

---

## M. Pirgerou on D. Izzo and C. Martinez's *Revisionary Interventions into Henry James*

---



### Electronic version

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/ejas/7613>

DOI: 10.4000/ejas.7613

ISSN: 1991-9336

### Publisher

European Association for American Studies

### Electronic reference

"M. Pirgerou on D. Izzo and C. Martinez's *Revisionary Interventions into Henry James*", *European journal of American studies* [Online], Book reviews, document 9, Online since 27 July 2009, connection on 31 August 2022. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/ejas/7613> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/ejas.7613>

---

This text was automatically generated on 31 August 2022.



Creative Commons - Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International - CC BY-NC 4.0  
<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

---

## M. Pirgerou on D. Izzo and C. Martinez's *Revisionary Interventions into Henry James*

---

- 1 Donatella Izzo and Carlo Martinez. *Revisionary Interventions Into Henry James*. Eds. Napoli, 2008.
- 2 *Revisionary Interventions into Henry James* is a compilation of a series of papers presented at a colloquium which took place at Università Orientale in Naples, Italy, on October 27, 2006. In her introduction to the volume, Donatella Izzo acknowledges the “rather blatant plagiarism” (7) which lent the book its title. The borrowing, of course, refers to Donald Pease’s landmark *Revisionary Interventions into the Americanist Canon*, which aimed to revise the theoretical stance as well as the critical practice associated with American Studies. One result of Pease’s critical revision was the emergence of New American Studies, a field concerned with marginalized social, racial, and political perspectives formerly obscured under the normative, hegemonic representation of U.S. culture. The aim of the essays in this volume is to adopt a similar stance towards the work of Henry James. As the essays revise the premises of James’s canonization, they open a dialogical interaction between James’s own Americanness, the socio-political aspects of his narratives and the ideological issues they raise, especially if read against the wider European context in which they were produced.
- 3 In the book’s first essay, “‘In the Cage’: James’s London,” Patricia McKee traces James’s representation of London as an urban space through the eyes of the telegraphist, the central consciousness of James’s well-known short story. In the protagonist’s attempt to reconstruct the social world from the fragmented pieces of information she holds, McKee perceives the reproduction of the modern world of “urban panoramas” and “montaged experience” as described by Walter Benjamin. According to Benjamin, as quoted in McKee’s essay, the reproduction of urban panoramas signals a retreat from experience in the form of “anaesthetized” visual practices (27). In addition, McKee maintains, the telegraphist-protagonist’s effort to reconstruct the social and urban space she inhabits from the fragments of information she pieces together produces a kind of visual montage in which the protagonist inserts bits of her own life and

experience. Rather than producing a unified, homogeneous picture, however, the protagonist's involvement results in the construction of a visual gap between sign and referent, "fusing them together in a deceptive totality" (34). By weaving into her imaginary reconstruction of the urban panorama different layers of social reality brought together by the uneven flow and distribution of material wealth, the protagonist destabilizes the movement of the urban panorama. The implications of this unequal distribution of commodities function like a lighthouse, McKee ingeniously notes, which demarcates safe social positionings but, at the same time, signals prohibited urban spaces in "flashed recognitions of what is to be missed in order for the panorama to be continued" (39). McKee's revisionist approach to James's short story thus amplifies the perspective of its readings by offering an alternative critical evaluation which endows James's text with a socio-political dimension often underrated or overlooked.

