

Book Review

Ralph Norrman, *Techniques of Ambiguity in the Fiction of Henry James: With Special Reference to In the Cage and The Turn of the Screw*. Åbo 1977. Acta Aboensis, Ser. A, Vol. 54, nr 2. 180 pp. plus List of Works Cited and Abstract.

Techniques of Ambiguity in the Fiction of Henry James by Ralph Norrman places itself firmly within the mainstream of Henry James criticism, which again happens to be the mainstream of academic, Anglo-American criticism. The study demonstrates that methods and techniques derived from New Criticism can still illuminate obscure corners and shades of meaning in a given literary work.

Ralph Norrman distinguishes between "two main components in a literary work imitation (the mimetic element) and system (the transformation of this subject-matter in form, style and craftsmanship)," and goes on to state that "ambiguity belongs essentially to the second" (7). His preoccupation like that of Henry James is the way "form" can be used to heighten life and in that process turn life into art. Like the new critics he renounces the use of extra-literary systems of significance and resolutely concentrates on the text itself.

Ralph Norrman's study consists of two parts. Part One is a thorough attempt to systematize what he calls Henry James' "ambiguity-creating devices," a designation which is more precise than beautiful. He deals with four main forms of such devices: 1: *The incomplete reversal*, which has to do with the writer's leaving two interpretations of a given situation open, interpretations which are both possible but mutually exclusive. 2: *Blanks* which concern an absence of meaning or precision on the part of the writer. 3: *The transformation of codes into neo-codes* often by way of symbols. An example of this device is the way the word "supper" comes to mean "sexual intercourse" in the verbal exchanges between the telegraphist and Captain Everard in the tale: *In the Cage*. Finally 4: *Misunderstandings*. Ralph Norrman explains Henry James' wide use of misunderstandings between characters in his books by the special, subjective point-of-view technique he adopts. Ralph Norrman's exemplifications of these devices from the whole Henry James opus are much to the point and seem to exhaust all possibilities in the rich texture of Henry James' prose.

Part Two of the study is made up of interpretations of two well-known tales by Henry James: *In the Cage* and *The Turn of the Screw*. The analyses make full use of the categories which have been established in Part One. Ralph Norrman's overall thesis about Henry James' thematic preoccupations in the stories and novels of the late nineties and the turn of the century is that "objective reality begins to show its teeth" (118-119). Ralph Norrman suggests that an overriding concern in the work of Henry James was to probe the possibilities and the limits of the "romantic imagination," and his reading of *The Turn of the Screw* and especially of *In the Cage* seems to bring out what he sees as a general tendency of

the works of this period: Although the protagonists fly further than ever on the wings of imagination, "ultimately [they] have the scales fall from their eyes so that they can return to objective reality" (120).

The chosen stories are well suited to explore the lures and dangers of living in the imagination or perhaps even in delusions, and "ambiguity" is a category which will bring the critic far when he seeks to establish the focal points where objective reality and imagination meet and blend and shy away from each other again in a perpetual motion. Ralph Norrman introduces Henry James' interest in the process of knowledge as a mediator between the two extremes. He then goes on to show very convincingly that the vocabulary especially in *The Sacred Fount* and *In the Cage* is heavily dependent upon the vocabulary used in scientific inquiry, and concludes that a "presentation of dubious scientific methods thus becomes an ambiguity-creating device in this type of literary work" (41). This is an observation which deepens our understanding of certain characteristic elements in the Jamesian text. Norrman even in a footnote suggests that "perhaps there is a connection between James's 'scientific' themes, with their manifestation in a scientific vocabulary, and the spirit of the age" (41). But Ralph Norrman does not go on to substantiate the idea.

Another example of the way the study uses the codification of "ambiguity" in a very interesting way, is its treatment of the significance of "hats" and "hatlessness" in the analysis of *The Turn of the Screw* (91-92). Ralph Norrman demonstrates a clear connection between being hatless and being under the influence of the ghosts, but having established this thematic connection he stops short. He does so out of necessity, it seems to me. In this example as in many others Ralph Norrman with great insight and fidelity to the text brings into mutual play the various elements of the stories and novels. He fails, however, to account for the way in which "James's fictional idelect" (11) becomes intelligible as an expression of the way a certain group of people in a specific period and place make sense of their own lives and relatedness to other individuals and groups. In order to do this Ralph Norrman will have to give up his distinction between "imitation" and "system" and treat literary works as integrated "systems of meaning" or "significance." To do this for the work of Henry James is clearly an enormous task, and it also presupposes conscientious, detailed textual analysis of the kind Ralph Norrman has provided.

Bodil Folke Frederiksen
Roskilde University