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"Whimsies and Crochets": Pragmatism, Poetry, and Literary Criticism's Founding Gesture

Kristen Case

- 1 The premise of this essay is that one of the fundamental contributions of Jamesian thought to early-twentieth-century culture was the idea of truth as a participatory process involving a range of both human and nonhuman actors. Lately the idea of truth as a "construction" has proven problematic, particularly in a moment when, in the United States, we find ourselves confronted with the specter of "alternative facts" and "fake news"—and so I wish to revisit this key Jamesian idea, but not through the familiar figure of construction—which seems inevitably to be taken up (as both Bruno Latour and Isabelle Stengers have pointed out) with a "merely" attached, as in "scientific laws are *merely constructions*,"—and which also lamentably suggests a fixed and static edifice, rather than a Jamesian flux.¹ So rather than construction I want to talk about *participation*, which etymologically means "to take our share of." The *part* in participation reminds us that we aren't responsible for the whole thing, but we are responsible for *our share*. Participation, for James, was at once epistemological and ethical. The epistemological claim, as articulated "Pragmatism and Humanism," is that "in our cognitive as well as in our active lives we are creative. We add both to the subject and to the predicate parts of reality" (599). The ethical corollary to this claim is nicely illustrated by the following passage from *Pragmatism*, in which James describes

a world growing not integrally but piecemeal by the contributions of its several parts. Take the hypothesis seriously and as a live one. Suppose that the world's author put the case to you before creation, saying: "I am going to make a world not certain to be saved, a world the perfection of which shall be conditional merely, the condition being that each several agent does its own 'level best.' I offer you the chance of taking part in such a world. Its safety, you see, is unwarranted. It is a real adventure, with real danger, yet it may win through. It is a social scheme of cooperative work genuinely to be done. Will you join the procession? Will you trust yourself and trust the other agents enough to face the risk?" Should you in all seriousness, if participation in such a world were proposed to you, feel bound to

reject it as not safe enough? Would you say that, rather than be part and parcel of so fundamentally pluralistic and irrational a universe, you preferred to relapse into the slumber of nonentity from which you had been momentarily aroused by the tempter's voice? (112)

- 2 It is significant that for James the only alternative to participation is "nonentity." *Non-participation* is not an option if one is to remain on the side of being. We ought, therefore, to own up to and embrace our participation in the world, to willingly do our share of its co-operative work.
- 3 My argument in this essay has two parts. The first, already well-established by Joan Richardson, Steven Meyer, and others, is that in the early decades of the twentieth century the Jamesian epistemology and ethos of participation had a transformative effect on U.S. poetry—my example here will be the poetry of George Oppen, largely because this gives me a good excuse to examine the recently discovered, pre-*Discrete Series* poems published in pamphlet form by New Directions in 2018, but I suspect I could have chosen almost any major US poet of this period to make this point.²
- 4 The second part of the argument is that in these same decades, the then-emergent profession of literary criticism refused to absorb the participatory ethos, even as other disciplines, perhaps most notably education and anthropology, were being transformed by it. My principle example here will be I.A. Richards, whose *Principles of Literary Criticism* I'll consider as a founding document for the discipline. I'll conclude with some thoughts about what the adoption of a participatory approach might look like in literary critical studies, with special attention to the transactional model of reading theorized by Louise Rosenblatt beginning in the late 1930s.³

1. Oppen, Richards/Participation, Distance

- 5 There is much to be said about the newly discovered "21 Poems" of George Oppen, which predate what had previously been considered his earliest published work, *Discrete Series*—but for the purposes of this talk I will limit myself to a brief discussion of the first poem, which seems to me to speak in every way, on every level, of the fact of our participation.

Round muscles in the damp womb
 Move. Child (folded, articulated: knees bent, back rounded)
 Fills the dark wholly. Knee jerks shortly, entirely silent.
 Surges of blood in the smaller veins beat perhaps more sharply.

