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Revisiting Henry James: High Modernists and Objectivists

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Abstract

This article addresses the manner in which two generations of American modernists read and responded to Henry James. It identifies readings by the first-generation modernist poets Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot and William Carlos Williams and the second-generation modernist poets Louis Zukofsky and George Oppen as significant and then goes on to suggest that the approach towards James of the second-generation modernists also implies a complex and revealing relation to their modernist forebears.

Keywords

Henry James, Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot, William Carlos Williams, Louis Zukofsky, George Oppen, Modernism, Objectivist Verse, Poetry

In this article I will address Henry James's reception by two generations of American modernist poets, whom I shall designate as High Modernists and Objectivists respectively. The central exemplar of Jamesian modernism in the first of these groups is Ezra Pound, whose work I will address at greatest length, though works by T.S. Eliot and William Carlos Williams also approach the American novelist. Of the Objectivists it would be Louis Zukofsky and George Oppen that responded most fully to James, and I shall address their work accordingly. I will also chart a peculiarity in the Objectivists' approach to James in that their poetic reception also provides a commentary on Pound and the High Modernists. Thus the Objectivists' reading of James becomes a simultaneous reading of the High Modernists' reading of James, giving an insight into the complex nature of modernist influence and reception.

Henry James and the High Modernists

For transatlantic modernists such as Eliot and Pound, Henry James was both a pioneer exile and the creator of a social and tonal subtlety of analysis and expression that would provide them with a benchmark and a useful literary-analytical tool. For the cisatlantic Williams the same qualities provided the impetus for an irony that the transatlantics would also occasionally employ. These were poets born in James's novelistic heyday—Williams and Pound in 1883 and 1885 respectively, between *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881) and *The Bostonians* (1886), while Eliot was born in 1888, the year of *The Reverberator*. James, then, was a fixture on the literary scene from the beginning of these poets' lives, and when writers like Pound and Eliot moved to London it was with the intention of inhabiting the same literary milieu that James had fashioned there. For Pound, at least, meeting and speaking to James was high among his priorities on arrival in London 1908 (Moody 179-80).

A trio of poems by these writers respond to James's historic novelistic phase; Pound's "Portrait d'une Femme" (1912), Eliot's "Portrait of a Lady" (written between 1910 and 1915, published in 1917) and Williams's "Portrait of a Lady" (1920)—poems that encapsulate each of these poets' views on James. Pound and Eliot's poems follow recognizably similar trajectories; Pound's *femme* floats serenely among "[i]deas, old gossip, oddments of all things" (*Poems and Translations* 233) and is, finally, adrift on a sea of tone and nuance familiar from James:

> In the slow float of differing light and deep,
> No! there is nothing! In the whole and all,
> Nothing that's quite your own.
> Yet this is you. (234)

Eliot's "Portrait of a Lady" also strives for the Jamesian tone—approaching "all the things to be said, or left unsaid" and the "velleities and carefully caught regrets" (*Collected Poems* 18) of classic Jamesiana. Williams's Lady, however, is further from Jamesian practices—he mimes an inarticulate poetaster attempting to praise said "lady" in terms of a nature that inadvertently casts her as thick-thighed, frigid-kneed and hairy-calved; a parody of the Jamesian mode that finally collapses into inarticulacy and bathos—the sinuosity of the Jamesian sentence trips the persona, tying him in knots:

> Agh, petals maybe. How
> should I know?
> Which shore? Which shore?
> —the petals from some hidden
> appletree—Which shore?
> I said petals from an appletree. (129)

Williams's poem offers the most extreme parody of these modernist Jamesians, but to a greater or a lesser degree, *all* of these poems are parodies, and only gesture towards the great representational subtlety that marks out James's true mastery.

In "Henry James," an essay that he contributed to *Poetry* shortly after James's death, Pound encapsulates the author's contribution to letters:

> I have heard no word of the major James, of the hater of tyranny; book after early book against oppression, the domination of modern life; not worked out in the diagrams of Greek tragedy, not labeled "epos" of "Aeschylus". The outbursts in *The Tragic Muse*, the whole of *The Turn of the Screw*, human liberty, personal liberty, the rights of the individual against all sorts of intangible bondage! The passion of it, the continual passion of it in this man who, fools said, didn't "feel." (*Literary Essays* 296)

Pound's analysis speaks to a more profound understanding of James's than Eliot's pastiche or Williams's dismissal—and yet, for all the Jamesian sensitivity in Pound's early work, and his appreciation of the Master's practice, Jamesian liberatory equivocation would not finally find a place on Pound's tonal palette. The James that we meet in canto 7 of Pound's central long poem *The Cantos* appears as a charming memory draped in velleities, implicitly contrasted with the greater efficacy of modernist didacticism in the Poundian mode:

> The old men's voices, beneath the columns of false marble,
> The modish and darkish walls,
> Discreeter gilding, and the paneled wood
> Suggested, for the leasehold is
> Touched with an imprecision… about three squares;

