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Lao She, James, and Reading Time

By Nan Z. Da, *University of Michigan, Ann Arbor*

In an early essay on realism written after his stint in London, twenty years before his visit to America and almost forty years before he was hounded to death by the red guards in the Cultural Revolution, the Chinese writer Lao She broached the topic of Henry James's reading time. Like many before and after him, Lao She was fascinated by the dilation of time and lived experience that characterizes Jamesian style: "to cover the entirety of James' oeuvre other writers would only have needed to deploy such a phrase as 'ten years had passed' . . . but James [unlike Conrad] took care to lavish over the little bits of reality" (CW 248).¹ The essay, "Shi Shi de Yun Yong," or "The Uses of Realism," appears as the crowning piece in a volume called *Old Ox, Broken Cart* (1936) (CW), a collection of writings that detailed the Western influences in his novels of the 1930s and, like James's New York prefaces, molded reading practices amenable to these very novels. "The Uses of Realism" uses James to deliver a final reflection on the novel and its readers.

In this essay I recover Lao She as not only a reader of James but a practitioner of what he saw as the diegetic duration offered in Jamesian style, wherein, for example, the three minutes it takes to read a page mean that only three minutes will have passed in the plot. Because Lao She has largely been seen as a student of Dickens and Faulkner, the influences on his work by Anglo-European writers have also primarily been understood in terms of genre or theme (e.g., Lao She learned from Dickens how to write the Chinese naturalist or socialist novel). But what Lao She takes from James cannot be so easily classified. I offer a brief reading of his *Little Po's Birthday* (1934), a novella about the life of an ethnically Chinese boy living in Singapore in the late 1920s that best exemplifies this abstract influence. Composed around the same time as "The Uses of Realism," *Little Po* changed the way novels are experienced in order to overturn what Lao She referred to as "[Joseph] Conrad's marginalization of Asian people in his works, where they are only allowed to occupy the peripheries of plot and space" (CW 176). I argue that *Little Po* reclaimed the ontological weight

of Asians not just by moving previously marginal characters to the center and giving them their own complicated lives but by implementing the Jamesian ratio of reading time to narrative time, getting the time it takes to read as close as possible to the time that passes in the narrative.

Of course it is completely erroneous to characterize diegesis in James's fiction in this way. Most scholars would disagree that James commands a one-to-one ratio between narrative time and reading time, noting his complex use of ellipses, prolepsis, chiasmus, and other asynchronic narrative devices.² Certainly greater spans of time are covered in his books than the time it takes to read them, and James would be first to rail against such a simple-minded scale. But, for our purposes here, it is enough to say that Lao She associated James with this kind of diegetic scale contra authors like Defoe, Swift, and Conrad, whom he discusses in *Old Ox*. His transnational perspective affords us a different vocabulary to describe the impenetrability of James's fiction and its demands on the reader. Conversely, his perception of the function of duration in James reopens Lao She's own transnational corpus and its experimentation with the act of reading. A representative work from this period, *Little Po* did not just intervene in East-West literary paradigms by taking up Jamesian themes; rather, it actively experimented with the "reader/text" ethics demanded by Jamesian style. Requiring readers to commensurate their own lived time to the time of the literary characters becomes for Lao She a kind of anti-colonial literary project, a way to resist the tendency of Western writers to smooth over (and thereby belittle) the time and human experience of others with such handy narratological tools as "ten years had passed."