Begins—
 (Hand jumps against the soft wall) —

But for the bound darkness,
 Back, back sinking! The dark pressure, slowly absolute.
 Lurches (soundless). Forced muscle to muscle
 Pressed blind ungrouping, parting the live personal flesh.
 That is it! (The woman screaming)
 Round baby-head to the battered light
 (O God she)
 (But dawned in the veins unmoved and unremarkably warm)
 New light blunts on the body, shatters in vacant eyes. Shot thru
 already
 This stuff with fragile passages. Light has delicate forceps.

The world leaps against the wall,
 Spread shapes, colours dissolving. This has been standing
 How long, in the waiting light, visible?
 Born! Pulses accurately,
 Surges down soft wrists.

Begins unhesitating. (Of all we three only) Damp throat beneath, firm with muscles.
 To
 which
 Born? (No return. The woman
 Again the woman. The path sealed, no dark pool of comfort.)
 The woman returns. Here dropped the world.
 But the warm breasts, drawing from inward,
 (The round muscles, the ribbed cavern, untaut, unsuspended
 Life irrevocably bright. But the warm breasts, outreached,
 Have followed him. (11)

- 6 This remarkable description of childbirth, written around 1929, takes up a perspective that shifts between observer and participant. In the opening lines, Oppen adopts the Dickinsonian strategy of a logically impossible perspective: an observer *inside* the damp womb who is not the child, but who sees that the child “fills the dark wholly.” Of course, such an image might also be arrived at from a position *outside* the womb from the child’s back and knees articulated against the mother’s body, but the slippage here between what is inferred and what is *seen* dramatizes the fluidity of all such movements, the way perception *participates* in the world extending our vision from the seen to the unseen. In the poem’s opening lines, Oppen brings the question of inside and outside to the fore, yoking the question of the poem’s perspective to the event it describes, *parturition*, or the act of giving birth.
- 7 Here I’d like to think about the coincidence of the sound-similarity of *parturition* and *participation*. These words have different etymologies: *parturition* means labor, coming from the Latin verb meaning “to bring forth” while *participate* comes from a different Latin verb meaning “to take part.” I am struck, however, by the way these words together are suggestive of James’s description of reality as “social scheme of co-operative work genuinely to be done.”
- 8 In his introduction to Oppen’s *Collected Poems*, Michael Davidson describes the “odd merging of American pragmatism and European existentialism in Oppen’s poetry,” noting that “in both systems, knowledge is a relationship *between* rather than *of* things, a negotiation rather than an appropriation.” Davidson describes the way this relational or participatory ethos works both in the poems of *Discrete Series* and in the later *Of Being Numerous*, noting that Oppen “places his faith in parts of speech and speech acts rather than images because it is only in its reduced, functional state that language may reveal its complicity in the production (rather than refecation) of reality” (xxxii-ii). The idea of the mind’s participation in the world is reflected everywhere in Oppen’s writing, and there is good reason to suspect that Jamesian pragmatism is an important part of Oppen’s American inheritance.⁴
- 9 In the opening poem of the series we see this participatory ethos playing itself out not only on the level of language but also on the level of life itself—one is tempted to say, on the level on ontology. Language suggests not only the ways in which we participate in what we know, but also the fact that our very being is a product of labor, the cooperative labor between the body of the mother and the body of the child, though

such labor is hidden from view in order to maintain our forgetfulness of our dependence on others. Our essential contingency goes hand-in-hand with our participation in the world: like everything else we are brought into being via the agency of others. Oppen's poem is a vivid evocation of the fact that we do not stand aloof above the world; we are in it. We *are* it.

