

Henry James and Prose Rhythm

When Albert C. Clark attested to the ‘obscurities which surround the subject’ of prose rhythm in *Prose Rhythm in English* (1913), he believed that ‘no one has doubted that there are principles at work, if only one could grasp them’. The category of ‘prose rhythm’ still remains elusive. For some, it is achieved by rhetorical figures of parallelism and repetition, whilst for others it bears a striking, but problematic, relation to the rhythms of verse (George Saintsbury, *A History of English Prose Rhythm* (1912)). However, this doctoral dissertation’s unique contribution would be to show how elements of vocalisation such as tone, stress and melodic utterance are crucial to the interpretation of Henry James’s late fiction, whilst also clarifying our understanding of ‘prose rhythm’.

For James’s early readers, his prose rhythms were a difficulty rather than an achievement. The speech rhythms of James’s protagonists, it was claimed, were so marked as to make them sound as though they were under the command of some external force, more suited to poetry than to prose. Yet in his flawed but important history of the subject, Saintsbury argues that prose rhythms tend towards a principle of difference as distinct from the regularity of verse. I will also argue that James’s prose carries its own particular rhythms by unpacking his claim in ‘The Art of Fiction’ (1884) that fiction depends upon ‘catching the very note and trick, the strange irregular rhythm of life’.

Whilst building on Adam Piette’s work, *Remembering and the Sound of Words* (1996), I will also explore the specificity of James’s prose through rhythm and the related aspect of tone. Fernando Poyatos’s *Paralanguage* (1993) and Henry Sweet’s *A Handbook of Phonetics* (1877), both provide important critical and

historical references. Tone, as it is achieved by rhythmic stress and intonation, is central to how James's characters understand and interpret each other, and the subtlest shift in emphasis may determine another's fate. In my analysis of the relationship between rhythm and character in James's late fiction, I will consider Henri Meschonnic's *Critique du rythme* (1982), which shows how rhythm extends beyond metre and constitutes subjective experience. From this I will also demonstrate how inseparable rhythm is from thinking. In *Thinking in Henry James* (1989), Sharon Cameron demonstrates how James's characters think for each other. But this ventriloquism of thought exists alongside a ventriloquism of sound, evident in *The Golden Bowl* (1904), where characters attribute speech rhythms to each other without speech actually occurring.

This proposal develops my previous work on revision as a form of cognition in Henry James's fiction. It could also be broadened to consider the influence of the rhythms of French prose upon James (Maupassant, Flaubert), or a greater consideration of prose rhythm in James's earlier works. Professor Simon Jarvis, with whom I am currently working on elements of technical virtuosity in Henry James, and with whom I worked on verse rhythm for a Part II dissertation, would be an invaluable guide for this proposed research.