

## REVIEW

*Henry James's enigmas: Turning the screw of eternity?* (Nouvelle poétique comparatiste. Vol. 31. Directeur de collection: Marc Maufort.) By Jean Perrot. Peter Lang: Bruxelles, Bern, Berlin, Frankfurt am Main, New York, Oxford, Wien, 2014. 309 pp., 1 ill.

Review by Miroslawa Buchholtz

The first paragraph of Jean Perrot's book ends with the following declaration of intent: "the progressive development of a successful writer with his mysterious personal sensibility grounded in a particular vision of the Western world will constitute the main focus of this study" (11). This explicitly stated intention in fact reveals both the critical approach and the main concern of the scholar. Both can be summed up in one word, which – apart from its everyday usage – is also one of the most challenging philosophical concepts, namely, time. Jean Perrot's reading of James's life and works is, however, the opposite of the "vanitas" conception of time (stemming from the biblical tradition). It highlights instead the glory of literary achievement and follows the stepping stones that led James to success. Perrot's study is also at times Proustian in its perception of totality through detail and its sense of progression through instantaneous epiphany. His practice of literary analysis is allusive, associative, and – yes, in many ways – novelistic: peopled by numerous characters who are involved in complex interactions, set in real and envisioned places, and following the red thread(s) of recurrent themes and motifs. The scholar strides boldly across all of James's works and crucial life experiences, suggesting numerous analogies between fiction and biography as well as pointing to intertextual links between James and other artists and scholars of and before his time. Jean Perrot's background in comparative studies is noticeable from the beginning of his study and his erudition is indeed unfathomable.

The table of contents, which testifies to the author's effort to structure reality, on the one hand, and the Introduction to his book, which signals its main

points, on the other, are divided by a (perhaps deceptively) serene colour image of the clock on the church tower in Rye and the gilded inscription from *The Book of Wisdom* 2: 5 above the clock: “For our time is a very shadow that passeth away.” Flanked by two likewise gilded cherubs, the impeccably elegant, beautiful, and solid inscription captured in the photograph subverts the message of its words. As the author of the study (and possibly also the author of the photograph, though no credit is given for it in the book) remarks, the church in Rye has stood for seven centuries and the clock’s mechanism is one of the oldest in the country (13). Viewing the photograph, one notices also that the clock face, the inscription, and the cherubs do not show any signs of wear, and no shadow is cast on any element of the depicted scene. Thus none of these elements seems to come within time’s “bending sickle’s compass,” which substantiates on the level of visual meanings the scholar’s belief in the endlessness of artistic achievement. From the perspective of eternity, exemplified in Jean Perrot’s book mainly by the Poet’s Corner of Westminster Abbey (15), Henry James’s life and literary career were indeed a success, but a plaque or a headstone which sets visible signs is not an end in itself for the scholar. It provokes questions about the mysteries of James’s life in the past, the lives of his characters ever since, and the lives of his readers today.

Although focused on the issues outlined in the declaration quoted above, Jean Perrot’s book pulls in many different directions and brings together (though not always under one roof) the myriad ideas and interpretations that are crucial to the study of Henry James. The abundance of interpretive tropes is not only attractively rhizomatous in a Deleuzian sense, but also and mainly a monument to a lifetime of careful reading, which may prove inspiring to careful readers of Perrot’s study. The scholar is – as he should be – very knowledgeable about James’s life and works, but his attention to detail, his ability to connect and compare scenes and motifs in all of James’s oeuvre and far beyond constitutes added value. Who would have thought of a violet as a literary motif in the Master’s works, or embarked on a study of a convent as a literary setting? Who would have traced the metaphor of “turn” from James to his predecessors? Who could decipher portmanteau words, especially character names (e.g. 74, 225), with such expertise? In Perrot’s study these are not just trivia gleaned over decades of reading, but elements of an intricate argument (21-22, 281-282).

Some comparisons and conclusions drawn from them seem more convincing than others. For example, Perrot’s analyses of Henry James’s and Sigmund Freud’s take on archaeology (28), on the one hand, and Leonardo da Vinci, on the other, are both richly nuanced and cogent. So is also his exploration of James’s approach to the leisure class vis-à-vis Thorstein Veblen’s and W.D. Howells’s texts (32-33). An overview of the settings and actual places of James’s sojourn – from London to New York – in Chapter I is truly impressive.

Whether or not it is in fact true that James developed “a system of coherent oppositions gleaned from the very nature of his experiences and the apparent ingrained contrasts of the various societies he explored” (50), by making such a claim, Perrot provokes the reader to think of arguments for or against this blanket statement. The assertion that James progressed towards the rhetoric of elision and towards silence, valuing the private garden above other places (50), has a similar effect on the reader.

The scope of Jean Perrot’s interest is immense. Not only does he move freely between major works from various stages of James’s literary career, but he also passes enlightened judgment on less well-known or less often analysed pieces: tales, travel writing, life writing, notes, plays, letters, essays, and reviews. Perrot has at his fingertips all of James’s writing as well as the contemporary culture in which he was immersed, his antecedents, and his proved or likely inspirations. The scholar again and again surprises his readers with bold statements which may well be true, or – even if they are not – they at least address issues that are definitely worth pondering, such as the varieties of James’s humour or his way of handling the theme of homosexuality. Comparisons help Jean Perrot to see James in a very wide context of literature, philosophy, science, and religion of, before, and after his time. For example, in Chapter III, Perrot views “The Author of Beltraffio” as a parody of a Nativity scene painted by da Vinci’s most talented disciple. Like a genuine archaeologist, Perrot unearths the lost (or in fact, erased) antecedent of James’s tale to enrich his (and the reader’s) understanding of it. Although the idea that at the age of thirty-three, James experienced “a masochistic identification to Christ” (100) need not be true, the argument about Leopold von Sacher-Masoch’s aesthetic influence on James’s works presented in Chapter IV is indeed interesting. Perrot’s study of James’s masochism is in turn indebted to Deleuze (100, 117).

