

INTRODUCTION TO “FURTHER NEW DIRECTIONS IN JAMES AND LITERARY STUDIES”

TODD BAROSKY AND JUSTIN ROGERS-COOPER

This is the second of two consecutive special issues of *William James Studies* that explore the relationship between the work of William James and the field of literary studies. The five essays collected here reinvigorate established links, such as between James and modernism, and forge new connections between James and literary regionalism, speculative fiction, and working-class literature. The James who emerges in these pages is a dynamic thinker who probes different dimensions of human experience and communicates his discoveries in a language that is both accessible and adaptable. Indeed, James remains a vital presence in literary studies today not merely for the range, originality, and influence of his ideas, but also on account of what Paul Stob terms his unique “discursive posture.”¹ As a writer and public speaker, James developed “a rhetorical style capable of animating individuals who stood outside the professional cultures of which [he] was a part.”² If Stob is chiefly concerned with the “ordinary Americans” and “popular audiences” who bought James’s books and thrilled to hear him lecture on psychology, religion, and philosophy, his insight also applies to the contributors to this special issue.³ They, like many other literary scholars at work today, find in James an inspiration and a guide for formulating new

configurations between literary studies and other fields of intellectual inquiry.

This special issue picks up where the first left off, with further explorations of the links between James and modernism. The opening two essays attend to figures on the fringes of traditional modernist studies and so expand our sense of the scope of James's influence. In the first essay, "It's Not Personal: Modernist Remediations of William James's 'Personal Religion,'" Graham Jensen revisits James's provisional distinction in *Varieties of Religious Experience* between personal and institutional religion to argue, with reference to the poetry of E.J. Pratt, a prominent Canadian modernist, that James inspired a socially-pragmatic approach to religious belief that shaped poetic expressions of personal religion throughout the modernist era. For Pratt, poetry opened a space in which private religious belief could be publicly shared, and so have salutary social effects, without becoming dogmatic or institutionalized. In his study of Pratt's poetry, particularly *Brébeuf and His Brethren* and "The Truant," Jensen urges us to rethink two assumptions about modernist poetry: that it participates in, if it does not actively encourage, secularization; and that it tends toward obscurantism. While both James and Pratt were alive to the shortcomings and distortions of language, both stressed in their written work language's "pragmatic social applications" (148).

Emily Gephart's "Sensation and Suggestion: William James and Sadakichi Hartmann's Symbolist Aesthetics" redirects our conversation into the literature about modernism, seeking connections between James's work and modernist art. She focuses on Sadakichi Hartmann, an art critic who around the turn of the twentieth century published wide-ranging articles in venues such as *McClure's* and *Camera Work* that championed the emergent formal properties of modern art. Gephart makes a compelling case for the affinity between Hartmann and James. First, she reveals how

James's psychological theories permeated the avant garde circles in which Hartmann moved, providing a rigorous foundation for the kinds of aesthetic experimentation that Hartmann espoused. Second, and more specifically, Gephart links James's dynamic accounts of embodied perception and creative consciousness with Hartmann's aesthetic of the "suggestive"—a concept that appears prominently in James's oeuvre. Both Hartmann and James, too, fuse their writing with a literary style that reanimates their expertise for intellectual work beyond art criticism or philosophy. Gephart helps us see Hartmann, like James, as a "literary" author.

Ultimately, we see Hartmann and James as allies in the fight against "vicious intellectualism," which David H. Evans defines as "the imposition of a set of transcendental categories and fixed principles that provided the ultimate definition and foundation of reality. Such an approach," Evans adds, "inevitably sacrifices lived experience to the predetermined limitations of concepts."⁴ In his criticism, Hartmann embraced "diversity and divergence" in both lived experience and modernist art; and, like James, he "affirmed the role of progressive modern culture in a heterogeneous democracy" (182).

James's own reflections on the heterogeneity of American democracy during an age of imperial expansion serve as the point of departure for the next essay in this special issue, Cécile Roudeau's "Like Islands in the Sea': Intermingled Consciousness and the Politics of the Self in Sarah Orne Jewett's Late Stories." Roudeau posits an affinity between James and Sarah Orne Jewett, a regionalist writer best known for her local-color depictions of rural New England life. Reading James's "The Philippine Question" beside two of Jewett's stories, "The Queen's Twin" and "The Foreigner," Roudeau suggests that both writers sought to "psychologize imperialism" (194) by mapping the "cognitive patterns of selfhood in a world turned global" (192). Jewett's stories, Roudeau argues, are best read as Jamesian explorations at the

boundaries of the porous self. If imperialism threatens the integrity of the nineteenth-century liberal self, so too does it make possible for Jewett's characters new kinds of transatlantic communication and social combinations. "There is no point of view absolutely public and universal," James writes in his preface to *Talks to Teachers* (201). In her fiction, Jewett similarly resists a monolithic perspective, preferring to create "experimental spaces" (208) that open investigations into "alternative modalities of the commons" (194).

