

REVIEWS

David H. Evans, ed. *Understanding James, Understanding Modernism*. London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2017. 272 pages.

Classical American pragmatism, the pragmatism of Peirce, James, and Dewey, keeps returning and energizing various areas of contemporary intellectual culture. Pragmatism, both classical and in its “neo” version, has been a vast, flexible movement spanning surprisingly diverse forms of the life of the American mind, and—in a truly American fashion—synthesizing the material and the spiritual aspects of this life. Pragmatism’s strength has always resided in the intellectual and spiritual boisterousness displayed by its founding fathers, figures who, among other things, were responsible for the transition that the American culture was undergoing, from the eruptions of its Romantic genius to its codification in respective modernist expert cultures.

One of those key figures is William James—a powerful and rich personality whose influences continue to be many. A few years ago, I obtained a volume of selected poems by Peter Gizzi, a poet I had written on and translated into Polish. The book carries an epigraph from James in which the philosopher postulates a continuity between the realms of matter and of the spirit, the idea coming from his groundbreaking *Principles of Psychology*. I was delighted at this find, and immediately remembered that Gizzi had been a great fan of a study by Joan Richardson, *A Natural History of Pragmatism*, from 2007, which explores the myriad ways in which various American pragmatisms (those found in figures as different as Jonathan Edwards and Gertrude Stein) nourished the literary thought. I also remembered that Gertrude Stein, one of the poets that Gizzi’s formalist linguistic styles are indebted to, was William James’s student and one of his most enthusiastic followers among the literary modernists.

Stein’s often quoted tribute to James (“Is life worth living?—Yes, a thousand times yes, when the world still holds such spirits as prof. James,” qtd. on p. 3 in the reviewed volume), next to remarks such as the one by Frost, who applauds James as “the most valuable teacher” he had at Harvard (160), serve as a useful entry to the central idea behind a volume of essays entitled *Understanding James, Understanding Modernism*, edited by David H. Evans and published by Bloomsbury in 2017. The task that the editor and the authors gathered in the publication had taken upon themselves has been to illustrate the various channels of logical continuity and correspondence that are active between James’s philosophy and Western literary modernism, both as a general movement and as the creative output of an impressive array of particular authors, from Henry, William’s brother, to Stein, Joyce, Proust, Frost, Stevens, and Pound. As adjacent to these connections, the volume discusses James’s international liaisons, particularly the relation with Bergson, his impact on various other philosophers, both in the US and Europe, as well as his relation to modern political thought. The discussions are complemented by a section of shorter articles which serve as glossary entries on selected key terms from the various fields explored by James’s restless thought.

Evans has given the volume a lucid and convincing structure. The first part presents a survey of the major areas and directions in which James’s philosophical

thinking developed, from his original contributions to psychology, through commentary on religion, to his brand of pragmatism, culminating in his theories of experience and the inherent pluralism of the universe. This conceptual background is then treated, by the authors gathered in the second part, as a platform of departure for a series of discussions illustrating either the direct influences or the more general parallels that are at play between James and the giants of literary modernism. In all, the volume presents a daunting panoply of James's impacts and contributions that are detected in psychology, philosophy, literature, sociology, religious studies, political theory, and sociology.

Part 1 of the volume conceptualizes the fascinating path that James's thought traverses from his theories of consciousness, via his intuitions on religion, to his pragmatist theories of truth and the model of experience that fits what Nietzsche—whom it makes sense to treat as a continental parallel to James's contribution to modernism—would call a world of becoming rather than being. Diversified and picturesque as this path is, it is also amazingly coherent and Evans's volume does a great job in bringing forth its consistency.

James's philosophy begins with his insight into the fluid mechanics of human consciousness. The concept of reality as flux, which, together with his theory of experience, constitutes the core of his philosophy, culminating in his pragmatism and theory of the plastic universe, have their proper root in his psychological studies of the nature of consciousness. James, alongside Bergson in Europe, is responsible for making us aware of the stream-like nature of thought. We have thoughts and meanings in fluid continuities—such is the main thrust of this thesis—not in atomistic portions. On the other hand, the streams of consciousness are portioned out and attended to selectively by humans as individualized organisms. A personality is a particular set of habits which are responsible for the way in which the singular human organism responds to modulations of experience.