James's influence on Lao She has received some coverage. David Dewei Wang gives the briefest of mentions of the Lao She-Henry James connection in his broad survey, *Fictional Realism in Twentieth-Century China*. Chinese scholars of Lao She have also recorded the influence, which range from the borrowing of James's "lonely narrator" for his novel *Nail* (*Reading Lao She* 248), to Lao She's development of the concept of "the receiver of the narrative" (Wu and Wei 236), to his mid-1950s critiques of Peking University president Hu Shi's own failings in the uses of realism (Lao She reread James's fiction along with that of Deng Tuo and Wang Ruoshui) before coauthoring the actual essays [Xie 196]). However, these influence arguments have remained documentary and not critical. This is not surprising given that, although he was a voracious reader of Western authors up to, during, and after his trip to London as well as a translator, Lao She only lets us glimpse his exposure to other writers.³ He never discussed James enough to give literary historians much traction. Lao She's archive leaves us only bread crumbs, and much of this essay has to proceed speculatively. We know that at the time of writing "The Uses of Realism," Lao She had clearly read enough James to write authoritatively on Jamesian style. Nonetheless, the actual reading of Jamesian fiction has to be inferred. Prior to his London trip he worked closely with the Chinese Christian philosopher, Zhao Zichen (aka T. C. Chao), whose second daughter Zhao Luorui would be one of the earliest translators of "Daisy Miller." In the 1920s, he was introduced into London society and its inner literary coterie, translators, sinophiles, and sinologists by Ezra Pound, who around that time was rethinking James's legacy.⁴ When Lao She returned to China, he struck up a close friendship with literary critic and publisher Zeng Xubai (one of the first to publish James's stories in a Chinese periodical), who devoted a short chapter to James in his *American Literature ABC* (1929). If we consider the time

of composition instead of publication date, Lao She's "James essay" predates the earliest known Chinese assessment of Henry James, including Zeng Xubai's chapter, as well as Zheng Cichuan's entry on James in *Modern Novelistic History of Europe and America* (1931) and Zhang Yuerui's brief introduction in *American Literature: Works of the Nineteenth Century* (1934).

As the opening of "The Uses of Realism" makes abundantly clear, Lao did not only consider James's "bitsiness," or fussiness over the minute, as a manner, theme, or style. That tendency of James to stretch out perceptible and affective experience, for which he received criticism even from his own brother William, urged itself to Lao She principally as a question of diegetic duration. Focused on the pacing of events as it relates to the reader's own pace, diegetic duration's difference from narrative duration was most famously theorized by Gérard Genette, who distinguishes the latter, or the time that the novel encompasses, from the former, which introduces the variable of the reader. No one, avers Genette, "can measure the duration of a narrative. What we spontaneously call such can be nothing more, as we have already said, than the time needed for reading," but, in the end, we cannot know how long it takes someone to execute a reading of three pages, cannot know the pauses that the reader opts to take, and must, finally, "give up the idea of measuring variations in duration with respect to an inaccessible, because unverifiable, equality of duration between narrative and story" (86–87). In *Old Ox* Lao She was theorizing realism's attempts to try to control this "inaccessible" and "unverifiable" factor of reader response by triangulating style and narrative duration with readerly attention. How much information can the modern reader retain before he is overwhelmed into inattention? What can the author expect to accomplish in reading time? Lao She's interest in the transmission between narrator and audience can be seen in his many essays on traditional modes of storytelling and their transaction in real time. He argued that novel-writing should not try to replace but rather emulate in order to hold wide swaths of audiences responsible and responsive to other people's lives and inner thoughts.⁵

In "The Uses of Realism," Lao She, like James, worried out loud about the merely absorptive reader who moves on too quickly from the narrative. Witnessing unprecedented changes in popular print culture in the first quarter of the twentieth century in China, as James did in the second half of the nineteenth century in England and America, Lao She was one of the first Republican Era writers to formally propose mnemonics for the modern reader. He opens "The Uses of Realism" by addressing the bad reading habits encouraged by new kinds of reading materials: "When we look at [an] ordinary [sequence of] events, we regard them in a single plane, treating them as though a one-time read through is enough, the same practice and attitude of reading newspapers (CW 248). As in James's meditations, it is, paradoxically, the strict linearity of reading for events that encourages the habit of skipping over, a "mute, passive intaking of textual material that stores no traces of its own activity" (Dames 249). This reader-centric introduction to the novel theory in the essay proper echoes James's own essays and prefaces that fret about the amnesiac consumption cultivated by mass culture. Pondering over the linear temporality of novel reading, Lao She, like James, would implicate himself as a reader prone to forgetfulness, an author unexempt from the patterns of mass response that the techné of print culture had fostered. In the only essay to follow up these earlier thoughts on reading and amnesia, "Discussing Reading" (1960), Lao She would openly identify with this kind

of reader, just as James did when he cited the “half-remembered novels, devoured in infancy” (*HJL* 215). With shocking candor for a member of the literati at the time, Lao She confesses that he does not remember “80 to 90 percent of the books he’s read,” lamenting the shame and waste of this low retention, as well as its vitiation of the reader’s critical relationship to texts (*CW* 393).

