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SPECIAL ISSUE: NEW DIRECTIONS IN WILLIAM JAMES AND LITERARY STUDIES

Guest Editors: Todd Barosky and Justin Rogers-Cooper

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INTRODUCTION TO “NEW DIRECTIONS IN WILLIAM JAMES AND LITERARY STUDIES”

TODD BAROSKY AND JUSTIN ROGERS-COOPER

This is the first of two consecutive special issues of *William James Studies* that explore new connections between the work of William James and the field of literary studies. The ten articles gathered here — five in this issue, five more in the next — along with the nearly thirty abstracts and essays we considered but could not include, demonstrate that James remains a vital presence for twenty-first century literary studies. As a thinker and writer, James helps scholars formulate new strategies for interpreting, critiquing, theorizing, and appreciating literary texts of all kinds. Our contributors to these special issues bring James into conversation with an exciting array of texts, from the romantic poetry of William Wordsworth to the speculative fiction of Ursula Le Guin. What the essays share is a belief that James speaks to a wider variety of literary interests, critical practices, and theoretical commitments than has been previously supposed. The depth and breadth of this shared belief is evinced by the fact that our contributors are drawn from all levels of academic experience and from institutions on three different continents.

We believe our issue reflects James’s capacious qualities as both a philosopher and literary author. Indeed, Robert Richardson argues that James “made major contributions to at least five fields — psychology, philosophy, religious studies, teaching and literature.”¹ We might wonder, however, if this list fairly ranks James’s contributions in order of their relative importance, and we might question whether these fields were as distinct for James as they are for us. The essays in this special issue seek to open new

investigations into James's contribution to literature. But in doing so, they challenge the notion that literature can be easily distinguished from his other fields of study. For instance, James's contribution to literature has traditionally been understood as an influence exerted upon literary practitioners — poets, novelists, and playwrights — as well as literary critics and theorists. On this view, he influenced how literature was written and read. But as Richardson reminds us, James, from his earliest youth, “never stopped reading literature, no matter how busy he was.”² Accordingly, the first essay in this issue, David E. Leary's “‘Authentic Tidings’: What Wordsworth Gave to William James,” inverts the usual question and asks what reading literature contributed to James's life and work. Leary argues that Wordsworth's poetry, especially his long narrative poem *The Excursion*, which James read voraciously in the early 1870s and returned to throughout his adult life, sustained his mental health during trying periods and shaped his mature psychological and philosophical thought. To give one particularly provocative example of many mentioned in the essay, Leary suggests that James's “ambulatory” approach to knowledge emerged from Wordsworth's poetic conception of “the mind's excursive power” (12). More generally, Leary insists that any account of James's contribution to literature must include the recognition that literature enriches individual lives and inspires new developments in diverse disciplines of thought.

If James was a reader of literature, so too was he a literary practitioner. As the next two essays demonstrate, his writing demands and repays careful literary analysis. Sean Epstein-Corbin's “‘The Sentiment of Rationality’: William James and The Sentimental Tradition” situates *Pragmatism* and *The Meaning of Truth* in the context of sentimentalism, a discursive tradition that includes eighteenth-century moral philosophers like Ashton Ashley-Cooper and Adam Smith, and nineteenth-century novelists from Jane Austen to Louisa May Alcott. From the former, Epstein-Corbin argues that James adopts a rhetorical framework to dramatize his conception of truth-as-process. From the latter, James borrows the

motif of the “moderate narrator” to figure pragmatic philosophizing as a narratological endeavor: the search for authentic feeling and appropriate belief. James Jiang, in “Character and Persuasion in William James,” provides an alternative genealogy for the literary qualities of James’s philosophic texts. Recognizing that *A Pluralistic Universe* reads like a spiritual autobiography, Jiang argues that James evolves a literary persona derived from Victorian sage writing — a genre which, as practiced by Ralph Waldo Emerson and John Henry Newman, substitutes the logic of narrative for conceptual logic and seeks to persuade its readers through the forceful expression of the philosopher’s character. These two essays show that James’s challenge to the dichotomy between rational thought and objective truth, on the one hand, and feeling and lived experience, on the other, is launched at the level of style. And they remind us, as Jiang writes, “that a history of ideas cannot be conducted in isolation from the textures of the writing through which such ideas are putatively transmitted” (64-65).

The next two essays discuss how James’s ideas have been transmitted, or transmuted, by the textures of modernist literature. Maude Emerson in “A Feeling of *If*: The Experience of Grammar in James, Stein, and Whitehead” and Jill Marsden in “Adventures at the Fringe of Thought: William James, Modernism, and Disability Studies” both take as their point of departure the chapter on “The Stream of Thought” in *The Principles of Psychology*. This chapter is conventionally cited as James’s most enduring contribution to literature, for here literary scholars locate the inspiration for the modernist narrative technique of “stream of consciousness.” But Emerson and Marsden indicate that this technique is predicated upon a set of assumptions that James himself resisted or repudiated. Emerson argues that stream of conscious narration tends to represent experience as a realm of subjective sensations and emotions. But for James, as well as for two of his most inventive readers, Gertrude Stein and Alfred North Whitehead, experience is not contained by consciousness; it is an expansive field in which events like consciousness emerge. Similarly, Marsden argues that critical

accounts of stream of consciousness narrations import conceptions that James does without, particularly the humanistic conception that a self-reflective subject is required to organize experience and give form and direction to the stream of thought. In her reading of Benjy Compson's narrative in William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*, Marsden demonstrates that, for James, thinking exceeds prevailing ableist notions of the mind or self. Emerson and Marsden thus return to James's writing with fresh eyes and inaugurate a rethinking of the genealogies of modernist literature and make James a party to some of the most dynamic theoretical conversations in literary studies today.