One of the paramount consequences of this model is James's insistence on the importance of relations or transitions between the states of consciousness, which on a different level may be considered as transitions between portions of experience or, simply, of reality. As Owen Flanagan and Heather Wallace remind us in the opening chapter, on the level of individual consciousness these transitions are detected as moods and other aspects of the conscious life, and James's brilliant idea is that we should pay attention to the particular emotional, cognitive, but also linguistic modulations of these relations (that is why James turns our attention to “the feelings of *and*, the feeling of *if*...”—the linguistic entries into experience, this thought leading directly to the poetry of Gertrude Stein).

The dynamic and plastic model of consciousness stands behind James's intriguing claims, later in his career, that the crux of our reality is a sort of primordial substance, preceding all sorts of subject/object splits. This substance is an absolute dynamics of flow and changeability which he calls “immediate flux” or “pure experience.” The way this foundational level of reality can be approached and explored is called “radical empiricism.” Joseph Campbell shows, in his contribution, how this concept returns us to the fluid model of consciousness as, again, “an affair of relations.” The world is much more a matter of our negotiating or participating

in alternate sets of relations—whose extensions always exceed any particular here and now—than strict, one-directional, representational reports issued by a clearly delineated subject in reference to an equally clearly delineated and separate object. James's much more dynamic epistemic model—anticipating not only modernist but also post-modernist insights—takes us almost literally out of our skins: to sit in a room and to understand it will be a completely different real experience depending on the different, optional, networks of relations we explore—either those that refer to the biography of the perceiving human subject or those pertaining to the no less fluid “biography” of the physical space coming into being. Thus, the subject and the object will be provisional aspects of the vaster flux-like substance of the “pure experience.”

The dynamic models of consciousness and experience are matched and complemented, in the middle part of James's career, by his views on religion, his pragmatist treatment of truth, and, finally, his vision of the plastic universe.

Especially the first two of these areas are affected by the quality of James's thought that is also responsible for the basic difference between his theory of flux and all those other theories that see reality, desire, truth, or subject-object relations as a matter of flow. For example, where contemporary approaches derived from the philosophy of Gilles Deleuze see reality as permeated by flows of desires and vitalistic energies unobstructed by any contour of individual self, subjecthood, or personality, James's philosophy confronts flux with the reality of the always discrete, humanized, individualized sets of needs and desires, which, on a different level, constitute whatever is stable about our personality. The James-Deleuze relation is discussed in the volume by Barry Allen who concentrates on *A Pluralistic Universe*. While Allen stresses the affinity between the two thinkers, I would point out the difference: in James, unlike in Deleuze, flux is checked with individual human intervention which is, of course, also a form of complicity with the flux. This reciprocity is first noted in his reflection on religion.

James, as Nietzsche in Europe, shows gods and divinities to be concepts whose efficacy is impossible without the strictly human realms of needs, desires, conflicts and purposes. Micheal Bacon discusses the revolutionary approach to these correlations in James's *Varieties of Religious Experience*, a study of the psychology of religion as it features in particularized experience of individuals, to show an unfailing originality of this volume. For James, gods—just as all our other conceptual frameworks—evolve in time, and are inextricably dependent on our inner psychological conflicts. Thus, to uphold the religious view of reality is, predominantly, to display an active stance toward the universe as an evolving whole—a view that James put together in his probably most well-known single piece, the essay “The Will To Believe,” which is discussed separately in Evans's volume by John J. Stuhr. The combined reading of the chapters by Bacon and Stuhr helps to show how James managed to signal a paradigmatic shift in our understanding of the religious mind: for him religion is a name for a capacity of maintaining a twofold belief. First, it is a belief in the plasticity of a world as a place whose future is not pre-determined. As I would argue, based on the discussions found in Evans's volume, the very idea of the plastic universe is, on its deepest level, a religious response to the world. Second, it is a belief that it is the human stance toward the world that constitutes a decisive force that pushes reality toward its never pre-determined futures.

