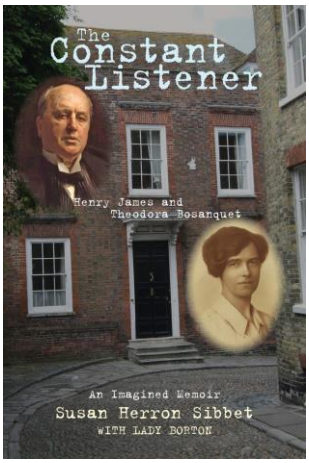

The Constant Listener: Henry James and Theodora Bosanquet: An Imagined Memoir,

By Susan Herron Sibbet with Lady Borton.

Athens: Swallow Press, Ohio University Press, 2017.
ix + 309pp. ISBN 9780804011839

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Published posthumously with significant editorial contributions by Lady Borton, Susan Heron Sibbet's *The Constant Listener* is, in her words, the "imagined memoir" of Theodora Bosanquet, an editor, novelist, suffragette, and Henry James's secretary for the last nine years of his life. Sibbet, we are informed in the book's "Afterword," did much of the initial research for the book during the early 1990s, and as she continued to work on the manuscript up until her death in 2013, she would have witnessed a surprising explosion of fictional interest in Henry James's life from the late 2000s. While Sibbet's book is the only recent work to make Theodora Bosanquet the key protagonist and narrator, the typist does figure as a significant character in David Lodge's *Author! Author!* (2004), Michael Heins's *The Typewriter's Tale* (2005), and Cynthia Ozick's short story, "Dictation" (2008). While this is unfortunate timing, one cannot help feeling this "memoir" needed to do something more than it manages to stake out new imaginative territory.

The novel's first chapter, "The Tragic Muse" begins with Bosanquet's arrival in Rye as she begins typing the Preface for James's novel of the same name (the book's chapter titles are titles of James's writings and each is accompanied by a quotation from James related to that title). Sibbet's focus on Bosanquet as the novel's pseudonymous "constant listener" (and possible muse) allows for some engaging treatment, especially in the early chapters, of the process of dictation and of the surely strange experience of attending to the winding syntax of James's Prefaces for the New York Edition and their unsteady stream of articulated punctuation. It is difficult, however, to sustain the narrative interest of this act of listening to someone explain, obtusely at best, their compositional process.

Naturally Sibbet gives us a window onto Bosanquet's interesting life outside her employment by James—her lesbian relationships, her involvement in the suffragette movement, her experiments with psychic communication. Sibbet uses Bosanquet to query the gender politics of the period, connecting James's use of her to broader difficulties faced by women at the start of the twentieth century. Recalling the second suffrage march in London, Bosanquet remembers wondering how "many of us were those whose work was truly invisible, for we were editors, researchers, amanuenses, and literary secretaries … How many of us were serving some other Mr. James?" (173). There is definitely great potential in the text's sidelong interest in the dual trajectories of James's and Bosanquet's careers—their shared queerness, their disparate experiences in terms of class and gender—but ultimately, and perhaps inevitably, the details of Bosanquet's life often get short shrift and the first-person narration ends up feeling at cross purposes.

Especially in the latter half of the novel, Sibbet has made some striking choices about where to fictionalize her account of Bosanquet's career and its intersections with James and his legacy. For instance, while we know from her diaries that Bosanquet worked as an indexer for the *Encyclopedia Britannica,* Sibbet invents an episode in which her protagonist finds a dismissive entry on her former employer in a section she has been asked to oversee and decides to rewrite it in a more appreciative voice. Another charming example involves Bosanquet play-acting with James and his extensive hat collection, coaxing the author back to work after the loss of his favourite typewriter to repairs leaves him despondent. Such inventions are the novelist's prerogative, imaginatively reshaping and filling in the partial stories traced by an archive. But the invention feels gratuitous, and oddly Orientalist, when Sibbet's Bosanquet takes on automatic writing, at the suggestion of William James (which is on record), and consequently pens two pages in a script that turns out to be Romany, a language she has never learnt; the experience causes her to recall a repressed episode from her childhood in which she has run away from her home for a day and encountered (or invented) a "Gypsy child" named Dina (182). The Society for Psychical Research archives—which we are told holds these fictional pages—does in fact contain later examples of Bosanquet's "trance writing" in the 1930s in which she claimed to be channeling the ghost of Henry James but these do not make it into the novel's compressed chronology.

In the wake of James's death, Bosanquet's preservation of carbon copies of James's deathbed dictations—the infamous "Napoleonic fragments"—becomes a somewhat overworked plot device used to gather the narrative to an endpoint. As Bosanquet receives and then grows wary of the young Leon Edel's increasingly proprietorial attitude toward the James family archive, she, eventually, decides to append those previously withheld dictations to her last recordings about James with the BBC in 1956. Here, as she recites from the copied fragments, Bosanquet finally "dare[s] to speak out in public in the voice of Henry James." The performance cannot help but feel anti-climactic, something Sibbet seems to recognize in the "quiet" and "softened echoes" that mark the novel's final sentence (277); perhaps it is an appropriate note to strike for a fictional memoir in which the protagonist insistently reads herself in the shadow of her former employer.

One unnecessary editorial tic that returns throughout the novel is the use of *[sic]* in quotations from James's various writings—given the novel's conceit, are we supposed to presume these are Bosanquet's insertions serving as editorial apologies for unusual syntax or spellings? or were these added by Lady Borton who, we learn in the "Afterword," "checked and fine-tuned" (281) the manuscript after the author's death? There is no clear way of knowing, and while this might seem fitting—given the novel's passing references to "The Turn of the Screw" with its infamous textual indeterminacy—it mainly serves to distract from Sibbet's uneven but touching tracing of the intimacy between James and Bosanquet.

Daniel Hannah
Lakehead University