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¹ Richardson, *William James*, xiii.

² *Ibid.*, 45.

“AUTHENTIC TIDINGS”: WHAT WORDSWORTH GAVE TO WILLIAM JAMES

DAVID E. LEARY



It is widely recognized that William James had a profound and pervasive impact upon literary writers, works, styles, and genres, not to mention upon the encompassing frameworks of modernism and post-modernism, throughout the 20th century. Much less recognized is the impact of literature upon James's life and work, whether in psychology or philosophy. This article looks at the influence of one particular author, William Wordsworth, primarily through his long 1814 poem *The Excursion*, from which James drew “authentic tidings” that helped him weather some early storms and create his distinctive way of thinking about the human mind and its place in nature.



It is widely recognized that William James (1842-1910) had a profound and pervasive impact upon literary writers, works, styles, and genres, not to mention upon the encompassing frameworks of modernism and post-modernism, throughout the 20th century. The literary scholar R.W.B. Lewis has even asserted that “William James had arguably a greater literary influence than [his novelist brother] Henry James: that is, influence upon literary practitioners, poets and novelists, rather than critics and theorists.”¹ Nonetheless, little has been said about the reverse effect: the impact of literature upon James’s life and work, whether in psychology or philosophy. What difference did it make that he spent so much time reading Shakespeare, Goethe, Wordsworth, Browning, and any number of other authors, both throughout his life and more particularly during the decades when his fundamental assumptions and perspectives were being formed?²

Addressing this question is timely in an age when the value of literature, and of the humanities in general, have been subjected to doubt and even overt attack, including (alas) within the halls of academe. Individual lives are assuredly enriched by literature each and every day; understandings are challenged, viewpoints shaped, emotions soothed, motivations roused: In every possible way, lives are continually being changed as the result of literary works. And even bigger differences (“bigger” in terms of scope) have been made, and can be made, in the challenging and shaping of disciplines. In this article we will consider both of these matters in relation to James and the work of one particular author, William Wordsworth (1770-1850).

How was psychology and philosophy, as well as James himself, changed as a result of his sustained encounter with the poetry of Wordsworth? The convenient thing about raising this question and similar questions regarding the impact of literature upon the life and work of James is that he left us so many resources that document what he read, when he read it, how he reacted to it, and what he did

with what he took from this or that reading. Within these materials is evidence that clarifies precisely how (for instance) Wordsworth's poetry provided a needed tonic, helped generate a renewed joy in living, and thereby contributed to James's recovery from a particularly bad period in the early 1870s (when he was in his late 20s and early 30s), while also prompting and confirming the emergence of doctrines that came to underlie his psychology and philosophy.

Although I cannot discuss everything that would be interesting and relevant to this topic within the brief compass of this article, I will show how Ralph Waldo Emerson's contention that "Wordsworth... has done more for the sanity of this generation than any other writer" was illustrated in James's life: how James's acceptance of the "authentic tidings" offered by Wordsworth, especially in his long poem *The Excursion*, put him into a better, if still tenuous frame of mind.³ Beyond that, I will indicate how James's acceptance of Wordsworth's "authentic tidings" impacted in a significant way upon the vision of "mind" and "matter" that he eventually incorporated into his psychological and philosophical works; and, finally, how it contributed to his critique of contemporary materialistic science. After making these related points, I will list in necessarily rapid-fire manner a number of other points of contact between Wordsworth's poetry and James's work. Even though I will not be able to elaborate upon these points in this article, I hope that this tabulation of other links, combined with the preceding discussion, will provide sufficient validation for now of James's own self-description as "a sort of Wordsworth" and of a close friend's observation that he had "a poet's sense of the real."⁴

PERSONAL CONTEXT

More than 80 years ago, Ralph Barton Perry reported that James found Wordsworth's poems "edifying," but Perry failed to explain

exactly why he found them so, beyond saying that Wordsworth's "gentle mysticism" and "gospel of sympathy and love" provided a "soothing medicine" for his "despondent soul."⁵ In addition, neither Perry nor more recent biographers (e.g., Allen, Simon, or Richardson) nor other James scholars (e.g., Feinstein or Bjork) have explored the possible significance of Wordsworth's poetry in relation to his later work.⁶ Perhaps the most suggestive treatment has been Donna Ferrantello's discussion of the striking parallels – "uncanny resemblances" – between Wordsworth's and James's thought with regard to perception, but she attributes these similarities to James's "unconscious associations" and provides no historical evidence of the actual paths and full range of Wordsworth's influence.⁷ Meanwhile, Amy Kittelstrom has noted the religious and moral messages that James received from Wordsworth, but not the broader psychological and philosophical significance of what he took from his work, which was not her concern.⁸ (James himself later told a younger brother that his crisis had been "more philosophical than theological perhaps," the "perhaps" simply indicating that religious issues were encompassed within the larger philosophical ones.⁹) Finally, Alan Hill has provided some useful historical context regarding Wordsworth's relations with "his American friends," including Emerson, but he omitted any discussion of James, who did not have a direct personal connection to Wordsworth.¹⁰ So the topic awaits fuller exploration.