- 4 Manuela Vastolo takes up the same short story in "In the Cage of Glass," where the author adopts Pierre Bourdieu's theory of "habitus," and "symbolic capital," as well as his re-conceptualization of social stratification in order to argue that in "In the Cage" James introduces the existence of a new social positioning co-existent with the emergence of the middle class in the rapidly industrialized society of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Employing Bourdieu's concepts, Vastolo, quite convincingly, illustrates the ways in which symbolic and cultural capital, rendered by means of subtle textual nuances, signal the telegraphist's precarious social positioning, her oscillation between the upper class she wishes to occupy and the actual social class she is so rigidly confined to. The protagonist's "symbolic capital," that is, her vivid imagination, Vastolo argues, allows her to engage in a social mobility of which she would normally be deprived. Vastolo's essay is a refreshing re-reading of James's story with a solid theoretical grounding. It complements McKee's previous interpretation and allows us to perceive the social significance of the narrative underlying James's rhetorical and thematic complexity.
- 5 The sociology of Pierre Bourdieu also provides the theoretical background of the third essay included in this compilation, Donatella Izzo's "More Lessons from the Master: Henry James and the Literary Field." Based on the notion of "autonomy," as described by Bourdieu in *The Rules of Art* (1992), Izzo contends that James's works are actively engaged in the late nineteenth-century construction of literature as an autonomous field. James's version of literary autonomy, Izzo argues, exemplified in James's "The Art of Fiction" (1884), is much closer to Bourdieu's emancipatory notions than to a New Critical heritage mostly propagated by F. O. Matthiessen and summarized in the famous "split between life and art" (73). Along with "The Art of Fiction," Izzo focuses on "Broken Wings" (1900), a short story included in Matthiessen's collection, and revises the interpretations of James's narrative which disconnect it from living experience, claiming that, on the contrary, James's story is firmly rooted in the social world, commodity culture and the market place. Offering a very perceptive, revisionary reading of James's texts, Izzo's interpretation firmly resists the notion that life and art are mutually exclusive raising our awareness both to their mutual permeability as well as to the ideological consequences such a fusion entails.
- 6 In a similar manner, Anna de Biasio's "Art and the Production of Value in H. James's *The Outcry*" attempts to reinstate the notion of James's narrative investigation of value, exchange, authenticity and economy as they intertwine with the concepts of art

production and its appreciation as represented in James's last finished novel. Published in 1911, the novel, de Biasio maintains, investigates the place and position of art in an age of increasing consumerism, industrialization and technological progress. De Biasio finds that the novel also seeks to confront questions such as the "origin" of art at a time when the "drainage" of artistic masterpieces from England to the US, had reached its peak. Drawing parallels between *The Outcry* and Pierre Bourget's *La dame qui a perdu son peintre* [*The Lady Who Lost Her Painter*], published in 1909, as well as Bourdieu's notions of art and commercial value, de Biasio contends that James's novel, far from depicting an aesthetic self-mirroring, nonetheless serves to separate the aesthetic from its economic and social conditions. In addition, de Biasio's alternative, but very perceptive, reading of the paintings described in the novel as "vacuums of representation" (98), and, therefore, open to multiple interpretations, provides another aspect to the treatment of paintings as objects of value and commercial exchange belonging to anyone cultural space. Moreover, her association of Adorno's ideas of "authenticity" as a bourgeois ideal, and Bourdieu's "production of belief" with James's own treatment of art, the aesthetic ideal and the artist involved, clearly underscores James's own questioning of the notions of artistic value and the consecration of the object of art.

- 7 In quite a different mood, the fifth essay of the volume, written by Carlo Martinez and bearing the title "Henry James and the Tourist Imagination," seeks to re-read the function of tourist discourse in James's writings focusing, in particular, on "The Birthplace," one of the novelist's short stories published in 1903. Employing Baudrillard's concept of "simulacrum," Martinez also delves into the notions of authorship, textuality and literary criticism uncovering James's own revisionary stance about these notions. By reading "The Birthplace" as tourist discourse, Martinez draws analogies between the readers as tourists and the novels as commodified tourist sites, arguing that James attempted to establish anew the author-reader relationship reworking the status of fiction in relation to the newly emerging cultural context of the turn of the century. Martinez's essay thus provides a thoroughly renewed reading of the specific narrative connecting it with innovative and challenging concepts. He also clearly associates his own interpretation of James's text with an underlying philosophy of commoditization, to pick up the former essayist's argument, as intrinsic to James's work.
- 8 Enrico Botta's essay, entitled "Transatlantic Intertextuality in *The American*," analyses the particular novel in terms of its treatment of the "international theme," a literary and narrative perspective so prominent in James's work. Defining *The American* as a "cross-cultural encounter novel" (147), Botta attempts to read James's text intertextually, i.e. setting it against the European literary background into which it is so deeply engrained, as he claims. More specifically, Botta argues that James's "first international novel" in fact draws from different and diverse genres of the European literary tradition, namely Occitan poetry, Greek epic poetry and tragedy, Renaissance drama, the Gothic novel, romance and even fairy tales. Botta thus re-elaborates the plot of Christopher Newman's European adventures in a diegetic parallelism with European and Mediterranean literary archetypes. In the essayist's view, *The American* becomes the epic of the transatlantic encounter between the American and the European culture "projecting Christopher Newman into a mythological dimension" (161). In this way, Botta argues, James aims at a radical re-evaluation of the U.S. in a worldwide intellectual and cultural context, setting the cornerstone of what could be defined as "a