- 10 Oppen read both Jameses, though his debt to Henry James is more clearly established, and we can see some evidence both of his awareness of pragmatism and of the pragmatist tendencies of his own thought in the following entry from the *Daybooks*, likely written between 1962 and 1965:

Does philosophy burden itself unnecessarily with the terms 'mind' and 'subject'? Is it not possible simply to say that the world contains, among other things, living organisms? The problem of knowledge would therefore reduce to psychological or physiological problems. It would result, I suppose, in a pragmatist solution, since it is clear that reason cannot judge its own reasonableness except by its results in action. (88)

- 11 A few lines down from this passage, Oppen writes: "I DO NOT MEAN TO PRESCRIBE AN ~~OPINION OR AN IDEA~~, BUT TO RECORD THE EXPERIENCE OF THINKING IT" (88). This sentence, crossed out text included, rather neatly summarizes for me the pragmatist inheritance in American poetry in the first half of the twentieth century. For the poets who absorbed it, this inheritance transformed the descriptive imagist impulse into the *participatory* objectivist one, an impulse that extended beyond the objectivist movement into modernism more generally: for Wallace Stevens, for example, modern poetry will come to be defined as "the poem of the mind in the act of finding /What will suffice" (218).

- 12 By way of contrast, I'd like to turn now to a passage of a text from the same period, I.A. Richards's *Principles of Literary Criticism*, first published in 1926. Richards's text set out to be, and indeed became, a kind of rule book for the discipline of literary criticism as it was emerging in the early twentieth century, and in his text we can see evidence of a sort of founding gesture. At the same time that poetry in the U.S. was embracing a pragmatist ethos of participation, literary criticism was creating itself as a discipline in part by forbidding this ethos, and adopting instead a particularly rigid separation of critical subject and literary object. Here is Richards, describing the critical practices that he means to supplant:

A few conjectures, a supply of admonitions, many acute isolated observations, some brilliant guesses, much oratory and applied poetry, inexhaustible confusion, a sufficiency of dogma, no small stock of prejudices, whimsies, and crochets, a profusion of mysticism, a little genuine speculation, sundry stray inspirations, pregnant hints and random aperçus; of such as these it may be said without exaggeration, is extant critical theory composed. (2)

- 13 Of particular interest to me is the phrase "applied poetry" which moves us from a description of symptoms to a diagnosis: the underlying problem with "extant critical theory," the passage suggests, is a failure to distinguish literary criticism from literature itself, an improper assimilation of the subject by its object. This kind of boundary policing, I want to argue—perhaps most clearly embodied a couple of decades later in Wimsatt and Beardsley's "affective fallacy"—was the move around which the literary critical culture we still inhabit was formed. Though we've struggled as a discipline to make up our collective minds about what literary criticism should do or be, we've been quite clear about what we *don't* wish to be: whimsical, nostalgic,

sentimental, *unrigorous*. Nothing comes more naturally to the literary critic, nothing is more enshrined in normal critical practice, than the establishment of one's *rigor* by way of one's *detachment*.⁵