A one word name for such modernist translation of religion is *meliorism*; in a sense, this is what James's philosophy submits in the face of what Nietzsche would have called the death of traditional gods. But where Nietzsche dramatically over-reacts to his own diagnosis with the radical idea of the need to breed a post-human species (his anxiety-ridden concept of the *übermensch*), James proposes a much more viable option of observing our movements within our own plastic universe with which we ceaselessly interreact and communicate on many levels. Meliorism, thus, is a stance fitting a world that—against the ages-old philosophies of the varieties of absolute monism—cannot ever be arrested by any single key-word concept that, as those philosophies hoped, would arrest and freeze our understanding of it in one stable contextual frame. James develops this idea in his lectures on *A Pluralistic Universe*. As it is shown in the contribution by Barry Allen, the main significance of this idea is that James's ontology is deeply and irrevocably pluralist, with the reverberations of this ontology predictable on the level of cultural politics.

All strands of James's philosophy seem to come together in his analysis of the world's indigenous plasticity. As an organic ingredient of this plasticity, we react to its exigencies, and our reactions are forms of commitment. When they obtain a particular form of intensity, they may be considered as forms of religiousness. If we wish a more secular approach, we enter another vast area of James's heritage—his "pragmatism." Truths—as Alan Malachowski reminds us in the volume—are names, according to James, not so much of stable correspondences to reality (the flux view of reality making this Cartesian concept antiquated), but of actively modulated "agreements"—which should be seen as results of our continuous struggles with reality. They are forms of engagement in which we break the flux into particular realities. Thus, as Malachowski reminds us, James's pragmatism is his way of pointing toward the "world-completing powers [of] humans," our "truth-creating powers" (71). Thus, James's theory of truth returns us to the individualistic side of James's thinking. Life, in James, is worth-living as a form of the individualized form of negotiating the flux. We confront the energetic vastness of the plastic universe, its ridiculously disproportionate energetic excess, through personal existence that is always "a genuine struggle and strenuous engagement that demands our creative and transformative energies" (38).

Two conclusions come to mind as commentary to the first section of the volume. The first one is offered early on by the main editor, David H. Evans. Namely, James should be seen as a thinker who is pivotal in a paradigmatic shift: his exuberant, many-fielded writing helps intellectual culture to leave behind the strictures of Cartesianism, and at the same stroke to pave a way for those ideas of the fluidity of our truths and meaning that have been explored by the thinkers of late modernity and post-structuralism. The inclusion among them of figures like Richard Rorty seems obvious (James, next to Dewey, was Rorty's personal hero), but it is worth pointing out that Evans also mentions Wittgenstein, Derrida, and Deleuze.

The second commentary is my own. I would venture the thesis that James's thought offers an alternative to the more up-to-date trends derived from the advocates of the post-human, Deleuzian, new-materialist fluidity. In James, the confrontation of flux reveals the animalistic and evolutionary genealogy of the human, but it does not abolish the contours of a certain individualized, interpretive, and will-oriented entity.

Truth, meaning, in some sense the flow of experience itself, make sense only because there are pragmatically limited, physically embodied, finite, mortal individuals, whose limited biology dictates to them the respective ways in which they simply have to negotiate and configure the flows of desire. These carvings, in turn, help to create the truths and realities out of the flux. The universe, that is, with all of its impressive plasticity, makes sense only because there are those fragile, finite, desiring beings, such as humans, whose finitude also spells the necessary forms of limiting the flow.

Part 2 of the volume concentrates on the influences and parallels between James's thought and literary modernism. The chapters on these literary correspondences are preceded by an elaboration of the rich and fruitful James-Bergson relation, offered by Rosa Slegers, who reminds the reader how both philosophers were united by their staunch animosity toward the "vicious intellectualism," which is the position according to which stable concepts capture the essence of reality. Instead, the task of being closer to what is really going on around us, claim both James and Bergson, is fulfilled better by diving back into the fluid flux of experience. As far as forms of writing are involved, such dive can only be effected through the kind of language that is seeking states of suspension and flexibilities that steer away from clichéd and stultifying structures of established concepts. This is precisely the approach to writing that is shared by both of the James brothers and the parallels between their respective endeavors—in William's best and most fluid philosophical prose and in Henry's complex stylistic exercise of his later novels—are examined in the chapter by Jill Kress Karn.