new global literature" (171), an opening of literary themes and topoi to form a common ground in which different cultures would meet, clash and interact. Botta's essay, apart from the refreshingly original perspective from which it reads a novel which has been interpreted in numerous ways, contributes to our deeper understanding of James's "international theme" by re-contextualizing *The American* in a European cultural setting and thus reinforcing James's own reluctance to belong to only one country or to one nation.

- 9 The next essay, contributed by Gianna Fusco, is entitled "Questioning gender/genre: Doctors as Professional Men in Henry James and Leopoldo Alas «Clarín». In her study Gianna Fusco attempts a comparative reading of Henry James's *Washington Square* and *The Wings of the Dove*, and Leopoldo «Clarín's» novel *La Regenta*. In the particular texts the essayist aims to trace the culturally specific traits of medical professionalism as an aspect of normative masculine discourse at the *fin-de-siècle*. In the works of both James and «Clarín», Fusco, based on Michel Foucault's *The Birth of the Clinic* (1963), identifies proper masculine development in terms of professional achievement as this is exemplified by prominent doctor figures in all three novels. Moreover, Fusco contends that the ideological impact of normative masculinity associated with professional success is linked to the novel as the most popular literary genre at the turn of the century. However, Fusco ingeniously points out that the growing tension arising from (hetero)normative discourses on proper masculine behavior are textually represented in the deviant, and yet highly professional, masculinities of Austin Sloper in *Washington Square*, Sir Luke Strett in *The Wings of the Dove* as well as the middle-aged Don Robustiaño Somoza in «Clarín's» "Bovarist" novel set in the Spanish society of the late nineteenth century. Investigating professional status as both a recurrent and a highly definitive characteristic of the ideologically constructed masculine performance, Fusco claims that all three canonical texts seem to question "the genre's potentiality to represent and signify" (197), thus exposing the *fin-de-siècle* novel as an ideologically loaded literary genre criticizing its own cultural/ideological potentiality. Indeed, Fusco's connection between the specific theme and the specific literary genre provides an innovative and far-reaching interpretation of the thorny *fin-de-siècle* issue of normative masculinity and the extent of its representation in the novel as a literary genre at the end of the nineteenth century.
- 10 The eighth essay has the title "The Preposterous Theory" and is written by Nicolangelo Becce. In it, Becce aims to re-read James's short story "Maud-Evelyn" (1900) in the light of Modern Spiritualism, a popular *fin-de-siècle* movement which sought to reestablish religious faith, especially faith in afterlife, among dissident Victorians caught up in the rapid scientific and technological development questioning religious credibility in the middle and late nineteenth century. As Modern Spiritualism, however, claimed a sound scientific grounding, the movement affected James's writing of "Maud-Evelyn," Becce claims, as well as of a number of other short stories reinforcing the writer's attraction to the supernatural. In particular, according to the essayist, James's representation of the supernatural element in the specific short story can be read as subversive of Victorian gender codes and norms especially as regards the contradiction the author wishes to stage between the two female heroines of the story. James, thus, stages a marked contrast between the "dead" Maud-Evelyn, who, in the form of a spirit seems to acquire a freedom of existence and earthly pleasures denied to her in actual life, and Lavinia, whose attachment to Victorian proprietary norms along with her passivity and sexual apathy, Becce maintains, had condemned her to a "death-in-life" state of being.