To get a running start on this matter, we should step back to 1858, when the 16-year-old James had already come to appreciate the usefulness of literature – and poetry in particular – even as compared to the utility of seemingly more practical enterprises like engineering. As he wrote to a friend:

Poets may be laughed at for being useless,
impractical people. But suppose the author of the
"psalm of Life" [Henry Wadsworth Longfellow],

had attempted to invent steam engines, (for which I suppose he has no genius) in the hope of being useful, how much time would he have wasted and how much would we have lost! But no, he did better, he followed his taste, and redeemed his life, by writing the “Psalm” which is as useful a production as any I know.¹¹

Interestingly, Longfellow’s poem addresses the same practical issue that drew James later to Wordsworth: whether “Life is but an empty dream” or “is real! ...is earnest!”; and whether “Not enjoyment, and not sorrow,” but rather “to act, that each to-morrow / Find us farther than to-day” is “our destined end.”¹² The poem urges that life is real and that personal action is the way to “leave behind us / Footprints on the sands of time.”¹³ And though our belief in the significance of life may seem illusory at times, and our actions may seem futile, the poem encourages us to “Learn to labor and to wait” for better times to come.¹⁴

Unfortunately, the waiting got more and more onerous as James’s faith in the freedom of his will, his confidence that he could make a personal difference, and his desire to carry on despite severe doubts in both of these regards faltered over the next decade, as he fell into a progressively deeper and more sustained depression.¹⁵ It is in this period that James turned to Wordsworth for assistance. The classic statement about his sustained encounter with Wordsworth’s works was given by his father Henry James, Sr., who wrote to James’s brother Henry in March 1873 that, contrary to his earlier condition,

Willy goes on swimmingly.... He came in here the other afternoon... and ...exclaimed “Dear me! What a difference there is between me now and me last

spring this time: then so hypochondriacal... and now
feeling my mind so cleared up and restored to sanity.
It is the difference between death and life.”¹⁶

Despite fearing that an inopportune query might disrupt his eldest son’s improved spirits, his father

ventured to ask what specifically in his opinion had promoted the change. He said several things: the reading of Renouvier (specially his vindication of the freedom of the will) and Wordsworth, whom he has been feeding upon now for a good while; but especially his having given up the notion that all mental disorder required to have a physical basis....He saw that the mind did act irrespectively of material coercion, and could be dealt with therefore at first hand.¹⁷

In light of this, “he has been shaking off his respect for men of mere science as such.”¹⁸

We will set aside consideration of the influence of the philosopher Charles Renouvier, though he too (along with the poet-dramatist William Shakespeare and the religious allegorist John Bunyan, somewhat earlier, and the poet Robert Browning, around this same time) contributed to James’s turn-around. Here we will focus solely upon the role that Wordsworth played in James’s personal revitalization, in the establishment of his belief that physical causation is not irresistible – that it can be resisted – at least in certain situations, and in his related rejection of the way that “men of mere science” were then approaching the relation between mind and matter. All of these points, as we shall see, were intimately connected. Before discussing them, it should be added that James’s intellectual and emotional recovery, so closely tied to his renewed

belief in free will and his rejection of materialistic determinism, was to be an on-and-off affair. Even after drinking plentifully from the Wordsworthian stream, he stumbled on for several years, now better and now worse, until his marriage in 1878 consolidated the gains he had made. After that time and for the rest of James's life, he suffered occasional dark periods, but never so dark and never so prolonged as before.¹⁹

PERSONAL ENCOUNTER

In 1903, James claimed to have read all of Wordsworth's poetry.²⁰ Whether or not he had done so by the early 1870s, we know that he was at least familiar with a great deal of it, including in particular Wordsworth's *The Excursion*, which he read over and over, concentrating especially upon Book III on "Despondency" and Book IV on "Despondency Corrected."²¹ As he wrote to his brother Henry in February 1873, "I have read hardly anything of late, some of the immortal Wordsworth's excursion having been the best."²² The significance of his repeated reading of *The Excursion* is underscored when one considers that it is some 9,000 lines in length, and by any standard an intellectually challenging and provocative work.

The story conveyed by *The Excursion* is simple enough. It revolves around four persons – the Poet, the Wanderer, the Solitary, and the Pastor – who spend five days sharing their respective experiences and points of view as they are on an excursion, walking through both countryside and mountains. The point of the poem is whether – and how – it might be possible to maintain a sense of joy and hope – to overcome despondency – in the face of political upheaval, social disillusionment, natural disasters, the loss of loved ones, and all the other painful and disappointing realities of human life. Wordsworth sets the context for his answer at the start when he

writes that nature, the “living presence of the earth,” is not dark “chaos” but vivid “beauty,” if seen in the proper manner.

For the discerning intellect of Man,
 When wedded to this goodly universe
 In love and holy passion, shall find these [natural
 phenomena]
 A simple produce of the common day.
My voice proclaims
 How exquisitely the individual Mind
 (And the progressive powers perhaps no less
 Of the whole species) to the external World
 Is fitted: – and how exquisitely, too –
 Theme this but little heard of among men –
 The external World is fitted to the Mind;
 And the creation (by no lower name
 Can it be called) which they with blended might
 Accomplish: – this is our high argument.²³

This is hardly a manifesto for naïve empiricism! (And perhaps you noticed the consonance of this passage with later Darwinian thought.) To express the matter differently, the human mind, in engaging the world, actively gives forms to things unknown, as Shakespeare put it.²⁴ Or, as Wordsworth argued further on in *The Excursion*:

....The mind's repose
 On evidence is not to be ensured
 By act of naked reason. Moral truth
 Is no mechanic structure, built by rule;
 And which, once built, retains a stedfast shape
 And undisturbed proportions; but a thing
 Subject...to vital accidents.

