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Review [of Peter Rawlings' *Henry James and the Abuse of the Past*]

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and critical figure—indeed as one engaged in an “immanent” and thus Rortian or Adornean social critique, in Ross Posnock’s view (227)—is squared with the traditional thematics of passivity and renunciation. It is squared, in other words, with a Strether content to indulge in the diminished pleasures of experiential belatedness. Balance here seems not a springboard but a conclusive gesture that replaces the far-reaching irony of James’s portrait with a vision of Strether as a floating signifier capable of absorbing contending values.

Perhaps the most important lesson to be taken from *Seeing and Believing* is found in its treatment of spirituality as a disruptive force. Considered closely (as Hutchison does) this force—as opposed to spirituality conceived as a set of doctrines—can shake up one’s sense of representative authorial obsessions and even the narrative coherence of James’s late fictions. The turn is refreshing and apparent in some recent critical work on James. As Pericles Lewis, writing on the spiritual issues raised in James’s ghost stories, points out, “[James] emphasizes not [the ghosts’] reality or unreality but their social character and their unpredictability” (36). Hutchison offers many valuable contributions to scholarship on key fictions. I would note for special appreciation the challenge to the unreliability thesis so predominant in criticism on *The Sacred Fount*: from a spiritual perspective the narrator’s predisposition toward ambiguous phraseology conversely “suggests a consciousness working at optimum receptivity” and resembles the state of mind of the convert (59), as specified in brother William’s *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902). Also illuminating is Hutchison’s understanding of James’s reliance in *The Golden Bowl* (1904) on elaborate tropes and conceits as evidence of the narrative’s “subliminal viewpoint, [which is] too deep for conscious articulation” (140). In the end, Hutchison manages the difficult task of making the obscure in James more approachable while retaining its fascination.

#### WORKS CITED

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Peter Rawlings. *Henry James and the Abuse of the Past*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005. 226 pp. \$79.95 (hardcover).

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In *Notes of a Son and Brother*, Henry James famously described the circumstances surrounding the injury that apparently disqualified him for service in the Union Army. In 1861 or 1862 (accounts vary), a small fire (James styled it “a shabby

conflagration" [AU 415]) broke out in Newport, Rhode Island. James, still a teenager, joined the efforts of several other volunteers, who struggled desperately to operate a rusted, jerry-rigged engine. Awkwardly wedged in the corner where two high fences met at a sharp angle, James toiled away, pumping mightily to coax the recalcitrant engine into action. In the process, as a result of the cramped position he had held for "twenty odious minutes" (414) James suffered what he elliptically referred to as "a horrid even if an obscure hurt" (415). James's account, no less than the event and the injury itself, has fueled endless debates over the precise nature of the hurt, the actual circumstances under which he incurred the injury, its physical and psychological consequences, the reasons for James's vagueness about the incident, and the uses (both practical and creative, conscious and unconscious) to which he put it.

Peter Rawlings's *Henry James and the Abuse of the Past* refocuses attention on James's "obscure hurt" and its historical context, the Civil War, organizing four substantial, densely packed chapters around this event to which James, no less than his biographers, "returned compulsively" (xi). Yet Rawlings's study neatly sidesteps the by-now-tedious questions of what, where, when, why, and how, in order to explore the epistemological dimensions of James's persistent linking of the personal and the national wounds and the ways in which James's writing deploys public and private pasts in aid of literary ends. In so doing, he reclaims this episode in Jamesian biography from the psychoanalyst's couch and uses it as a point of entry into the complex web of social, scientific, and aesthetic thought in which James's work is enmeshed. The project of the book is ambitious, its intellectual sweep extensive. Ranging widely across James's *oeuvre* but alighting chiefly on stories, sketches, and essays that have received relatively little attention from critics, *Henry James and the Abuse of the Past* situates James's creative response to time, history, and the past with respect to contemporary theories of psychology, historiography, philosophy, and linguistics.