- 14 I want to pay particular attention here to the gendered character of Richards's language—especially “whimsies and crochets” and “pregnant hints”—for here we see the psychic threat over which the protest of critical autonomy is erected again and again: assimilation, being literally *taken in*, involves a giving over of one's self, a forgoing of the illusion of autonomy. Insofar as integrity and independence are the hallmarks of the model masculine subject, the messiness and entanglement that are the epistemological starting point for the Jamesian participatory ethos seem feminine, weak, unprofessional, *unrigorous*.
- 15 I want to further suggest that it is in part the necessity of a degree of assimilation, of *being taken in*, to critical work that makes Richards, and literary critical culture in his wake, protest so anxiously against it. Literary criticism is writing defined by its relation to other writing. In this way it may be said to be closer to its subject than say, anthropology or even art criticism. Its most basic practices require its practitioners to become absorbed by, to enter into, another writer's writing. It is *born of* another writer's writing. The boundary between writing about literature and writing literature (which is always also on some level *about literature*) is, practically speaking, a porous one, “shot thru /already... with fragile passages.” At the level of actual practice, critical writers are not “studying an object” so much as moving around in a sea of texts, their own and those of others, thinking in and with these texts, taking in and being taken in in turn.
- 16 But for the literary critics of the early twentieth century, eager to establish on the notoriously feminine ground of literature a respectably masculine discipline, the participatory nature of literary critical practice had to be obscured. As Gerald Graff details in *Professing Literature*, in the nineteenth century “the modern languages and literatures were considered mere social accomplishments, they were looked upon as feminine preoccupations. This explains why these subjects made earlier headway in the female academies that proliferated in the middle decades of the century.” This perception of the study of literature as a feminine pastime rather than a serious (i.e. masculine) undertaking helps explain the special appeal of professionalization for the young discipline, which sought not only to shake of the taint of amateurism but also to cleanse itself of its “reputation for effeminacy.” Indeed, Graff notes, “One of the attractions of Germanic philology” for emerging literary scholarship in the U.S. was “that as a hard science its manliness was not in question” (38). I want to suggest that what began as a professional imperative rooted in and reinforcing class and gender distinctions has become mostly a matter of convention, upheld by the force of disciplinary inertia and new varieties of professional insecurity that urge, however radical a critic's political or theoretical positions, extreme conservatism in her writerly comportment.
- 17 What it might mean for literary critics to surrender our implicit claims of autonomy, to confess our interestedness, to adopt a participatory rather than a distant critical stance? This question dovetails in significant ways with questions raised by Rita Felski in *The Limits of Critique*, by Bruno Latour in “Why Has Critique Run out of Steam?,” and by Eve Sedgwick in “Paranoid Reading, Reparative Reading.” Taking a cue from Oppen's *Daybooks* entry, I want to suggest that a participatory ethos in literary criticism might

involve "RECORDING THE EXPERIENCE OF THINKING" in our own personal, messy, interested engagements with literature, taking that experience seriously, taking it as the starting point for critical writing, or, perhaps we might better say, for writing about other writing.

- 18 The kind of practice I am describing here does not amount to a *rejection* of literary criticism as conventionally practiced, even as practiced by the likes of Richards, Wimsatt, and Beardsley, but rather the explicit acceptance of one of conventional criticism's own implicit values—the value of care—which is everywhere evident in, for example, Richards' reading of Eliot in the appendix of *Principles of Literary Criticism*.⁶ The premise that, as Richards has it, "mixed modes of writing which enlist the reader's feeling as well as his thinking" are "dangerous to the modern consciousness," and that such participatory modes signal a suspect effeminacy, I want to suggest, subsists as the ghostly holdover of the compensatory fantasies of a once-fragile new discipline, derived from an antiquated epistemological model in which feelings could (and according to Richards, *must*) be separated from knowledge (5).

2. Interlude on Whimsies and Crochets

- 19 I was an undergraduate listening to a lecture by a famous professor. The course was Modernist Literature, the text was Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*. The lecture was about nostalgia, and the novel was held up against *Ulysses* as an example of bourgeois sentimentality masquerading as experimental modernism. The appeal of the book was an appeal to longing for a bygone Victorian past. It was in this sense a false modernism, in contrast to the true modernism of Joyce. Ten minutes into the lecture, I took out my notebook and, rather than listen, began copying sentences I had underlined in the novel, which I had finished breathlessly, tearfully, a few hours before class. I remember feeling hot: my face burning with something like anger but also with something like embarrassment at my own response, which I could see from the outside as petulant, childlike, feminine. Risking this perception of my response—or rather risking internalizing what I imagined this perception would have been had anyone been able to perceive it—felt like an imperative. Writing out the quotations (which itself felt like a sentimental, girlish, pseudo-intellectual thing to do) was an adrenaline-fueled response to a threat. If I could have articulated what I was feeling it would have been that the professor was shaming me for loving this book, shaming all of us who loved it, and I was using the book itself, its own language, as a way to shore up my love, as a way of inwardly insisting on love as a valid response.
- 20 In doing this, I saw my image of myself merge with an image from television and movies, a girl in high school or middle school doodling hearts in her notebook, not paying attention. It is always a girl doing this, dreaming of love, making something decorative, failing to be serious.
- 21 In this encounter, several things happened: I erected a boundary between myself and the professor. I also worked to deepen my attention to Woolf. Transcribing is a way of getting to know a sentence slowly, word by word, with attention to order and rhythm. As I lost myself in this attention, the professor's words became noise and Woolf's words became hyper-present: on the page of the book, on the page of the notebook, a complex transfer of mind to hand to other mind, other hand, across time.

