

The Alchemy of Art

Person, Place, and Thing in Henry James's Novels, by Charles R. Anderson, Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1977. 308 pp. \$12.75.

PROFESSOR ANDERSON quotes from James' 1875 essay on Balzac, concerning the French novelist's "mighty passion for things . . . [his] overmastering sense of the present world [which] gave him . . . his background, his *mise-en-scène*." From Balzac, according to Anderson, James got his first suggestion of a

means—besides that of a central consciousness—to cope with the problem of relationships between characters. It is Anderson's principal working thesis that James' characters establish relationships with each other "only indirectly through the places and things that symbolize what they are." Anderson quotes also from *The Portrait of a Lady* (though without stressing the irony that the speaker, in conversation, is the somewhat unsavory Madame Merle):

. . . every human being has his shell . . . you must take the shell into account. By the shell I mean the whole envelope of circumstances. . . . What do you call one's self? It overflows into everything that belongs to us. . . . I have a great respect for *things*! One's self—for other people—is one's expression of one's self; and one's house, one's clothes, the books one reads, the company one keeps—these things are all expressive.

Anderson's discussion focuses on six novels, chosen for their representativeness, as well as for the different challenges they offer to his thesis. There is in addition considerable use made of James' nonfictional writing: travel essays, essays on art and on the theater, literary criticism, letters, biographical and autobiographical works.

The relevance of most of these to Anderson's interpretive approach is perhaps easily enough recognized. The symbolic quality of a setting—a city, a quartier, a street, a palazzo—is analyzed in its context and function within the novel; but also, our understanding of it is increased by the added dimension achieved by tracing out James' initial, recorded reaction in a travel essay. Similarly references to *The Painter's Eye* aid our understanding of James' use of paintings for their emblematic significance in rendering character and consequently relationships, all the way from the crude copies perpetrated by Noémie Nioche in *The American* to the Bronzino portrait in *The Wings of the Dove*. However, especially in these two areas of travel and art, Anderson refuses to confine himself to the study, the library, no matter how well

equipped. He takes great delight, it is clear, in physically covering the ground himself, retracing James' steps or the steps of a character in a novel. He details for us (as James does not) the route Hyacinth Robinson follows to call for Millicent Henning in Pimlico and from thence escort her to the Strand Theatre. "By bending over to read it upside down," Anderson, apparently acting on his own prescription, makes out the Latin text in the book held by Lucrezia in the Bronzino (scholarly curiosity triumphing over professorial dignity). Thumb-ing through the collection of reproductions in the Courtauld Institute he discovers that the crucial river scene in *The Ambassadors* is less closely paralleled by a Lambinet than by Claude Monet's *La Seine à Vétheuil*.

James' literary criticism obviously did not serve in the same way as sources of place and thing. There are minor exceptions, from his criticism or simply his reading of other writers. "Many of Dickens' descriptions of streets and street scenes in *Oliver Twist* must have been recalled by James as he wrote *The Princess [Casamassima]*"; and Anderson finds a possible clue for the pub called the "Sun and Moon" in a favorite hangout of Bill Sikes. But the literary criticism served chiefly as aid to James, by observation of the trials and experimentation of his fellow craftsmen, in developing in his own way and for his own purposes the transformative process. "James shaped his own art by learning from many masters," Anderson says. Much of what he learned was to the good. Yet on occasion, when he obtained more from them than suggestions concerning fictional techniques, the results were less happy. *The American*, for example, is for the greater part a promising comedy of manners, but in the concluding third it breaks down into a formula-type melodrama, the fault, Anderson holds, of James' being too much influenced by George Sand and the dramatist Émile Augier.

Place and thing often provide Anderson with a controlling symbol or metaphor for his chapters on the individual novels, or for subsections within chapters. Rome becomes a controlling symbolic cityscape for part of the discussion of *Roderick Hudson*; Paris, for part of that of *The*

Ambassadors. "Abyss" and "labyrinth" pair for thematic purposes in the discussion of *The Wings of the Dove*. For *The American* Anderson draws upon a phrase in a letter from James to William Dean Howells concerning "walls which fatally divide us," American from European—walls of language, art, and manners. *The American* has of course its own physical walls, with their own symbolic force—those of the Hôtel de Bellegarde, those of the convent where Madame de Cintré is immured—which Anderson uses along with his more inclusive metaphor. For *The Portrait of a Lady* there is the contrast of "vistas"—"opening" vistas in the Italian sense of the word as panorama; "closing" vistas in the English sense of a long corridor whose lines seem to converge in the distance; with Isabel Archer's ultimate finding of "the infinite vista of a multiplied life to be a dark, narrow alley with a dead wall at the end." But Anderson points out, too, the somber significance that even the "opening" vistas—Gardencourt, Italy to Isabel's first view, the Tuscan hills and valleys from Osmond's terrace—"are set in a waning afternoon or in actual twilight, and in the autumn of the year or something that is akin to it."

Anderson gives general acknowledgment, and specific acknowledgment whenever he can, to other critics who have dealt with James' symbolizing techniques. His thesis does not make the pretense of being ambitiously new, designed to render all previous interpretations of James obsolete. It is nevertheless new in the sense of viewing from a different window, so that we are presented with a different perspective, as well as the sudden appearance of things not seen before. Along with this there is the thorough working-out in detail and the considerable body of material brought in from outside the novels themselves to bear on their interpretation. The book as consequence is not one that loses a good part of its value as soon as its thesis is grasped and understood, but rather one that the Jamesian—whether scholar or, in the best sense of the word, amateur—will want to keep within close reach on his shelf.