While Lao She suggests practical preventative measures such as journal-keeping, he is indeed a forgetful reader. Had he remembered his own earlier essay at the time of writing “Discussing Reading” he would have recalled that his prescribed antidote to chronic inattention resided in novelistic form. A “properly paced” realism could pick up the slack for inadequately retentive readers while also giving them the full-bodied, detail-heavy experience of real time (*CW* 251). As in James’s case, “[the] novels remember for the forgetful reader” (*Dames* 252). The same effect in the words of another critic: James describes “things as they are” all the while “gaining enough control to upset the ‘ordinary balance of our naïve expectations’” (*Veeder* 79). In Lao She’s accounting, the proper “use of realism” likewise helps the novel remember for the forgetful reader who all the while has an ethical obligation to be tasked with the sundry details of “things as they are.” Authors cannot strike the careful balance of abundance and readerly attention by introducing only exciting events into the narrative: “inserting a segment of plot, no matter how interesting, inevitably negatively affects the aesthetic whole” (*CW* 251). A properly used realism is a properly paced realism; Lao She uses the phrase “*ping yún*,” which not only connotes evenness but also ordinariness. Proper pacing “animates” mundane events so that they unexpectedly, upon reflection, become important and memorable, so that “any kind of thing . . . can become energized.”

Lao She’s formal and, because reader-conscious, temporal understandings of realism in James’s fiction have critical implications for his early London, Singapore, and transpacifically composed novels, which have been analyzed as sites of his ambivalence toward East-West relations and cross-influences.⁶ For example, his London novel, *The Two Mas* (1927), has been read as an experimental novel that in equal measure adopts Western technique and exposes English racism toward Chinese immigrants and their second-class citizenship in England. In these types of arguments, influence and rebuttal are things found *inside* the novel, half in form, half in plot. What if we reassess Lao She’s transnationalism as the designing of a hermeneutic as historicist as it is formalist, one deeply conscious of the material dialectics of changing readership? Even if Lao She’s borrowings from Western writers are indisputable, “interpretation must move beyond the initial level of establishing intertextual linkages in order to avoid becoming an uncontested narrative of literary influence” (*Liu* 117). For someone like Lydia Liu, the translingual modes of representation in Lao She’s novels body forth a series of interpretive traps that “undercut” the more vacuous political readings that the novels seem all too happy to hand over (123–26). (I will return to this point at the end of this essay.) A reading for cross-influences in form, as opposed to theme, style, or schools of thought, as David Dewei Wang originally suggested, allows us to rework influence into hermeneutics. The transfiguration of formal devices into new interpretive horizons can be best seen in the transnational works of the late 1920s and early 1930s. Lao She had just returned from London but had not yet landed on the mainland and was working on a new collection of novellas in the Pacific Rim. His fictional laboratory of this literally interim period is

an excellent space for recasting form as experimental hermeneutics—not just for the historicist, Chinese nationalist, post-colonial, and global readers of posterity but for the ordinary readers of his own time.

Written from the point of view of a child, *Little Po's Birthday* is an unprecedentedly slow novella. Ranbir Vohra's summary basically captures the narrative energy: "There is not much of a story in Little P'o, and the first half of the book is basically a description of Little P'o in the context of various situations—in school, at home, wandering in the streets, playing with his friends, celebrating New Year's day, celebrating his birthday, and so on" (55). We must qualify Vohra's descriptively accurate summary a little. Nothing much happens in *Little Po*, hence its qualitative slowness; more crucially, however, nothing much happens in proportion to reading time. *Little Po* detains the reader, though not by distracting him with more sundry details than in any of his previous novels. *Old Zhang's Philosophy* (1926) and *The Sayings of Zhao* (1927) are lavished with descriptive detail. *Little Po's* slowness comes from an acutely discerning mind—the child protagonist—figuring out things that can only be half-known to him. As has been said of *What Maisie Knew*, this novella enjoins the reader to co-experience "the perceptions of a child fumbling to constitute meaning and value" (Hadley 275). The mental fumbblings of the eponymous narrator are not only time-consuming for him—they are literally time-consuming because they are time-consuming for us as well. The novella readies the reader right-away for this level of commensuration with the text in its opening interlude. Befuddled that he's named Little Po (Xiao Po), or a diminutive of Singapore (Xin Jia Po in Mandarin), when his younger sister is named Magical Po (and not Littler Po), Little Po tries to straighten out what cannot be straightened out: the mystery of his name originates from the persistence of old Chinese naming customs in new geographic spaces and the confusions of a translingual zone that was still not recognized as such. In turn he asks his mother, father, and brother about his name, but each only further confuses him with their responses (or lack thereof). Little Po takes a long time attempting, in vain, to understand why he's diminutive and how language actually obfuscates understanding. His confusion recapitulates the recurring theme of the 1920s and '30s novels: the diminutive and marginalized who don't see themselves as such wrestle with the problem of their own perceived fullness of experience (enough to waste and squander) against what others perceive as littleness, nothingness.