From rural New England to the planet of Anarras: the next essay traces James's influence within the more obviously "experimental spaces" of twentieth-century speculative fiction. In "Variations on Theme by William James": Varieties of Religious Experience in the Writing of Ursula K. Le Guin," Amelia Z. Greene draws on original archival work to document Ursula Le Guin's engagement with James, while also suggesting that his description of religious experience in *Varieties* offers a conceptual framework for recognizing the animating impulses of speculative fiction more broadly. The first section of the essay, which shows how Le Guin's short story "The Ones Who Walk Away From Omelas" was inspired by James's "The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life," reminds us how James's unique discursive posture—his penchant, as Stob puts it, for locating philosophy among the "experiences and perceptions" of "ordinary people"—has repeatedly invited dramatic treatment of his philosophical ideas.⁵ In her reading of *The Dispossessed*, Greene argues that Le Guin dramatizes James's conception of "the religious attitude" (223). Her hero, like James's informants in *Varieties*, is moved by powerful beliefs that remain unconfirmed by evidence and seeks new ways to harmonize with the universe. This is, not coincidentally, also the attitude of the writer of speculative fiction: "If we would envision a more ideal way of life, Le Guin contents, we must enter the realm of the unprovable, and proceed as if it might be possible" (232). Thus while Greene's essay

raises questions about science, religion, and epistemology, she is keen to emphasize how, for Le Guin, such questions ultimately also concerned the politics of utopia and the possibilities of new social worlds.

If politics is the art of the possible, then James's pragmatism offers us a powerful tool for charting the horizons of possibility in modern politics. This is the central claim advanced in our final essay, "'Truth Written in Hell-Fire': William James and *The Destruction of Gotham*," by Justin Rogers-Cooper. Arguing that we should not conflate James's personal politics with pragmatism's explanatory power, Rogers-Cooper adopts Joaquin Miller's 1886 sensational gothic novel *The Destruction of Gotham* as a means to test pragmatism's capacity to explain social and political change. Miller's novel carries its readers to an event horizon: the total devastation of New York City by a radicalized working-class insurgency. This apocalyptic event, and historical events like it, from the 1871 Paris Commune to the 1877 General Strike, might not have been countenanced by liberal pragmatists like James. But Rogers-Cooper, through a deft reading of representations of working-class reality in Miller's novel and James's own writing, demonstrates how the shared embodied sensations of hunger, disability, and abjection can result in eruptions of collective violence that are not criminal or irrational, "but pragmatic in the fullest sense of James's term" (272). Pragmatism is not a politics, liberal or otherwise; it is a philosophy that reveals how politics works. Pragmatism accounts for a range of political possibilities, even the most violent and extreme. Rogers-Cooper situates James within his political moment—the cascading crises of nineteenth-century laissez faire capitalism—but his essay might show us just how fully pragmatism can illuminate our own political predicaments as well. For we, too, live at a time when fantasies of urban destruction are de rigueur in popular culture, and when the liberal center seems ready to lose its hold on American politics.

The writers considered in these five essays—Pratt, Hartmann, Jewett, Le Guin, and Miller—have little in common save for their engagement with James; or, more accurately, what they share is James’s capacity to engage with them. The divergent interests on display in the two consecutive special issues of *William James Studies* reflect our priorities as guest editors. We have not tried to circumscribe the field, and neither have we sought to engage only with traditional threads of scholarship. Just the opposite: even at the risk of neglecting established literary and critical canons, we have, in this special issue, in particular, endeavored to indicate the essential openness of James to sometimes neglected fields, texts, and authors. We did this because we believe each essay invites new lines of inquiry into James’s relationship to literary studies, and because we are confident that they will lead in exciting, and often unanticipated, new directions.

Saint Martin’s University
tbarosky@stmartin.edu

LaGuardia Community College, CUNY
jrogers@lagcc.cuny.edu

REFERENCES

- Evans, David H. “Unstiffening All Our Theories: William James and the Culture of Modernism.” In *Understanding James, Understanding Modernism*, edited by David H. Evans, 1-16. New York: Bloomsbury, 2017.
- Stob, Paul. *William James and the Art of Personal Statement*. East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2013.

NOTES

¹ Stob, *Art of Popular Statement*, xv.

² *Ibid.*, xxiii.

³ *Ibid.*, xiv.

⁴ Evans, "Unstiffening All Our Theories," 8.

⁵ Stob, *Art of Popular Statement*, xxvii.