- 22 My favorite passage of "Self-Reliance" is the one in which Emerson dissolves the self he has spent the previous pages telling us to rely on, concluding that what we must really rely on—something he approximates with the phrase "the good"—is perfectly ineffable. "When good is near you, when you have life in yourself, it is not by any known or accustomed way; you shall not discern the foot-prints of any other; you shall not see the face of man; you shall not hear any name;— the way, the thought, the good, shall be wholly strange and new." In this crisis moment, the attempt to articulate the essay's "highest truth" which "probably never can be spoken," Emerson returns to the essay's title: "Why, then, do we prate of self-reliance?" (252)
- 23 Self-reliance at its deepest point turns out to be something like its opposite, an utter openness or readiness to obey something that is not only not the self, it is not even recognizable to the self. This moment risks incoherence and self-contradiction. It especially risks, in not only explaining but enacting the complexities of this boundary moment, being called "whimsical."
- 24 In the lecture I, like Emerson, was both closing down and opening up at the same time in a complicated moment of boundary adjustment. Both choices were instinctual, having to do with survival. The professor's lecture seemed intended not only to "demystify" the text but also to cut off my access to a mode of reception that I instinctively valued as helpful and salutary. It seems a significant feature of this experience that it felt both like a choice and like a failure. In refusing to disavow my love for the text, I felt myself to be failing at something (critical distance, clear-eyed intellect, rigor).
- 25 As I worked I felt these criteria for success begin to slip away. I was making something in my notebook. It had nothing to do with success. I was making it slowly, with care. The small movements were repetitive and absorbing. It grew one line at a time, until I was no longer little an adolescent girl but rather like an old woman knitting, or as Richards would have it, crocheting. Finally, it was as if I weren't there at all.

3. Reading as Transaction

- 26 Following Simone Weil, I want to suggest that given a framework of autonomous and self-contained subjectivity, there is a something necessarily humbling, even humiliating, in her particular, spiritual sense, about the experience of reading itself, a sort of effacement of psychic autonomy. That postures of critical distance are so alluring in part because they compensate for or provide a defense against that humiliation. My speculation is that critical disavowal is a more sophisticated version of the student's recourse to hatred of the text as a mechanism for resisting *reading* the text. "Something in our soul," Weil writes, "has a far more violent repugnance for true attention than the flesh has for bodily fatigue" (335).
- 27 Reading requires the reader to quiet her own thoughts, to direct her attention to the sentence at hand in a variety of physical and cognitive ways. The retina scans the page, triggering complex processes of instantaneous comparison of letter patterns to those already stored in the brain's mental lexicon, a process that can be either aided or supplemented by spelling-to-sound conversion, which allows the reader to "voice" the words silently. The more complex the sentence, the more processes will be brought to bear. As cognitive neuroscientist Stanislas Dehaene notes,

when our nervous system is confronted with ambiguity, its fundamental strategy is to leave all possibilities open—something that is only feasible in a massively parallel system where multiple interpretations can be simultaneously entertained. Thanks to this open organization, the subsequent levels of analysis can contribute their own pieces of evidence until a globally satisfactory solution is reached. In some cases, only the context in a sentence allows one to understand the meaning of a word or even its pronunciation—think of a sentence like ‘the road winds through a valley battered by fierce winds.’ In such cases, experiments show that all of the possible interpretations of a word are unconsciously activated, until the context restricts interpretation down to a single meaning. (x)

