similes, and allusions suddenly make sense or become more revealing, but entire passages, poems, and novels are seen in a new perspective and offer new possibilities for interpretation" (pp. 11–12). For these large claims, Russell M. and Clare R. Goldfarb offer little support. After a diffuse and superficial opening chapter, in which the