....I exult,
Casting reserve away, exult to see
An intellectual mastery exercised
O'er the blind elements; a purpose given,
A perseverance fed; almost a soul
Imparted – to brute matter.

....Science then
Shall be a precious visitant; and then,
And only then, be worthy of her name:
For then her heart shall kindle; her dull eye,
Dull and inanimate, no more shall hang
Chained to its object in brute slavery;
But taught with patient interest to watch
The processes of things...[it shall] serve the cause
Of order and distinctness.²⁵

The mind, in short, is a creative force that confers order and distinctness on the world, and even attributes moral significance to it. Nature – reality – is thus the result of a marriage between mind and matter. It was this vision of the human mind that helped dissolve James's personal melancholy, at least for a while, in early 1873; and it was this vision, too, that became the basic creed that underlies his later psychology and philosophy. Although James sometimes justified this creed with evidence and argument drawn from other sources, typically using more scientific and philosophical modes of expression, its place and its emotional weight within his system of thought derived, in important and demonstrable ways, from his encounter with Wordsworth.

PERSONAL BENEFITS

With regard to James's personal revivification, it is important to remember that his depression was directly related to his reluctant, not yet fully and consistently disavowed belief in scientific (which is to say, completely deterministic) materialism.²⁶ His imbibing of contrary perspectives from Wordsworth's *Excursion*, which overlapped and reinforced insights extracted from his previous musing upon Shakespeare's Hamlet, Bunyan's Pilgrim, and Browning's Grammarian, convinced him that the human mind and its operations are not passive products of material causation, as mandated by scientific materialism.²⁷ Rather, they are active and can either divert or enhance our experience of the material world. And this belief, articulated powerfully and persuasively by Wordsworth, made a crucial difference for James, convincing him that his mind – and hence he himself – could make a personal difference, however slight, in the course of human history. (James had feared for some time that “not a wiggle of our will happens save as the result of physical laws” and hence that he would live and die “without leaving a trace,” that is, without making a personal, i.e., willful contribution that would leave a “nick, however small” in human reality.²⁸) In particular, *The Excursion*'s sections on “Despondency” and “Despondency Corrected” helped him realize that his worries about the inevitability of his depression were unfounded: that his mental state was not entirely dependent upon its “physical basis” and that he could think and act “irrespective of material coercion,” as he told his father. This was precisely the medicine he needed to assuage his “hypochondriacal” self: the conviction that it is not true, as the cynical, withdrawn “Solitary” in *The Excursion* put it, that one is condemned to “roaming at large,” simply “to observe, and not to feel,” and therefore “not to act,” while passively accepting this fate as a natural and necessary form of “servitude.”²⁹ Wordsworth helped James see, instead, that it is “well to trust” that “imagination's light” can help when “reason's fails.”³⁰

With his mind thus set free to view things in a personal (yes, subjective) way rather than in an impersonal (and objectifying) way, James was able to stop “viewing all objects unremittingly” in “disconnexion” from himself and the rest of nature, which left them “dead and spiritless.”³¹ With the wise “Wanderer” of the poem he accepted that if we are forever analyzing, forever “dividing,” we will ourselves “break down all grandeur” in human experience.³² By “kindling” his heart in relation to things, by “communing with the glorious universe” instead of standing aside and rending things apart, he could achieve “passionate intuition” rather than “dull and inanimate” conclusions of the kind produced by “uninspired research.”³³ If there was a basis of hope for James, according to Wordsworth, it lay – as it had for the Solitary figure in *The Excursion* – in his “tenderness of heart,” whose “murmurings” conveyed “authentic tidings of invisible things” and revealed the “central peace, subsisting at the heart of endless agitation.”³⁴ These latter two phrases – often quoted by James in subsequent years when he associated “central peace” with all that is “*in posse*” and with the notion that “however disturbed the surface might be, all is well with the cosmos” – captured the additional gift that he received from Wordsworth: a gift that provided immense comfort for James.³⁵ Even beyond the recognition that the human mind is active, it was the acceptance that the mind can feel the presence – or, as James put it in a less dogmatic and assertive vein, that it can feel the *possibility* – of “invisible things,” together with the “central peace” that came from believing in this possibility, that did so much to heal his distress and amend his lack of optimism about the future. His more realistic version of Wordsworth’s views came to be expressed as a “meliorism” rather than naïve optimism: there is always something better that can be sought and brought about, he believed, even if the full reality that one sees as preferable remains only *possibly* possible. As he wrote three decades later, after discussing “the

reality of the unseen,” one can live on “chance” and “hope” much better than “necessity” and “resignation.”³⁶ In contrasting these two modes of living, the latter equivalent to not really living at all, he often personified the distinction by referring to the hopeful Wordsworth versus the resigned Arthur Schopenhauer.³⁷