Like James's works featuring child protagonists, *Little Po's Birthday* has generally been classified as a treat in perspectival shift: "[w]hat interests the author in the 'Birthday' is the child's world of joys seen through the eyes of a grown-up for whom they are primarily amusing, charming trifles which make the child's life a chain of games, joys and light, passing sorrows" (Slupski 44); "The Birthday of Little P'o . . . deals with the everyday life and environment of a Cantonese boy in Singapore [and] reflect[s] the author's love for children" (Vohra 55). C. T. Hsia called it "a fantasy for children" (166). Lao She would react as vocally to the confusion of genre and subject as James did. "That which chooses a child as its protagonist cannot be automatically categorized as fairytale," Lao She wrote in "How I Came to Write Little Po's Birthday" (CW 178). His caution against the generic dismissal of fiction centered on children has not saved *Little Po* from symptomatic readings, however. If we want to reinvest *Little Po* with literary critical value beyond allegory (i.e., this book was Lao She's literal and figurative vision of Singapore in 1929 as a Chinese emigré), as

has been urged by Vohra, Alfred Owen Aldridge, and Yoon Wah Wong, we must ask after its relationship to “The Uses of Realism.” Through intertextuality, we can see that Lao She wrote *Little Po* to demonstrate the difference between Conradian and Jamesian diegesis.

In “How I Came to Write *Little Po’s Birthday*” (1936), Lao She begins the rebuttal to Conrad that he would finish with the counterexample of James in “The Uses of Realism.” It was his mixed feelings toward Conrad that propelled Lao She to stage his novella in Singapore. Lao She praises Conrad for vivifying the South Pacific but complains that his portrayals of Nanyang (South [China] Seas) only featured white men succumbing to its wildness. In these works “Asians . . . are sometimes present only as ‘decorative’ elements, so as to add some ‘color’” (CW 176). It is worth noting that this is one of the earliest postcolonial critiques of Anglophone transpacific literature, its tenor giving proof to Natalie Melas’s theory that in the literature of colonized islands the “problem of scale [created by colonialism and colonial literature]” is “linked to a crisis of subjectivity” (174). Lao She wished urgently to portray Nanyang’s “populatedness,” specifically the Chinese population that in his opinion cultivated the region. As borne out in the finished product, Lao She turns the tables on Anglophone literature’s chronic diminishment and belittlement by engaging readers in such a way that they could perceive Nanyang’s Asian population as though they belonged to that population. Such a project had to reshape reading practices, carefully calibrating what the author could offer with what the reader has at hand. Lao She saw that with *Little Po* he could achieve the desired effect “using only the one thousand characters that the average reader has at his disposal from his school primer,” Lao She exclaims (CW 178). Reception mattered more than ever because “the ontological dimensions of anticolonial writing [is] not an assertion of identity but a claim of existence” (Melas 173). Anticolonial writing has to first register the irrefutable fact that natives *are* there before it addresses *how* they are there. Therefore, in contrast to an argumentative or philosophical approach, the ontological reclamation of peoples through literature brings the author to that threshold of Genette’s unknown: the reader to whom the writer has to make the everyday thereness of his subjects felt.