- 28 As Dehaene’s description illustrates, to read even a simple sentence demands not only an intense investment of cognitive attention but also a pronounced openness, suspension in a state of indeterminacy. If we consider, now, an Emersonian or a Henry-Jamesian sentence, which pulls the reader through such dense syntactical tangles that she is forced to loop back again and again, connecting nouns to impossibly remote verbs and vague pronouns to vaguer antecedents, aspects of the sense coming into view while others are fading out, the whole sentence stretching unknowably ahead and already forgotten behind like a road in a blizzard, we will have a clearer sense of the psychic, as well as cerebral, work that reading an essay or a novel full of such sentences involves.
- 29 Battered by fierce winds. The vulnerability suggested by Dehaene’s presumably random example is suggestive. Attention of this kind is difficult and involves something that is, for the secular literary critic, perhaps uncomfortably like faith. For the literary critic, reading attentively is not the end of the work but only the beginning, and much of what we read gets us nowhere, or nowhere visible. When we don’t simply wrest the meaning we want from texts but rather open ourselves to their complexity and really read them, we find ourselves in the position of the student, grappling with something other than and larger than ourselves, unsure what to make of it or do with it. The more comfortable we are in our expertise, in our explanations and critiques, the easier it is to forget what this kind of learning feels like, the disorientation it entails, the risk to our sense of ourselves as knowers. The philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce’s famous “first rule of reason” is “that in order to learn you must desire to learn, and in so desiring not be satisfied with what you already incline to think” (48). Obvious as this sounds, it can be difficult to remember in a culture structured to reward fully-achieved and demonstrated knowledge, that even in its language (“field” “coverage,” etc.) treats knowledge as territory to be conquered.
- 30 In his essay “Circles,” Emerson describes the solidification of knowledge as a kind of containment which we must continually overcome: “For it is the inert effort of each thought, having formed itself into a circular wave of circumstance, as for instance an empire, rules of an art, a local usage, a religious rite, to heap itself on that ridge and to solidify and hem in the life” (402). To expand beyond this boundary is the work of learning, or, as Simone Weil puts it, the work of attention.
- 31 In adopting the stance of the detached critic, we are forced either to distance ourselves from our own most intense reading experiences, or to hide these experiences beneath a layer of detached critical affect. As a result, our readers and our students learn from us that the optimal way to experience a text is to remain safely outside of it, to resist contamination. That this affect is at odds with the modes of attention we continue to practice and to teach is a contradiction left to the individual student or critic to try to

resolve for herself, which she often does by sacrificing or burying her own most transformative reading experiences, dismissing them as embarrassing, naïve, undisciplined, and irrelevant, and teaching herself to master what Eve Sedgwick calls "the teachable protocols of unveiling," lest she be taken in again (143).

- 32 In contrast to the model suggested by standard critical practice, consider the transactional model of reading theorized by Louise Rosenblatt. Though influential in pedagogical circles, Rosenblatt's pragmatist theory of reading has had little impact in literary studies beyond being considered a subset of reader-response theory.⁷ Rosenblatt herself suggests one possible reason for this relative neglect, noting in her 1969 essay "Toward a Transactional Theory of Reading" that critics such as Rene Welleck and Austin Warren were "afraid that recognition of the importance of a reader will lead to an irresponsible impressionism" (35)—would lead, that is, to the respectable and rigorous field of literary criticism to be overtaken by whimsies and crochets.
- 33 Referring to Dewey and Bentley's theory of knowledge as "transactional" (a near relative of James's epistemology of participation), Rosenblatt notes that Dewey and Bentley "offered the term *transaction* to designate situations in which the elements or factors are, one might say, aspects of the total situation in an ongoing process. Thus, a *known* assumes a *knower* and vice-versa. A 'knowing' is the transaction between a particular individual and a particular environment" (35). Describing the application of this formulation to the act of reading, Rosenblatt writes,