The following chapters pursue further the literary bearings that William James's ideas have had on the giants of European modernism: David H. Evans examines how James's emphasis on the temporal transitiveness of experience is reflected in Gertrude Stein's attempt to render it in her forms of repetition; Mark Richardson looks at Frost's approach to religious experience through the lenses of James's translation of religiousness as an active/creative stance toward the universe; Kristen Case shows how Stevens's technique of observing the mind at play can be viewed as a version of James's linking truth and belief by the concept of a "hypothesis," with Stevens's poems discussed as devices through which we can observe the transformations of the hypotheses by which we test reality; Patricia Rae revisits grounds she has covered in her 1997 book on the pragmatist lineage of imagist poetry (*The Pragmatic Muse*), where she discusses Pound's image and Stevens's "fiction" as forms, again, of James's "hypothesis" viewed as diagnostic, interpretive devices. Rae expands her earlier argument by including in the picture George Orwell's political writing. The two remaining chapters on the literary connections, by Gian Balsamo and Lisi Schoenbach, treat the contribution that James's concepts of consciousness, embodied memory, and personality as collection of habits provide for our understanding of the stylistic and cognitive complexities found in the prose of James Joyce and Marcel Proust. Part 2 closes with two more essays, by Michela Bella and Robert Danish, which touch on, respectively, on the reception of James in Italy and his influence on modern political thought.

The collective thrust of the chapters gathered in this part is found in illuminating the proximity of the philosophical theory and the literary technique. James's prose itself is shown as an attempt, through a kind of philosophical language

that does not shrink from metaphor, to prepare the way for those literary experiments that underline the reality of change and relationality. The authors in this part present how the various particular writerly techniques devised by the leading writers of the modernist aesthetic revolution were attempts to align consciousness with the idea that meaningful experience must constantly negotiate its singular contours with and alongside, not against, the reality of permanent change.

As an afterthought, I would add that the discussions in Part 2 of the volume provide vistas that go beyond High Modernism. They also convincingly, if indirectly, suggest that continuous attention to James's thought makes very good sense in reference to those aesthetics that have grown out of the modernist moment and are part of the contemporary moment.

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Rüdiger Kunow. *Material Bodies: Biology and Culture in the United States*. Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter, 2018. 483 pages.

Rüdiger Kunow's massive volume offers an intricate analysis of intersections of and interdependencies between biology and culture. In the sections that make up the book, the author demonstrates numerous and complex ways in which biology organizes and challenges disparate life experiences, and, in view of recent biomedical technologies, poses new theoretical questions about life, ethics, and American identity. According to Kunow, biology has become thoroughly culturized, and has transformed into "a discursive anchor in debates about what can count as a good life worth having, what relations humans develop toward their bodies, their offspring, their own old age" (7). Moreover, a significant part of cultural productions is expressed via biological imagery, thus testifying to the way biology expands beyond the sphere of exclusively scientific projects and permeates everyday practices. To bring together all these questions and concerns, the author engages various critical approaches, from materialist cultural critique, Marxism, gender studies, ecocriticism, Foucauldian biopolitics, science and technology studies and posthumanism.

While the relationship between biosciences and the humanities is not a new idea, and Kunow acknowledges influences of such new interdisciplinary fields as medical humanities, literature and medicine (and the journal of the same title), and narrative medicine to name just a few examples, *Material Bodies* calls for a profound analysis of the two-directional engagements between sciences and the humanities. "If the cultural side of biocultures," writes Kunow, "is understood merely as offering cultural counseling to scientists or as providing the ethics component required in federal grant applications in the U.S., then the biocultures project will run the risk of merely 'reinforcing the structural problematic that too often governs disciplinary relations in the academy: the sciences are rich, the humanities poor'" (Clayton et al. qtd. in Kunow 20). What Kunow repeatedly emphasizes and demonstrates with a myriad of examples is the fact that literary and cultural criticism may significantly expand contexts in which biology and biocultures operate.