By having Little Po turn different versions of the same childish questions over and again, Lao She forces the reader to sit through a shift in scale. What is diminutive becomes unbearably and unjustifiably amplified. “Better not to think about it,” exclaims Little Po, referring to the banal mystery of his name, “Ay! Just thinking about it confuses me to death!” (201). But he thinks about it some more, rephrasing his confusion: “Are these things one and the same? Or two things that are different?” Almost intentionally throwing away plot devices, Lao She uses episodes such as Little Po’s playing hooky, which ought to move the narrative along, merely to continue these child-like deliberations. Largely effected through drawn-out internal dialogue and mental and verbal redundancies, the change in scale in *Little Po’s Birthday* does not make us feel that Little Po is an interesting boy who does interesting things as much as it makes his little boyness felt on every page. Like James, Lao She does not leave out any of the subtleties and nuances of thought and circumstance in a character who, like so many of James’s, “gropes toward increased ‘meaning’” (Veeder 223) instead of complete meaning.

Readers attracted by the perspectival shift must accept the larger difference in duration that I argue Lao She developed through his mental comparisons of various

Western writers, including James. *Little Po*'s pacing greatly tests the reader's patience: the chapter "In the Garden" is followed by the chapter "Still in the Garden." The thin plot revolves around the false-starts and disappointed narrative energies that characterize children's interactions: the planning and fizzling out of a make-believe train ride to Malaysia takes up many pages; plans for adventures are drawn up, then abandoned; Little Po (and we the readers) spend a lot of time musing over activities that never come to pass. The wasted planning so ordinary to everyday life takes up so much space that even the single day—Little Po's birthday—promised in the title does not feel like it has actually happened in narrative time. Rather than pile on psychological detail, Lao She uses dialogue and repetition to create this effect of delay. Lao She did not have academic jargon to describe the same tactics in James's fiction, but his extended characterization of James's style clearly differentiates it from simple detail-orientedness. James, he wrote, "stud[ied] the smallest things under a certain affect, and did not tire of their fussiness and ordinariness" (CW 249). A patient text, moreover, willfully deprives the reader of the language of fast forwarding, engaging affect "to creat[e] a world of refined awareness within the general area of the already known" (Waggoner 226). For Lao She, the Jamesian text is both detail orientated and patient in its use of temporal markers.

Lao She's classification of Jamesian fiction as the kind completely cleared of chronometric short-hands (such as "a week later"), even if ultimately incorrect, unlocks the alienation that many feel toward James's fiction, finding it "just interminable," "tedious and hard to get through," and causes readers to "give up after a few chapters" ("Thoughts," "Books," "Henry James"). In people who for cultural capital have prevaricated about the amount of time they have committed to the novels of Henry James we also find genuine head-scratching—an inability to fathom those special others who find the ratio of excitement/action to readerly commitment not only adequate but wonderfully sustaining. One contemporary reader, a blogger, wondered at those for whom "a single page of [James's] prose . . . could sustain them on a desert island" ("I Lied"). Then, mildly shocking to Jamesians, the blogger registers one last unimaginative, but not uncommon, complaint: "As I tried to read this book, I could barely pay attention to a single page. But fortunately nothing really happens in Henry James books so you aren't missing anything." James's difficulty extends beyond the affective or objective difficulty of the sentence or paragraph. When our frustrated reader says that "nothing really happens," what he really means is "not enough happens." We are so accustomed to narrative's compression and speeding up of others' lives that when only as much has qualitatively happened in the book as has happened to us, we revolt. Lao She nominates James's style as one that passes over nothing (CW 248) but also perhaps sensed that this attribution requires further curatorship and explanation lest his readers fail to see the delicate demanding art of exhaustiveness. The rest of "The Uses of Realism" therefore lays out the division of labor in this art, touching on what the reader can be expected to give, what the author, and, most importantly, how the novel might mediate their mutual deficiencies.