> The house too thick, the paintings a shade too oiled.
> And the great domed head, *con gli occhi onesti e tardi*
> Moves before me, phantom with weighted motion,
> *Grave incessu*, drinking the tone of things,
> And the old voice lifts itself
> weaving an endless sentence. (24)

"Portrait d'une Femme" had been published in 1912, Pound's important essay on James—which Pound paraphrases in *The Cantos*—in 1918, and this canto was probably written in around 1920 and published in this form in 1925. We should note that James's indeterminacy, praised in Pound's earlier essay, is now changed to "imprecision"—a shift that points to a hardening in Pound's attitude towards James. And when Pound *does* address what he terms "oppression" and "the domination of modern life" in his essay in his poetry his tone is one of great rage that is far removed from James's discrete equivocation, and his method one that privileges, though it does not always achieve, a version of scholarly accuracy and clarity that precludes the kind of "chopping logic" that James delights in.[1]

Henry James and the Objectivists

The second generation of American modernists, however, would adopt a more nuanced approach towards James. Less comfortable with James's incomplete depiction of class-relations than the High Modernists, they would, nonetheless, make far greater use of both James's studied indeterminacy and the connection of this process with the defense of the oppressed that Pound noted. We might see this as relating to their backgrounds; whereas Pound and Eliot both came from established, WASP-ish backgrounds, the next generation of modernists derived from more marginal origins. The poets I will address here are the Objectivists; a group of poets who were mostly Jewish, all Leftist—either card-carrying Communists or fellow-travellers—and from urban backgrounds that were only distantly familiar to James.

1 "As I have already had occasion to relate, he was angry at finding himself reduced to chopping logic about this young lady; he was vexed at his want of instinctive certitude as to how far her eccentricities were generic, national, and how far they were personal" ("Daisy Miller: A Study" 198).

Thus when Louis Zukofsky, in his *Autobiography*, connects his birth to James we should expect dissonance:

> I was born in Manhattan, January 23, 1904, the year Henry James returned to the American scene to look at the Lower East Side. The contingency appeals to me as a forecast of the first-generation infusion into twentieth-century American literature. (13)

James's account of New York in *The American Scene* contains a tone and vocabulary that would have been familiar to a Jew of the Lower East Side like Zukofsky. James describes the action of humanity in these immigrant neighborhoods as "a great swarming, a swarming that had begun to thicken, infinitely, as soon as we crossed to the East side and long before we had got to Rutgers Street. There is no swarming like that of Israel when once Israel has got a start" (*The American Scene* 464). James goes on to describe the swarming "aliens" as "a Jewry that had burst all bounds" (464), and asks an important question: "What meaning, in presence of such impressions, can continue to attach to such a term as the 'American' character?—what type, as the result of such a prodigious amalgam, such a hotch-potch of racial ingredients, is to be conceived as shaping itself?" (456).

In the twelfth movement of his important poem *"A"* Zukofsky imagines an encounter with James during his brief visit to the streets of his youth, describing the scene of Rutgers Street and the environs of the Lower East Side, before noting with pleasure James's kindly, fresh-faced and somehow Jewish persona (Zukofsky compares the novelist to a "Chassid," an observant Jew) ("A" 12, 148-49). James becomes Jewish in Zukofsky's hallucination—that casual anti-Semitism of *The American Scene* that we have seen subsumed in this new hybrid character. This is the James of radical, liberatory indeterminacy, consciously rearranged, in spite of himself, in support of another kind of outsider—the turn-of-the-century New York Jew. James concludes his analysis of Lower East Side as follows:

> The accent of the very ultimate future, in the States, may be destined to become the most beautiful on the globe and the very music of humanity [...] but whatever we shall know it for,

> certainly, we shall not know it for English—in any sense for which there is an existing literary measure. (*The American Scene* 471)

Such a new "literary measure" would be just what the experimentally-focused second-generation modernists would strain for, and James's example would be a useful one, primarily for Zukofsky's immensely subtle language. Though James felt that such subtlety was exactly what would be lost under the pressure of the incomers, this kind of English, sufficiently malleable to speak truth to power, was exactly what the new modernists sought.

Zukofsky was born, appropriately enough, as *The American Scene* was being drafted. Oppen was born four years later, in 1908; the year of the publication of "The Jolly Corner," another result of James's "strangely belated return to America" ("The Jolly Corner" 193), and which serves as a source for the uncanny tone of James's cameo in *"A."* Like Zukofsky, Oppen was Jewish, though he was, more like James, from a wealthy background and had only recently left his native San Francisco for New York where, in 1934, he published his first collection of poems, *Discrete Series*.

The volume begins with the following, untitled, poem, one that links James directly to Oppen's political and aesthetic concerns:

> The knowledge not of sorrow, you were
> saying, but of boredom
> Is—aside from reading speaking
> smoking—
> Of what, Maude Blessingbourne it was,
> wished to know when, having risen,
> "approached the window as if to see
> what really was going on";
> And saw rain falling, in the distance
> more slowly,
> The road clear from her past the window-
> glass—
> Of the world, weather-swept, with which
> one shares the century. (*The New Collected Poems* 5)

In this poem we see two direct references to James. Maude Blessingbourne is a slightly misspelled (with an additional 'e' added to Maud) version of the heroine of James's curious late tale "The Story in It," from which the lines "approached the window as if to see what really was going on" are also quoted (308).