A person becomes a reader by virtue of his activity in relation to a text, which he organizes as a set of verbal symbols. A physical text, a set of marks on a page, becomes the text of a poem or of a scientific formula by virtue of its relationship to a reader who thus interprets it. The transaction is perhaps similar to the electric circuit set up between a negative and positive pole, each of which is inert without the other. (43–44)

- 34 This emphasis on a scene of mutually constitutive rather than merely interacting parts is a staple of contemporary theoretical discourse: one thinks especially of new materialist descriptions of entanglement or "intra-activity" in the work of Karen Barad, for example.⁸ But Rosenblatt's early evocation of a similar epistemology applied not to the field of science studies but to the field of *reading*—already associated with the feminized labor of teaching—gained little theoretical traction. And indeed, Rosenblatt's articulation of the transactional theory in a 1969 article ends with something like a call to reframe questions about the meanings of texts as questions about *care*:

Does not the transactional point of view suggest that we should pay more attention to the experiential framework of any reading transaction? Is it not extraordinary that major social upheavals seem to have been required to disclose the fact that schools have attempted to teach reading without looking at the language and life experience, the cognitive habits, that the child brought to the text?... Should not a similar concern for reading as an event in a particular cultural and life situation be recognized as pertinent to all reading? (46)

- 35 One advantage I see in a shift in the direction of *interested participation* as a mode for literary studies is that it might allow us to begin to let go of the compensatory language of discipline and rigor and picture ourselves more accurately as what we are: participants in a profession that is at its most basic level *relational and responsive*, and that has more in common with repair and caretaking than it does with military training. Though we have long wanted to disguise this aspect of our work, it has always been there: in our teaching, in our writing, in our intimate work with and relationships to literary texts as well in on our relations to one another. Some have suggested that

the post-critical or "eudaemonic turn" in literary studies represents a retreat from social and political commitments of critique. I want to argue that a participatory ethos is valuable precisely because it may enable us to shift literary critical culture, and perhaps even academic culture more broadly, in the direction of care, and that this shift is both politically significant and, given the increasingly crisis-riven nature of our individual and collective lives, transparently necessary.

- 36 In his now-standard letter to incoming undergraduate students that made headlines when it was first circulated in 2016, University of Chicago Dean John (Jay) Ellison writes, "Our commitment to academic freedom means that we do not support so-called trigger warnings... and we do not condone the creation of intellectual safe spaces where individuals can retreat from ideas and perspectives at odds with their own" (Ellison). After its initial circulation, the university's president, Robert Zimmer, reinforced the message in an essay for the *Wall Street Journal*. "Universities," Zimmer wrote, "cannot be viewed as a sanctuary for comfort but rather as a crucible [sic] for confronting ideas and thereby learning to make informed judgments in complex environments." Whatever one's position on trigger warnings and safe spaces (which the letter incorrectly describes), the tone here is striking: real intellectual work involves "confrontation" and takes place in a "crucible." These are defined in explicit contrast to safety and comfort, which are not just dismissed as values but actually *disallowed* as terms to be associated with the serious business of universities. A crucible is an apt figure for the sort of atmosphere Zimmer seeks to evoke: an anti-sanctuary, figuratively a *severe trial* and literally container in which metals are liquefied by means of extreme heat. Welcome to college!
- 37 In *Truth and Method*, Hans-Georg Gadamer describes interpretation "not as a form of domination but of service" (322). In a culture in which possession and domination are increasingly recognized and rewarded, it is perhaps not surprising that literary criticism has sought to mask its natural alignment with service, care, and relation. But a reframing of reading as essentially *relational and participatory* and a concomitant redescription of critical work as essentially a *form of care* offers a useful avenue of resistance, not only to the logic of discipline but to the logic that makes the university a disciplinary machine. And if not a disciplinary machine, if not a crucible, then what?
- 38 Perhaps, following Isabelle Stengers, we might imagine the university as *an ecology of practices*, a complex system of relations, not only between people but between ways of thinking, a system in which no god's-eye-view exists because we are all on the inside:
- An ecology of practices may be an instance of what Gilles Deleuze called 'thinking par le milieu', using the French double meaning of milieu, both the middle and the surroundings or habitat. 'Through the middle' would mean without grounding definitions or an ideal horizon. 'With the surroundings' would mean that no theory gives you the power to disentangle something from its particular surroundings, that is, to go beyond the particular towards something we would be able to recognise and grasp in spite of particular appearances. (187)
- 39 To think "through the middle" and "with the surroundings" is to be involved, alert, interested, a full participant in what James calls "a social scheme of co-operative work genuinely to be done." In the university context it might mean to imagine our practices of teaching and reading and writing not as forms of domination but as forms of service, to particular texts, writers, and readers; to particular students; to each other. As Oppen's poem, with its continually shifting interior and exterior perspectives, illustrates, literature affords us a heightened capacity to exist in relation. This is what