PSYCHOLOGICAL AND PHILOSOPHICAL BENEFITS

As regards James’s later psychological and philosophical work, the critical insights that distinguished his way of thinking revolved around the Wordsworthian convictions that the human mind is active; that it has its own interests; and that its feelings are as significant – perhaps even more significant – than its thoughts. This set of assumptions, innovative in relation to the psychology and philosophy of the time, received its first sustained expression just five years after James’s father reported his (somewhat temporary) personal improvement. In his highly original “Remarks on Spencer’s Definition of Mind as Correspondence,” James gave expression to “the mind’s excursive power,” as Wordsworth put it.³⁸ (Wordsworth’s use of this phrase underscored that his poetically described excursion through countryside and mountains was an allegory for the mind’s ability to wander, in imagination, around objects, assuming different perspectives, seeing reality now from this and now from that point of view. This multiplying of perspectives was the substantive consequence of the extended conversation among the four different personified perspectives in *The Excursion*.) Giving a clear nod to Wordsworth, James related this “excursive power” of the human imagination to what he called his own “ambulatory” approach to human knowledge: we gain knowledge “*ambulando*,” he argued, that is, by gathering “the general consensus of experience” as we go along, rather than achieving knowledge once-and-for-all by a single act of cognition, much less by some “*a priori* definition.”³⁹ The roots of James’s philosophical pragmatism can be seen here, as they can also be seen

later in this same essay when he echoed Wordsworth's "high argument" about the marriage of mind and matter:

The knower is not simply a mirror floating with no foot-hold anywhere, and passively reflecting an order that he comes upon and finds simply existing. The knower is an actor, and co-efficient of the truth on one side, whilst on the other he registers the truth which he helps to create. Mental interests, hypotheses, postulates, so far as they are bases for human action – action which to a great extent transforms the world – help to make the truth which they declare. In other words, there belongs to mind, from its birth upward, a spontaneity, a vote. It is in the game, and not a mere looker-on.⁴⁰

Our interests, James argued, direct our attention to aspects of reality that matter to us, but since those interests are both limited and various, no one observation from any single position can possibly give us a completely final view of anything.⁴¹ (James's sensitivity to the role of "interest" in mental life was also spurred by Shadworth Hodgson and Chauncey Wright, but Wordsworth's vision of active mentality clearly encouraged him to amplify its importance.⁴²)

Active rather than passive perception, the kind that makes our experience "orderly," demands the kind of focused ("loving" or "rapt") attention that Wordsworth described.⁴³ With such attention, there are always new ways that something – some quality, event, person, situation – can be seen. As a result of this insight, in addition to insisting that the human mind is an actor, James's later psychology and philosophy emphasized the ever-changing, ever-developing, ever-growing nature of human perception, conception,

knowledge, and action. All of this is encapsulated in this early Wordsworth-inspired article.

One year after this article appeared, James elaborated upon central Wordsworthian insights in another important publication, entitled “The Sentiment of Rationality,” which contains the seeds of his mature philosophy. In this widely noticed piece, he argued that the “rationality” (he could have said the “persuasiveness”) of a philosophical position can be recognized only by “certain subjective marks.” Building upon Wordsworth’s “high argument,” he noted that these marks include the “strong feeling of ease, peace, rest” that results when one achieves “the transition from a state of puzzle and perplexity” to one of “relief and pleasure.”⁴⁴ An idea or conclusion that is rationally compelling *feels* a certain way, illustrating “the aesthetic Principle of Ease” that comes into play when one finds that “a chaos of facts is at bottom the expression of a single underlying fact.”⁴⁵ This feeling is analogous, James wrote, to “the relief of the musician at resolving a confused mass of sound into melodic or harmonic order.”⁴⁶ It involves the collaboration of both mind and matter; it depends, as Wordsworth put it, on the “mind’s repose” upon “the processes of things” that confers “order and distinctness” to what might otherwise be experienced as disparate “elements” of some “mechanic structure.”⁴⁷

James went on in this article to discuss additional “passions” that underlie “the sentiment of rationality” – for instance, the “craving” for simplification and the complementary “craving” for distinguishing, which must be satisfied, together, in a balanced way. And acknowledging that “a single explanation of a fact only explains it from a single point of view,” he suggested that “the entire fact is not accounted for until each and all of its characters have been identified with their likes elsewhere.”⁴⁸ This is, of course, a reference to the kind of metaphorical thinking achieved by the excursive mind, the absolute end of which is only heuristically possible since novel characters (i.e., characteristics) can come to

light whenever objects are viewed from novel perspectives with novel interests in mind.

Ironically, as James indicated in this article, Schopenhauer's reflections upon the psychology of philosophizing paralleled Wordsworth's views in these regards, so it is not surprising that in this philosophical article aimed at a philosophical audience James cited Schopenhauer and other philosophers (including Renouvier) for the most part. Yet he turned to Wordsworth in the article's vital concluding section – a denouement meant to instill a sentiment of the article's rationality within the reader. Having admitted that the ultimate reconciliation between mind and matter (between conscious "experience" and "brute fact") had been rejected by some philosophers (whether they favored a materialist or idealist reduction of the duality) and that it was simply accepted by others (such as Renouvier) in a "willful" way, James asserted that "the peace of rationality," that soothing sense of the apt conjunction of mind and matter, may be achieved through "ecstasy," which is to say, through the establishment of the mind's "loving" or "rapt" union with reality, as Wordsworth had put it.⁴⁹ For whereas "logic fails" when it tries to confirm this conjunction, the ecstatic wedding of consciousness and facts creates an "ontological emotion" that "so fills the soul that ontological speculation can no longer...put her girdle of interrogation-marks around existence."⁵⁰ At that point, James said, "thought is not, in enjoyment it expires."⁵¹

James granted that philosophers might well reject the "mystical" form of Wordsworth's argument, but even so, he maintained that the kind of respectful empiricism that Wordsworth represented should remain "the ultimate philosophy," and a palpable awareness of the existence of facts apart from the mind should continue to prompt "ontological wonder," even if the significance of that wonder must remain "mysterious" in the absence of Wordsworth's "mystical" intuitions of the divine.⁵² In sum, besides

emphasizing the active nature of mental life and the role of interest within it, this important article developed the Wordsworthian tenet that emotions – felt responses to facts – play crucial roles in mental life. They are, in fact, as actual and consequential as those facts themselves.