The "telling feature" of James's account of his injury, according to Rawlings, is its "utter obscurity" (xii), a "seminal" quality (xiii) that unleashes an entire "discourse of obscurity" (67) that drives much of his fiction. Indeed, James's writing partly "depends" (xiv) upon the production, proliferation, and perpetuation of obscurity in order to "[divert] the gaze" from "a potential abyss of meaninglessness in a world of appearances for which there is no corresponding reality" (xv). Obscurity—indirection, convolution, ambiguity, irony, and indeterminacy, as well as secrecy, silence, or omission—is a contrivance, Rawlings clarifies, that arises from James's preoccupation with "what can, cannot, and must not be said" (xviii). *Henry James and the Abuse of the Past* probes the ways in which James's fiction "encrypts" (xv) aspects of his private life and masks anxieties about public exposure of private matters. Throughout the study, Rawlings relentlessly pursues James's response to the unutterable, the unnamable, the inexpressible, and the impenetrable. Facts, he argues, "demand to be abused, reversed, and even perverted, if anything worthwhile is to ensue" (44). Consequently, the "abuse of the past" becomes in James's hands "an art of fiction and the framework of an autobiography" (67–68).

James's "principal epistemological tenets," Rawlings contends, are "the elements of secrecy, concealment, and ignorance" that also "control his senses of the past and . . . determine his attitude towards written history" (xiii). James emphasizes "what is not, rather than what is" (xiii), what cannot be represented, rather than what can

be represented. Distrustful of claims to objectivity and fearful of facts no less than “facts about facts” (xv), James resists and repudiates written history, embracing instead the necessary illusions of art and life. Beginning with James’s skepticism about the capacity of mere facts to represent the past, Rawlings carefully unveils the “fluid boundary between history and fiction” (5) in James’s work. Although history and fiction are “contiguous realms” (5), for James, fiction, with its artful selection of details, is superior in its ability to convey imaginatively a spectral sense of the past, which is, in turn, superior in truthfulness of representation to dry, scientific, fact-bound history. Rawlings proceeds from an analysis of the role of history, historians, and archivists in *Italian Hours* to a consideration of the relationship between the man of imagination and the historian in “The Aspern Papers.” Rawlings locates in James’s work a growing distrust of language itself and of its ability to “map” onto the real, a skepticism that in *The American Scene* culminates in a kind of “linguistic nihilism” (28).

The “use to which he put his negative experience of the Civil War,” subordinating the war itself to his own artistic purposes, Rawlings explains, “determined the trajectory of his senses of the past, present, and future, and shaped much of the writing to come” (xi–xii). The second chapter of *Henry James and the Abuse of the Past* concentrates on the Civil War, which, Rawlings suggests, James constructs as “a primal scene of lost innocence,” both a *felix culpa* and an urtext of experience and identity that engenders complication “at both the national and personal levels” (xi). Noting James’s ambivalent depiction of soldiers, military life, and “the carnival of war” (67), Rawlings explores homoeroticism, the performance of gender, the instability of gender boundaries, and the reciprocity between the discourses of gender and sexuality and the rhetorical uses of obscurity, silences, gaps, and secrecy in *Notes of a Son and Brother*, *Roderick Hudson*, and three early stories set during the Civil War, which Rawlings perceives as “in part perverse forms of re-masculinization” (109). Discussing “The Story of a Year,” for example, Rawlings brilliantly illustrates how the narrator inverts both the customary gendering of war and popular genres of romance and Civil War fiction by “mingl[ing] the feminine and domestic with the masculine and the military” (49), ultimately revealing both to be “intensely histrionic domains” (49). Performance is superior to “reality”; “image,” as James would have it, is “always superior to the thing itself” (38); and representation is anything but transparent.