Simone de Beauvoir calls “the miracle of literature, which distinguishes it from information: that an *other* truth becomes mine without ceasing to be other. I renounce my own ‘I’ in favor of the speaker; and yet I remain myself” (qtd. in *Moi* 134). Why not finally recognize out loud what we’ve at least half-known all along, that in the act of reading—in this space of participation, of complex relationality, of opening and closing—we are always “shot thru with fragile passages,” and that such delicate permeability is the basis of what’s best in our work?

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NOTES

1. See especially Latour.
2. See Richardson; Meyer; and Poirier.
3. I am deeply grateful to Nicholas Gaskill for extending to me the opportunity to present initial reflections on this theme at a conference on Pragmatism and Early Twentieth-Century U.S. Literature at Rutgers University in March, 2017; and to Steven Mailloux for introducing me, at the same occasion, to the work of Louise Rosenblatt.
4. For more on Oppen and the pragmatist inheritance, see Spinks.
5. For a lucid and sustained engagement with the similar fear of emotional contagion reflected in Wimsatt and Beardsly's "affective fallacy," see Thraikill.
6. Consider, for example, the admiration and attachment reflected in the following description: "If it were desired to label in three words the most characteristic feature of Mr. Eliot's technique, this might be done by calling his poetry a 'music of ideas.' The ideas are of all kinds, abstract and concrete, general and particular, and, like the musician's phrases, they are arranged, not that they may tell us something, but that their effects may combine into a coherent whole of feeling and attitude, and produce a peculiar liberation of the will" (293). Far from a limitation in Richards' reading of Eliot, I want to suggest that these feelings are precisely what drive its scope, intelligence, and lyricism. I include this passage not to indict Richards on failing to practice what he preaches, but rather to illustrate what Jane Thraikill identifies as "the extraordinary lengths

one must go to to imagine that the experience of a literary work—how it makes us feel—is irrelevant to its interpretation” (4).

7. For a thorough discussion of Rosenblatt’s marginalization in discussions of reader response theory, see Davis.

8. See Barad.

ABSTRACTS

Using as its key texts George Oppen’s *21 Poems* and I.A. Richards’ introduction to *The Principles of Literary Criticism*, this essay argues, first, that in the early decades of the twentieth century pragmatist epistemology and ethos of participation had a transformative effect on U.S. poetry, and second, that in these same decades, the then-emergent profession of literary criticism refused to absorb the participatory ethos, even as other disciplines, perhaps most notably education and anthropology, were being transformed by it. It concludes with some thoughts about what the adoption of a participatory approach might look like in literary critical studies, with special attention to the transactional model of reading theorized by Louise Rosenblatt beginning in the late 1930s.

INDEX

Keywords: poetry; literary criticism; literary education; participation; William James; George Oppen; I.A. Richards

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