LIBERATION FROM SCIENTISM

As for his “shaking off” of “respect for men of mere science as such,” i.e., for those who approached mind and matter in a scientifically reductive manner, as he had reported to his father, James wasted little time in excoriating the current trend away from the view that he and Wordsworth advocated.⁵³ Just two years after his acknowledgement of Wordsworth’s assistance, he was arguing against “the method of patience, starving out, and harassing to death” that was being implemented, especially in Germany.⁵⁴ The blunt instruments of experimentation, applied without sufficient thoughtfulness and care, were subjecting the human mind to “a regular *siege*” in which “the forces that hem her in” were threatening “her overthrow” rather than elucidation.⁵⁵ Clearly, these words resonated with Wordsworth’s well-known claim that “Our meddling intellect / Mis-shapes the beauteous forms of things, – / We murder to dissect.”⁵⁶ (“Intellect,” of course, was the word that Wordsworth used for rationalizing, analytic reasoning in contrast to the sympathetic and synthetic grasp of “imagination.”⁵⁷)

Clearly, this critique of “brass instrument experimentalists” and impersonal reasoning was aimed not at scientific research as a whole, but toward those experimentalists who failed to observe mental life with respect before “attacking” it with implements that often marred more than they illuminated mental phenomena.⁵⁸ Well aware of the possible advantages and insights to be gained from scientific research, James argued for careful preliminary descriptive work that captured the lived experience of mental life and its phenomena before proceeding to experimental research aimed at

explaining them. Such phenomenologically sensitive work was a prerequisite to useful experimentation and other forms of empirical research, according to James. Time has shown the virtues of his more tempered and thoughtful approach.⁵⁹ The same can be said about his reservations regarding the imposition of traditional philosophical categories and means of analysis upon mental experience. They should not take priority over the integrity of the phenomena themselves.⁶⁰ Together with Wordsworth, then, James accorded preeminence to close and respectful encounters with natural phenomena over the routinized brandishing of intrusive tools of instrumental or rationalized technique.

OTHER POINTS OF CONTACT AND FINAL BENEFIT

Wordsworth's thoughts and words echo – and more than echo – in James's later work: for instance, in his description of “felt relations” among mental phenomena and his assertion that “whilst part of what we perceive comes through our senses from the object before us, another part (and it may be the larger part) always comes...out of our own head” in *Principles of Psychology*;⁶¹ in his reference to the vital role of “unconquerable subjectivity” in “Is Life Worth Living?”;⁶² in his emphasis upon the import of Wordsworth's “authentic tidings” regarding the “limitless significance in natural things” in “On a Certain Blindness in Human Beings”;⁶³ in his recognition of “the reality of the unseen,” the sense of “the more,” and “prayerful communion” as essential aspects of religious experience and his belief that “a *full* fact” includes “a conscious field *plus* its object as felt or thought of *plus* an attitude towards the object *plus* the sense of a self to whom the attitude belongs” in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*;⁶⁴ in his personal testimony to “the extraordinary tonic and consoling power” of Wordsworth's poetry and of Wordsworth's conviction that there is “central peace subsisting at the heart of endless agitation” as well as his discussion

of how “in our cognitive as well as in our active life we are creative. We add, both to the subject and to the predicate part of reality. The world stands really malleable, waiting to receive its final touches at our hands....Man engenders truths upon it” in *Pragmatism*;⁶⁵ and in his similarly summary assertion that “truth we conceive to mean everywhere, not duplication, but addition; not the constructing of inner copies of already complete realities, but rather the collaborating with realities so as to bring about a clearer result” in *The Meaning of Truth*.⁶⁶

These and other points of contact between Wordsworth and James expand upon the connections we have already treated, such as James’s commitment to a “selectionist” framework, a “collaborative” approach to knowing, and an “ambulatory” view of truth. In light of these connections and the special relevance of Wordsworth’s *Excursion*, it seems all the more appropriate that James concluded his *Principles of Psychology* with an acknowledgement that “even in the clearest parts” of this masterpiece “our insight is insignificant enough.”⁶⁷ Indeed, “the more sincerely one seeks to trace the actual course of psychogenesis...the more clearly one perceives ‘the slowly gathering twilight close in utter night.’”⁶⁸ This final eight-word quotation, previously unidentified (even by the astute editors of the 1981 definitive edition of this work), comes from *Excursion*.⁶⁹ How fitting that the person and poem that helped James see more clearly also helped him see clearly how little he actually saw: helped him appreciate how much more remained to be discovered. That self-awareness and humility has endeared James to many readers, who have benefited from the insights he garnered from his encounters with Wordsworth.

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NOTES

¹ Lewis, *The Jameses*, 442.

² This article draws upon a chapter from a larger work, under development, on the influence of five writers (Shakespeare, Goethe, Wordsworth, Browning, and Emerson) upon James and his work in psychology and philosophy.

³ Emerson, "Europe and European Books," 1254. Wordsworth, *The Excursion*, 35-289.

⁴ James, *Correspondence*, vol. 7, 395. His friend's observation is quoted in Perry, *Thought and Character*, vol. 1, 749.

⁵ *Ibid.*, vol. 1, 339.

⁶ Allen, *William James*. Simon, *Genuine Reality*. Richardson, *William James*. Feinstein, *Becoming William James*. Bjork, *William James*.