Rawlings turns next to a cluster of stories about writers and writing, zeroing in on James’s tendency to enlist “in the proximity of the unutterable” Shakespeare and “the unassailable enigma of [his] life and work” (69). Here, Rawlings surveys a range of nineteenth-century American responses to Shakespeare, from Melville, Whitman, Emerson, and the visionary poet Jones Very to P. T. Barnum and Delia Bacon, whose theory that Francis Bacon and others secretly authored Shakespeare’s plays consigned her to the lunatic fringe. Further developing the context of these stories, he deftly recreates the controversy over nationalism, heritage tourism, and cultural imperialism that erupted in 1847 when Shakespeare’s birthplace was placed on the auction block. Through cogent interpretations of “The Birthplace,” “The Papers,” and “The Private Life,” Rawlings shows how the treatment of Shakespeare, his posthumous reputation, and his abuse at the hands of “marauding biographers” (xvii) resonate with James’s anxieties about secrecy, exposure, and the unwanted revelations and

publicity that might result from biographical intrusions. These tales, from Rawlings's vantage point, provide a window into the relationship among facts, fabrications, and fiction in James's aesthetic and reveal how illusion, invention, and artfulness actually enable art in the presence of what he termed an "historic void" (qtd. in Rawlings 93). Linking, moreover, the "privacy [that] is vital to art" to James's "obscure hurt," Rawlings subtly discloses the dependence of fiction upon "duplicity, secrecy, absence and lack" (113), arguing that "without the illusion of crypts more or less inaccessible, the mysteries on which fiction depends collapse" (121).

In his final chapter, Rawlings attends to the fourth phase of James's career, when James once again became preoccupied with "wars and rumours of wars" (xvii). Rawlings situates "The Jolly Corner," the unfinished novel *The Sense of the Past*, and *The American Scene* within the contemporary scientific, philosophical, and linguistic debates over the nature of time and space and shows how James takes "'liberties . . . with time and space' . . . at the syntactical level" (133). These "liberties," Rawlings avers, result in a "liberation" of the sense of the past which, in turn, facilitates a transformation of the past into usable forms (144). According to Rawlings, "Henry James's late fiction specializes in constructing, within the volatile framework of philosophies of time then current, decadent mutations of America's vanishing dreamers, characters arrested . . . by the forlorn realization that 'we shall never be again as we were!'" (141–42). Turning finally to "The Long Wards" and "Within the Rim," essays written during the First World War, Rawlings examines the "disabling incongruities" in these texts between the outbreak of World War I and the American Civil War—incongruities that "had a shattering effect on James's way with the past, both at the personal and aesthetic levels" (157). As a result, he suggests, James abandoned and never returned to the kinds of "ludic, abstract, engagements with grammars of time and senses of the past" (157) that distinguish the highly experimental fourth-phase fiction.

With its provocative poststructuralist perspective and challenging blend of cultural studies and intellectual history, *Henry James and the Abuse of the Past* is not a book for the uninitiated but rather for the aficionado, the connoisseur. Rawlings's argumentation is erudite, accomplished, and intricate, his style thick and at times ponderous, as he analyzes the slippage between use and abuse of the past and exposes the ways in which the past impinges on the present and future in the writing of an author "preoccupied from the beginning with the limits of language, the quiddity of gender, and the boundless reach of performance at all levels" (64). Yet even as the book demands a great deal from its readers, the rewards of this rigorous and sophisticated study are proportionately great. One only wonders, upon completing it, whether writing about what Rawlings characterizes as James's "obscure and obscuring language" and identifies as a *leitmotif* of his own monograph (xviii) necessitates a like rhetorical response from the critic. For Rawlings, like his subject, can be a virtuoso of the obscure. Perhaps this tendency is all but inevitable in a text that would unblinkingly scrutinize the tangled thread and raveling yarn on the knotty underside of the figured tapestry. After all, as Rawlings elucidates, forms of discourse such as obscurity and, indeed, fictions on the whole "can be prophylactics against chaos" (160).

WORK BY HENRY JAMES

*AU—Autobiography*. Ed. Frederick W. Dupee. London: Princeton UP, 1983.