An enigmatic poem, it seems to enact a conversation—the set up of other poems in *Discrete Series* point us toward the possibility that it may take place between the poet and his wife, Mary—a conversation that detects a dynamic aspect in the quality of boredom. Lyn Hejinian writes that

> the boredom Oppen has in mind (and indeed aspires to sustain) is neither the alienated anomie of the disaffected nor the boorish boredom of the disdainful; what he proffers is a precognitive, pretemporalizing threshold of wonder not yet attached to anything but across which everything can travel. (49)

It is, then, a radically liberated kind of sensibility—one that Oppen in his untitled poem envisions as a liminal emotion that provides a passageway from the High Victorianism of James, to "the world, weather-swept, with which / one shares the century."

As Hejinian points out, then, "The Story in It" presents a threshold for James. Written in 1900, it was one of the writer's first works of the twentieth century, as well as one of his most modernist in technique and outlook. The world that James described at the beginning of "The Story in It" is a symbolic, meta-fictional world—made up of literary ambiguities (compounded with a new self-awareness that is not so obviously present in early novels like *The Portrait of a Lady*) and long, complex, late-Jamesian sentences.

Such structurally intricate sentences offer James the chance to emphasize the psychologically incisive indeterminacy that he is interested in in his late tales—the kind of practice that Pound ironizes in his portrait of James in *The Cantos*. Oppen's poem repeats this method, offering a sentence as serpentine as anything in James. Ruth Jennison compares this sentence structure explicitly with the Jamesian method:

> This exaggerated prolonging of hypotaxis makes manifest the latent multiple temporalities of the sentence form. Our Blessingbourne poem begins with the past imperfect, indicating the imprecise near-past moment of the poem's initial enunciation: when "you / were saying." We then turn to Blessingbourne's personal domestic temporality, in the implied past of the poem: "having risen." "And saw rain falling, in the distance / more slowly" traces this past forward in both time and space. We conclude with Blessingbourne abstracted into a universal subject of the present, a present that is always right now becoming history: "with which *one* shares the century." (77)

This Jamesian sentence structure, allowing such temporal indeterminacy, is a key inheritance for Oppen, one that sets him apart from his immediate forebear Pound, and which posits a far less determinate understanding than Pound and Eliot's didactic High Modernism. In fact, James's indeterminacy would be central to Oppen's resistance against the High Modernist politics and cultural assumptions that were in conflict with his own Jewishness and left-wing convictions. Oppen would write

> I wanted James in the book—secretly, superstitiously, I carved his initials on that sapling book.
>
> I argued, shortly after *Discrete* was printed, that James and not Hemingway was the useful model for 'proletarian' writers […]. (*The Selected Letters* 241)

This is "the hater of tyranny" pointed out by Pound, but what Oppen realizes, and that Pound forgets, is that it is through James's "endless sentence" that that battle is undertaken.

Conclusion

In this article I have shown two different models for the appreciation of James; that displayed by the transatlantic and cisatlantic High Modernists (a method characterized by an early interest in James that is finally equivocal) and that of the Objectivists (a method which, though superficially even further from James's nuanced realism than the first-generation of modernists, actually engages far more closely with Jamesian practices). Oppen's approach towards James's "The Story in It" is emblematic of this difference—where the first generation of literary modernists had rejected James's elaborate prose on the charge of lack of clarity, Oppen would insist upon just this aspect of James's work, celebrating it and making it a crucial element of the Objectivists' claiming of literary modernism.

We can see that Zukofsky and Oppen use James in ways that are opposed to Eliot and Pound's parodies. We should note the particular version of James the Objectivists reverence; Pound, Eliot and Williams all parody *The Portrait of a Lady*, James's breakthrough work, the earliest of his mature novels. Zukofsky and Oppen, however, approach *The American Scene* and "The Story in It," two late works that are more uncomfortably self-aware and indeterminate than the early blockbusters. Both Jamesian indeterminacy and the disquisitions on writing that these texts provide fuel the Objectivists' interest: James helps Zukofsky consider his own ethnic marginality and helps Oppen to realign himself in relation to both the nineteenth-century Realist novel and High Modernism. Jamesian realism, self-scrutinizing in "The Story in It," is placed into a new social, historical and aesthetic context with Oppen's "century," while the mechanics of James's mature literary style are employed as an answer to the conservative pessimism of High Modernist fragmentation.

Oppen's détournement of the Jamesian sentence speaks of a more integral inhabiting of James's work than the High Modernists venture, then. The poet uses James in a Jamesian mode to pursue an apparently shared aesthetic-moral project, whereas Pound, Eliot and Williams had parodied James in a way that, at the same time as affording him praise, also refused his most distinctive methods an importance on their own terms.

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