The involvement of Mr. Marmaduke, the male protagonist, actually complicates matters, Becce suggests, as Marmaduke seems to develop a strong bond with the deceased Maud rather than with the living Lavinia. This bond disrupts both social and gender rules “dismissing the repressive rigidity of Victorian gender codes” (220). This effect, Becce remarks, is underscored by the many vague and equivocal sentences, overlappings between sentences, incomprehensions and misunderstandings, all pointing to a marked inadequacy on the part of language as a medium of representation. According to Becce, James’s rhetorical ambiguity and semantic ambivalence create a “trap-story” with a *séance* effect: the reader is forever caught in a subjective mechanism of interpretation in a narration which is as unpredictable and unfathomable as the medium trance. Becce’s essay, like Gianna Fusco’s before it, makes a powerful connection between gender and representation in a perceptive, well-argued re-evaluation of James’s treatment of gender and language.

- 11 In “‘The Good American’: Henry James, U.S. American Studies and the Frontiers of National Identity,” Tatiana Petrovich Njeghosh aims to cast a revisionary glance on James’s Americanness in view the Master’s cosmopolitanism, expatriation and the constructedness of national identity. Arguing that “James contributed to a problematic re-definition of U.S. identity” at the turn of the century (232), Njeghosh attempts to relocate James’s work within the field of U.S. American Studies and dismisses any oppositional reductionism of his narratives between the U.S. and Europe. Petrovich also investigates the extent to which James’s reading as a deterritorialised cosmopolitan actually results in a radical redefinition of the nation endowing it with an international rather than a strictly national scope. Oscillating between gender as well as racial exclusion and a rather problematic representation of national identity, James’s discourse, Petrovich argues, reveals an anxious re-evaluation of the nation as a continued constructedness simultaneously processed through both acceptance and rejection. Petrovich’s essay, in fact, promotes a more open-minded reception of James’s work while her well-argued rejection of the oppositional binarism traditional criticism had confined the author for so long, sets the premises for new and more insightful critical interpretations of James’s texts.
- 12 In the last, but by no means least, essay included in this volume, entitled “The Master’s Queer Language: Reading and Translating Henry James today,” Mario Corona attempts a brief, yet concise and quite perceptive account of the problems encountered in translating James’s linguistically complex narrative texts into Romance languages. More specifically, Corona refers to *The Sacred Fount* (1901), James’s autobiographical novel *A Small Boy and Others* (1913), the letters sent by James to the sculptor Hendrik C. Andersen between 1899 and 1915, and finally, James’s most equivocal short story *The Turn of the Screw* (1898). The essayist’s argument revolves around the difficulties involved in the translation of Jamesian texts rendered almost cryptic due to the Master’s deliberately evasive, elusive, “queer” language. Corona exemplifies his argument by focusing his analysis on the sexual undertones of certain Jamesian passages included in the afore-mentioned works. Corona contends that James’s linguistic mastery allowed him to treat socially and sexually tabooed topics by turning them into structurally complex and semantically ambiguous forms, thus proliferating the “unsayability” of their promiscuous nature within the Victorian context of moral codes and norms. This “unsayability,” according to Corona, can pose serious problems to the translator who often fails to produce equivalent forms in order to convey the “linguistic eroticism” of James’s narrative technique. Corona’s persuasive argument

about the “unsayability” of certain themes and topics persistent in the author’s texts is consistent with both Gianna Fusco’s and Nicolangelo Becce’s arguments about the limits of representation in their respective essays. Corona’s use of the medium of translation illustrates the way certain subtle, undercurrent textual nuances are actually “lost” from one language to another, thus, underscoring the inadequacy of language to hold the element which is not contained and is therefore culturally and ideologically dismissible.

- 13 All in all, the essays included in the present compilation offer a remarkable re-reading of some of James’s most canonical narratives introducing original and innovative ways of receiving and interpreting the Master’s works. The best thing about *Revisionary Interventions into Henry James* is its clear progression of thematic treatment which encompasses as many different perspectives as possible, but also provides a conceptual linkage and an argumentative development wonderfully attuned to the extensive scope and range of Henry James’s texts. In this light, the book constitutes an invaluable contribution to James’s scholarship especially in the radically re-evaluative stance it promotes towards the author’s critical appreciation and reception.

Maria Pirgerou, Ph. D. Candidate, University of Athens.