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Henry James and the "Aliens": In Possession of The American Scene. Gert Buelens. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2002. p/bk 164 pp. ISBN 90-420-1280-3. Price 36.68 USD.

The 1990s saw the rise of cultural studies and increasing attention was paid to James as a social and cultural critic. "At the fountainhead of this recent surge of attention [...] stands Ross Posnock's *The Trial of Curiosity*," which rescued the Master from "the ivory tower of aesthetic transcendence" and posited a fluid, context-specific Jamesian self that "displays an unwonted openness to experience, manifests a dynamic interest in the social" and results in a "wholly laudatory" attitude to the ethnic other (10-11).

Yet even Posnock fails to render an account that "rest(s) on a more complex understanding of the relation between self and other in James' writing" (12). Many critics tend to agree that there are moments in *The American Scene* when James does show openness towards the ethnic other, but nobody, not even Posnock, has demonstrated "what these moments have in common and how the very different character of other passages can be explained" (12). Buelens finds those studies most persuasive concerning "James' relation to the 'alien' that steer a middle course between embracing what apologists regard as his multiculturalist modernity and rejecting what critics see as his nativism and elitism" (15). What has hitherto been missing in James criticism, however, is "that close analysis of James' words, sentences, and paragraphs that [.] [is] essential to a proper assessment of his [James'] perspective on the ethnic other" (16). This kind of close reading of *The American Scene* and of some relevant passages of the *Autobiography* and the *Prefaces* is what Buelens offers in *Henry James and the "Aliens"* in order to address "the gulf that separates native-born and immigrant, European and American" along with the exploration of the continuities "that keep on reuniting these paradigmatically distinct socio-geographical categories" (9). In line with his inclination to steer a middle course between apologists and those who condemn James as a xenophobe and anti-Semite, Buelens' analysis uncovers the logic behind James' apparently inconsistent behavior towards the "alien": "James allows himself to be subsumed by an American scene of which the 'alien' seems master; this James is pleasurably possessed by that scene. Yet when, more rarely, James, as an individual,

tries to probe their distinctive character, then his response is determined by the reactionary, nativist, Anglo-Saxon basis of his judgment" (17).

In Chapter One, "Possessing *The American Scene:* Race and Vulgarity, Seduction and Judgment," Buelens convincingly argues that instead of the widely-acclaimed attitude of "contestatory resistance to the dominant ideology" that goes hand in hand with violence and confrontation (and is regarded as "masculine"), a true and successful democracy is better served by "manners," "translation" and "negotiation" (44), thereby raising one of the many topical matters discussed in this study. The ambiguity of late Jamesian language — so often condemned as "insufficiently masculine, and therefore immoral" (25) — may be taken as a commendable vehicle for such purposes.

At the beginning of Chapter Two, "Consuming, Performing, and Judging *The American Scene,"* Buelens warns against the dangers of taking out of context James' comments concerning immigrants and sets out to prove that the Master's attitude "cannot be captured under the blanket statement of xenophobia" (53). He shows the difference between James' pronouncements and his style by linking the former to the accumulative phase of capitalism (where "the self steadily grows by accumulating experience"); and to what Paul De Man defines as the "constative" use of language which predominates in the "Philadelphia" section of *The American Scene* (18). James' style reflects the "performative" use of language characterized by an intense enjoyment of the "sensory perception of reality" (18-9) so tangible in the New York chapters (65).

James' ultimate response to the impossibility of integrating "the overwhelming data" and the inability to "reduce the 'bigness'" is to "surrender the possessive ego and allow the unreadable immensity of the scene's otherness to possess him" (68). Chapter Three focuses on this immensity, with special attention paid to such natural features and public monuments. Buelens furthermore stresses James' humorous side, as well as his belief in the amusing element residing in the "horrific" (97).

In the final, fourth chapter, "Queering the American Scene," Buelens focuses on the "intense eroticism" of *The American Scene.* The object is unimportant — it does not matter whether it is male or female, human or inanimate. Buelens links this form of sexuality to the generally problematic word "queer," which he convincingly argues should not be equated with

homoeroticism. As its object of desire, this erotic drive feeds on the already mentioned "overwhelming other" and, instead of penetration, it takes the form of "oblique possession" (20), which "derives its jouissance rather from the replacement of the erotic object by a scene of desire with which that object is linked both metaphorically [...] and metonymically" (159). With its focus on questions of identity, Buelens' study is a welcome addition not only to James scholarship but to cultural, ethnic and queer studies in general as well. Its approach is excellent, shedding new light on both key passages and on sections that have hitherto been ignored. Its chapters are evenly proportioned (only Chapter Two is somewhat shorter); its main text as well as its handy footnotes testify to Buelens' immense and up-to-date knowledge of James criticism. The book does not have a conclusion, but the introduction and the four chapters are so well constructed that they perfectly convey the main thesis of the book.

Works Cited

Posnock, Ross. *The Trial of Curiosity: Henry James, William James, and the Challenge of Modernity*. New ed. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1991. Print.

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