Lao She's works little resemble James's, but they can inform James scholarship because, although vastly different in tone, theme, and narrative structure, works like *Little Po's Birthday* and "The Uses of Realism" help us relearn James's labor theory of reading. In his critical essay, "The Novels of George Eliot," James envisioned the labor of reading chiefly as the ability to inductively experience someone else's

ontological weight or to sit through such an exercise, meted out in words. Taking a break from analyzing Eliot's *Adam Bede*, James formulates memorably his ethics of reading wherein "the work is divided between the writer and the reader," with the reader "do[ing] quite half the labour" (*EL* 922). Great art molds the kind of reader that performs her "share of the task." But what exactly does the reader's share of the task encompass? Contrary to our predisposed notions, the labor assigned to the reader is *not close-reading*—at least not in this essay by James. Mentioning nothing of reading-against-the-grain, the "labour" of the reader in "The Novels of George Eliot" refers to what James himself calls "conscientious inductions" (*EL* 912). When reading *Adam Bede*, we have to be able to imagine episodes beyond the last chapter, "the possibility" that, after Hetty's death, "Adam, healed of his wound by time, should address himself to another woman" (922). "The assurance of this possibility," James writes, "is what I should have desired the author to place the sympathetic reader at a stand-point to deduce for himself." The commensuration of the reader's own sense of future time to the characters' has to occur not only during the time of reading but beyond, in the hypothetical afterlife of the novel where imaginary characters continue to accrete experience. The author's labor then naturally refers to her ability to commit the reader to imagine an "and so on" for the characters. This ability has no correlation to imaginative powers (in which he finds Eliot deficient) or dramatic pacing (he calls *Romola* a book that "drags and halts"), deriving instead from "an observation that deals, in preference, with small things" (925). James's labor theory of reading/writing endorses whatever novelistic style inspires us to grant continuation to characters whose lives technically stop on the last page, even if they do not vanish from the reader's mind as soon as the book is put down. The responsibility of this kind of inductive reasoning falls equally to writer, reader, and the text itself. Or, in the words of Gertrude Stein ventriloquizing James's exhortation to his reader, "I will try you will try. Oh yes . . . we will try" (159).⁷ Or, in James's own words, "The extraordinary is most extraordinary in that it happens to you and me" (*FW* 1260).

I would like to close by adding a final twist delivered by the model of ethical reading-as-inductive reading, one unforeseen by perhaps even the author himself. James's "The Novels of George Eliot" shows that the scale of narrative time to reading time—which Lao She saw as nearly converging in James's writings—can be further tipped by novelistic style. The reader of a novel in which the writer has done his share of the labor can actually spend more time than the author ever anticipated. "When you re-read coldly and critically a book which in former years you have read warmly and carelessly," James muses, "you are surprised to see how it changes its proportions. It falls away in those parts which have been pre-eminent in your memory, and it increases in the small portions" (*EL* 925). When the novel remembers for the forgetful reader, it remembers more than the author himself. In *Little Po*, the dilation experience and the slowing down of affective time produce outcomes that contradict the more nationalist, jingoistic overtones of the writer's own explanations of his authorial motivations in *Old Ox*, which Vohra and many critics since have insisted "should not be taken at its face value" (54). Throughout the novel *Little Po* drops small, random thoughts on race relations in Singapore that do not accrue into any ideological statement—any Lao She felt was worth mentioning in "How I Came to Write *Little Po's Birthday*," anyway. And yet these little details grow with each rereading. The long episode on the children's "hunt for tigers" and the dénoue-

ment that reveals this episode to be a dream (and therefore null in narrative time) provide an example of the powerful effect—and affect—of things that didn't happen at all—things that as far as the reader is concerned occurred in that space Genette calls “nonexistent diegetic duration” (94). The reader who has sat through only a little over a day's worth of mostly redundant mental activity has been challenged to inductively experience a scene in which ethnic others—“the little Indian,” “the little Malay”—take on the faces of animals and spirits in Chinese folklore (such as the Monkey King of *Journey to the West* and Wu Song, who fights a tiger in *Outlaw of the Marshes*), which Little Po projects on to the landscape of Singapore. *Little Po* is anticolonial on many levels, but it is even more anticolonial than Lao She intended. The confusion over the reality of the tiger hunt eats up a lot of readerly attention with back-tracking, but in the end we find these scenarios did not really occur because they could not have: “the wild (sterile) lands once inhabited by poisonous pythons and fierce tigers have been razed to the ground by the Chinese” (CW 176). Although this statement sits without irony in “How I Came to Write *Little Po's Birthday*,” its resonance grows upon reading and rereading the actual work. Getting one's bearings in the new landscape of the Eastern Archipelagos—in reality twice colonized, by different groups of people—requires time and patience, as the reader slowly figures out what “populatedness” has erased from the original habitat.