⁷ Ferrantello, "The Picture of The Mind Revives Again," 133.

⁸ Kittelstrom, *The Religion of Democracy*, ch. 4.

⁹ James, *Correspondence*, vol. 4, 489.

¹⁰ Hill, "Wordsworth and His American Friends." Since Emerson was James's virtual godfather and demonstrated an affinity with many of Wordsworth's views, it is apt to note that, however much Emerson prepared James to appreciate Wordsworth, James took his Wordsworthian draught directly from the source.

¹¹ James, *Correspondence*, vol. 4, 13-14.

¹² Longfellow, "A Psalm of Life," 3.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 4.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ This became the "period of personal crisis" that James scholars know so well. For new perspectives on it, see Leary, "New Insights: Part I" and "New Insights: Part II."

¹⁶ Quoted in Perry, *Thought and Character*, vol. 1, 339.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 339-340.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 340.

¹⁹ For background on James's lingering and then sporadic bedevilment, see Leary, "New Insights: Part I," 4-5 and 23n9.

²⁰ Boodin, "William James as I Knew Him," 217. James added that he had done so because he "enjoyed Wordsworth's purity of style and intimacy with nature." Ibid. Both style and content help account for the fact that James could and did quote from Wordsworth's poems, by heart, throughout the rest of his life.

²¹ Wordsworth, *Excursion*, 93-120 and 120-157.

²² James, *Correspondence*, vol. 1, 192. It merits mention that Wordsworth's poetry and *The Excursion*, in particular, were also significant for other nineteenth-century philosophers and scientists such as John Stuart Mill and Charles Darwin, and for reasons not unrelated to James's. See Mill's *Autobiography*, 96-98, and Darwin's "Autobiography," 33. Wordsworth implicitly encouraged Darwin's tendency to think metaphorically about nature, as Darwin did in developing the notion of natural selection from the established practice of artificial selection. See Darwin, *On the Origin of Species*, chs. 1 and 4. Manier, in *The Young Darwin and His Cultural Circle*, has discussed Wordsworth as a vital part of young Darwin's 'cultural circle' (see 89-96, 166-169, 186, and 196).

²³ Wordsworth, *Excursion*, Preface: 36-71.

²⁴ Shakespeare, "A Midsummer Night's Dream," 5.1: 15.

²⁵ Wordsworth, *Excursion*, V: 560-566, VIII: 199-204, and IV: 1251-1256.

²⁶ See Leary, "A Moralism," 178-181.

²⁷ Shakespeare, "Hamlet"; Bunyan, *Pilgrim's Progress*; and, Browning, "The Grammarian's Funeral." As previously noted, I will discuss the influence of Shakespeare and Browning on James elsewhere. For Bunyan's influence, see Leary, "New Insights: Part II," 29-35.

²⁸ James, *Correspondence*, vol. 4, 370, 12, and 250.

²⁹ Wordsworth, *Excursion*, III: 893-896.

³⁰ Ibid., IV: 772-773.

³¹ Ibid., IV: 962-963.

³² Ibid., IV: 964-965.

³³ Ibid., IV: 1296, 1255, and 626.

³⁴ Ibid., IV: 1144 and 1146-1147.

³⁵ James, *Pragmatism*, 125-126. James, *A Pluralistic Universe*, 55.

³⁶ James, *Varieties of Religious Experience*, 414.

³⁷ On Schopenhauer and James, see Leary, "New Insights: Part I."

³⁸ James, "Remarks." Wordsworth, *Excursion*, IV: 1263.

³⁹ James, "Remarks," 17.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 21.

⁴¹ For a classic statement of this position, see James, *Principles of Psychology*, vol. 1, 273-276.

⁴² The influence of Hodgson and Wright as well as Wordsworth was apparent as early as 1875, two years after James's intense reading of Wordsworth, when he wrote against the "*a posteriori* school" of empirical psychologists (people like Spencer) who considered "experience" the direct result of the inward impress of (or "correspondence" with) environmental stimuli. To the contrary, James argued, experience is not the automatic registering of every passing bit of stimulation: "My experience is only what I agree to attend to." James, "Review of *Grundzüge*," 300.

⁴³ Wordsworth, *Excursion*, Preface: 54 and 215.

⁴⁴ James, "Sentiment of Rationality," 32.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 35.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ See quotation cited in note 25.

⁴⁸ James, "Sentiment of Rationality," 37-38 and 52.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 35 and 62. Wordsworth, *Excursion*, Preface: 54 and 215.

⁵⁰ James, "Sentiment of Rationality," 62.

⁵¹ Ibid. "Thought is not..." is a quotation from Wordsworth's *Excursion*, I: 213, with past tense changed to present tense by James.

⁵² James, "Sentiment of Rationality," 61-64.

⁵³ See quotation cited in note 18.

⁵⁴ James, "Review," 297.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Wordsworth, "The Tables Turned," 357.

⁵⁷ See Johnston, "Wordsworth," xiv-xv, and 352-360.

⁵⁸ James, "Review," 297 and 302-303.

⁵⁹ James is widely recognized as a precursor of later phenomenological philosophy and psychology. See Herzog, "Development of Phenomenological Psychology"; Linschoten, *On the Way*; and Wilshire, *William James and Phenomenology*.

⁶⁰ On James's views regarding the qualitative research that should take place before scientific or philosophical analysis, see Leary, "Overcoming Blindness," 25-31.

⁶¹ James, *Principles*, vol. 1, 240-250 and vol. 2, 747.

