

ABRAHAM SOLOMON AND HENRY JAMES'S "THE BIRTHPLACE"

Current interest in the Victorian aspects of Pre-Raphaelite paintings draws attention to their genre content, (witness G. D. Rossetti's "Found" and W. H. Hunt's "The Awakening Conscience,") as well as attracting new emphasis to other Victorian genre pictures. The forthcoming exhibition in London in 1985 of the Solomon family of painters illustrates this nicely. Abraham Solomon (1824-1862), the older brother of the Pre-Raphaelite, Simeon Solomon (1840-1905) taught the latter painting in his studio.¹ Abraham enjoyed the wide-spread success achieved by genre painters of the contemporary scene, success denied his brother's idiosyncratic painting, although Burne-Jones was among Simeon's most ardent admirers. (Their sister, Rebecca (1832-1886), also was a painter).

Henry James, among the first to praise Burne-Jones in 1878², provides an interesting link to the Solomon family, joining his taste for the former to his nostalgia for the genre painting of Abraham Solomon. After the turn of the century James became much more attached to the arts and objects of his youth. They appeared frequently in his fiction when he returned to England in 1905 from his first trip to America in twenty years. However, even before that trip the tale, "The Birthplace" (1903) included a reminder of a sentimental picture of his youth which is here used metaphorically. In this story the hero, Morris Gedge, the cultivated but impoverished caretaker of the museum and reputed birthplace of "the supreme poet," Shakespeare, is horrified because he must sacrifice the few scanty facts known about the birth of the great poet to the desire of the public for drama. He almost loses his job when he refuses to tell lies and to put on a "show." And then, seriously threatened with the loss of his job and getting himself into the Shakespearean spirit of the thing, he goes to extremes in the opposite direction, assuming a grand rhetorical manner and making a work of art out of the fanciful material the sightseers and the board of trustees want. A sympathetic young couple from New York understand his predicament; they have heard him in his previous more serious lectures and have now come to see his new version.

After his brilliant performance, in which he hams it up, Gedge's wife announces that the administrator of the museum, Mr. Grant-Jackson (endowed with the name of two generals who were also American presidents, indicating supreme authority), wants to see him. Gedge fears he will be sacked and deprived of his livelihood, but it turns out, on the contrary, that he has triumphed with his