By introducing new experiences of duration and training the reader's attention to the minute things that happen and the things that do not (and cannot), Lao She effectively decolonizes his own novels' interpretive channels, despite his attempts to fix reader response in his metaliterary writings. His transpacific novels contradict their generally nationalistic companion essays in *Old Ox*, just as James's “Prefaces and novels remain in contest with one another” (Cameron 76). While both James and Lao She wanted to construct the most suitable readers for their fictions and fixated on providing “guides,” the experiences of reading those fictions lead the readers outside of the bounds of the prescribed. To simplify Sharon Cameron's argument, James's metaliterature and literary style raise the reader to such an uncanny awareness of how consciousness works in others—and what is more, let the readers in on this process—that the author can no longer totalize the reader's consciousness of the novel as such. The same happened to Lao She but with more dire consequences. His narrative logics cultivate readerly attentiveness to ideas that diverge from the narrative logics of mid-twentieth-century Chinese nationalism—logics that he would initially speak for but that would ultimately betray him and drive him to suicide. On 24 August 1966, Lao She drowned himself in Beijing's Taiping Lake after the Red Guards of the Cultural Revolution publicly tormented him and raided his home.⁸ That ontological convergence of the reader and the text that Lao She singled out as the hallmark of James's fiction and the hallmark of literary modernity literally gives us pause—gives us time to think about ethical reading and its unexpected dénouements.

NOTES

¹All translations are mine.

²Many scholars examine in James's texts the phenomenon wherein “some section of narrative discourse corresponds to nonexistent diegetic duration” (Genette 93–94). For outstanding chronometric studies of James's fiction, see Robbins, Eckstrom, and Helmer. See also Cameron's study of Jamesian coincidence (i.e., things that register exactly at the same time).

³As he worked with Clement Egerton on the translation of *Jing Ping Mei* he “devour[ed] the newly published works of Conrad, Lawrence, Joyce, Huxley, and Woolf” (Witchard 75). He only mentions James in “The Uses of Realism.”

⁴In the early '20s, Pound back-handedly praised Proust as "the nearest the French can get to Henry James." He would also single out James's prefaces as "one extant great treatise on novel writing in English," and soon after he lamented that "Henry James [was] among the missing" from Nobel Prize winners. All quoted in Holder's article.

⁵As Wu Xiaomei and Wei Shaohua have documented, "in his heart Lao She ever preserved an imagined mode transmission between speaking and listening for the novel . . ." (236). Lao She did not meditate on the question of the narrative "receiver" within the frame of Western literary traditions, seeking models in Chinese storytelling: "In traditional stories 'xiao shuo,' the narrator enjoys a mutually-responsive relationship with the narrative receiver, even to the point of copying the narrative receiver's speech patterns" (*Getting Closer* 371).

⁶It is now commonplace in China Studies and sinology-inflected studies of world literature to remark that the influence of Western literature on the first and second generation of Republican writers left a double legacy: what it introduced to Chinese writers as innovations in narrative voice, tone, structure, and attention to social malaises it also introduced as biased and politically expedient mischaracterizations by Chinese writers of China's past or its comparative backwardness.

⁷See also Haralson's reading of Gertrude Stein's "Henry James" to close his book on James and queer modernity: "If 'Henry James was very ready to have it happen for him,' so must readers be very ready for his writings to happen to them" (213).

⁸Sharing the same fate as thousands of artists, writers, and thinkers, Lao She had been labeled as a counterrevolutionary in 1966 despite a lifetime of writing novels about the proletariat. His increasing sense that Maoist Communist Ideology was destroying the ethics and aesthetics of literature was one of the principal incriminating factors. In one of the pieces written around the time of Mao's specious solicitation of diversity and freedom of expression (the "Let One Hundred Flowers Bloom" speech), Lao She wrote that "Literature is subject to its own laws" (FR 46).

WORKS BY HENRY JAMES

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