In his neatly structured study, Perrot looks for a pattern or a formula in James’s writing and he finds it, for example, in the trio of the weak man, the strong woman, and the statue (108), in the recurrent intimacy of the lady and her servant (112), or in the reliance on the myth of the twins (Chapter VI). Perrot frequently draws analogies between James’s life and his novelistic choices or instincts. The scholar’s background in children’s literature makes him particularly sensitive to actual and latent childhood tropes: juvenile characters, reliance on fairy tales (200), or the (less convincing) analogy between writing books and holding a child (135). Perrot tends to historicize James, viewing his fiction as a part of Victorian sensibility with its (thickly veiled) interest in fetishism, sadism, necrophilia, and masochism. This perspective is adopted in Chapter IV, which offers insightful close readings of selected texts. Perrot’s comments on illnesses depicted in Henry James’s fiction is indeed a much needed corrective to the popular belief (voiced in Joyce Carol Oates’s *Wild*

*nights: Stories about the last days of Poe, Dickinson, Twain, James, and Hemingway*, 2009) that James peopled his fiction with rich, beautiful, and invariably healthy characters. However, Perrot's James emerges not only as a historical figure with an ailing body, but also as a harbinger of psychoanalysis. The scholar insists again and again that James's fiction points towards a selection of concerns which later became associated with the name of Freud (153, 162, and 249).

In Chapters VII and VIII, Perrot proves again that the points of reference in his study of literature include also the visual arts, which is justified by James's well-documented and intense interest in these forms of creativity. Perrot expertly weaves his study of James's literary anamorphoses in Chapter VII with other previously discussed themes (e.g. twins, childhood). In Chapter VIII, he comments on James's interest in caricature before he turns to the novelist's caricature of Bram Stoker's *Dracula* in his own *Turn of the Screw*. The title of the whole study clearly places this book in the centre. Perrot argues early on that *The Turn of the Screw* (1898) was the turning point in James's career (18), just as moving to Rye was, according to Perrot, a significant change in James's life. The novelist moved to the house in Rye while working on *The Turn of the Screw*, which encourages the scholar to make frequent parallel readings of biography and fiction. Employing his favourite comparative strategy, Perrot points to Florence Montgomery's *Misunderstood* as a pre-text for James's *Turn of the Screw* (162-166). He also notices the appearance of Mrs Montgomery as a character in *Washington Square*, where she is Morris Townsend's poor sister and where she stands out as a character that has – significantly, as Perrot argues – nothing to say (232). Is it not too far-fetched, though, to view the fictitious Mrs Montgomery as a replica of the female author to whom James was indebted? Perrot, who has much relish for reading James's books through or alongside their possible sources, has no doubt that it is permissible. Inflected by Freudian thought, Perrot disambiguates the governess as a hysterical woman (155), who in her perversion causes the boy's death (61). He admits, however, on another occasion, that she is also a woman "threatened by a secret danger" (126).

Although biographicalism is present throughout the study, its final part, Chapter IX, focuses on the intimate details of James's love life, pointing to his alleged, once again erased relationship with Mme Thérèse Bentzon. As both parties destroyed their correspondence, the scholar's evidence is thin, but nevertheless appealing. Perrot's reading of James in this chapter is a dream-come-true for all Jamesians who would like to see the Master in love with a woman or a man, but first and foremost, passionately.

Apart from its strengths, the book also has certain technical shortcomings that are due to inadequate copy editing which detract from its scholarly value, for example, misprints of such words as "England" and "Reform Club" (18),

unitalicized titles of books (24), “or instance” instead of “for instance” (36), “lead” instead of “led” (46,66), “Colburn” instead of “Coburn” (46), “ibe” instead of “be” (115), and “choses” instead of “chooses” (124). There are some factual slips as well, for example, James did not live to see the end of WWI (23), *Hawthorne* was published in 1879, and not in 1884 (55). Contrary to current standards, Freud, Veblen, and even James’s *Jolly Corner*, though quoted in English in Chapters I and II, appear in their French versions as references in the footnotes. Unnecessary repetitions are a blemish on the final chapter, for example, “James’s attention of Henry James” (273) or “the tracks left by James left” (274). The bibliography seems incomplete, as several of the sources indicated in the footnotes do not appear at the end of the book (e.g. Leopold von Sacher-Masoch, Didier Anzieu, or Jakob Grimm are missing). There is no index at the end of the book, which is a pity because Jean Perrot offers a wealth of material that would prove fascinating to scholars who would like to focus on specific issues or connections in and around James’s life and work.

As a comparative study of life and fiction, intertexts, intermedia, intercultural exchange, and especially James’s connection with French culture, visual culture, and popular culture, Jean Perrot’s book *Henry James’s enigmas: Turning the screw of eternity?* is a rich mine of facts and ideas, and hence well worth reading and rereading.

#### About the author

Jean Perrot is an Emeritus Professor of Comparative Literature at Paris University. His main publications include *Mythe et littérature sous le signe des jumeaux* (Paris, 1976), *Art baroque, art d’enfance* (Nancy, 1991), *Le secret de Pinocchio. Carlo Collodi et George Sand* (Paris, 2001), *Du jeu, des enfants et des livres à l’heure de la mondialisation* (Paris, 2011). He has edited *Les métamorphoses du conte* for P.I.E Peter Lang in 2004.