⁶² James, "Is Life Worth Living," 54.

⁶³ James, "On a Certain Blindness in Human Beings," 139.

⁶⁴ James, *Varieties*, 55, 401-402, 411-412, and 393.

⁶⁵ James, *Pragmatism*, 55, 126, and 123.

⁶⁶ James, *The Meaning of Truth*, 41. Many additional passages reflecting Wordsworthian insights and themes can be culled from Leary, "Psyche's Muse"; "William James and the Art of Human Understanding"; and "Naming and Knowing." Of course, there were relative differences as well as close affinities between James and Wordsworth, but these will be treated in another place.

⁶⁷ James, *Principles*, 1280.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Wordsworth, *Excursion*, VII: 356-357.

“THE SENTIMENT OF RATIONALITY”: WILLIAM JAMES AND THE SENTIMENTAL TRADITION

SEAN EPSTEIN-CORBIN



This paper shows that William James borrowed a rhetorical framework from sentimental prose – both narrative and argumentative – which helped him grapple with novel problems in modern philosophy. The new direction I take to Jamesian studies is to place James into a context – sentimental culture – that can reveal to scholars how sentimental discourse influenced his thought, and how sentimental discourse might vibrate across pragmatism’s genealogy. I pay special attention to the philosophical tradition of moral sentimentalism and the literary tradition of sentimental fiction. Taken together, my efforts should help scholars to look at James anew – as a rhetorical innovator who borrowed narrative and argumentative tropes from the discursive environment available to him.



Traditional histories of pragmatism, such as H.S. Thayer's insightful *Meaning and Action: A Critical History of Pragmatism*, tend to privilege conventional philosophical genres over autobiography or literary fiction, leading to readings of William James that discount the literary and rhetorical features of his writing. Doing this not only minimizes the cultural complexity of James's thought, it also minimizes the influence of literary and rhetorical traditions on his writing. This essay will trace James's connection to the sentimental tradition. My argument brings together two strands of recent scholarship. The first includes those scholars – like Cornel West, Erin McKenna, and Richard Rorty – who address the literary and rhetorical features of James's writing, including his appreciation for irony, regard for the Romantic tradition, use of prophetic modes of expression, and emphasis on process narration (what McKenna characterizes as the “task of utopia”).¹ The second includes scholars like Jerome McGann, Shirley Samuels, and Dana Luciano, who have shown that the sentimental tradition is a de facto philosophical tradition, one governed by sophisticated rhetorical norms that transcend clear discursive divisions between prose, poetry, literature, pulp, philosophy, fiction, and nonfiction.²

My modest contribution here is to argue that James's pragmatism inherited the rhetorical framework of sentimental prose — both argumentative and narrative — and that he brought its formidable resources to bear on novel problems in modern philosophy. My aim isn't so much to view the philosophical as literary, but simply to place James into a specific literary and rhetorical context — the sentimental tradition — to help scholars analyze how sentimental discourse influenced his thought, and how sentimental discourse might vibrate across pragmatism's genealogy. Since a full analysis of James's writing is beyond the scope of this essay, I will focus on those texts most significant to pragmatism's development: *Pragmatism* and its sequel, *The Meaning of Truth*.

I will show that many features that distinguish James's style in these texts can be traced back to influential texts in the sentimental tradition. First, I will outline several key tropes in the writings of the

eighteenth-century moral sentimentalists, Ashton Ashley-Cooper, the 3rd Earl of Shaftesbury, and Adam Smith, arguing that they constitute the rhetorical framework of *Pragmatism*. Next, I will explore the common tropes and narrative techniques of sentimental fiction to suggest that James is best understood as the “moderate narrator” of his own philosophical writings. Instead of conflating “William James,” the man, with “William James,” the narrator of his philosophical texts, it is better to recognize the rhetorical skill of William James, the author.

Influence is notoriously hard to establish, but we can be fairly certain that James read the central writers of the sentimental tradition. We know, for instance, that he taught Smith and most likely was familiar with Shaftesbury. James had a copy of Shaftesbury’s text in his library within Houghton Library.³ Given that he retired from Harvard in 1907, the year of the publication of *Pragmatism*, it is likely that he read Shaftesbury prior to its composition. Further, Robert Richardson, in *William James: In the Maelstrom of American Modernism*, writes, “Benjamin Rand, who later did work on Shaftesbury...was James’s reader for Philosophy 2 [Logic and Psychology],” suggesting either that James guided Rand to Shaftesbury, or that Rand made the connection himself in relation to James’s instruction.⁴

The case of Smith is easier. First, Smith’s *Theory of Moral Sentiments* is listed as having been found, with James’s notes, in his personal library.⁵ Second, in an October 14, 1888 letter to his brother, Henry James, he mentions “Adam Smith” as someone he is reading in preparation for “a big class in ethics” he would be offering.⁶ Lastly, Smith mentions Shaftesbury’s theory of affections in Part VII.II.52 of his *Theory of Moral Sentiments*. It is also clear from James’s letters and known reading that the generic conventions and common themes of sentimental writing would have pervaded a large portion of his readerly universe.

TROPES FROM MORAL SENTIMENTALISM

Shaftesbury has gained increasing attention from scholars studying the development of 18th and 19th-century moral sentimentalism.

Elizabeth Eger has pointed out the importance of his writing to the Bluestocking Circle, a constellation of mostly female authors who exerted an enormous influence on the development of transatlantic cultures of sensibility and sentiment.⁷ Lawrence Klein has advanced new analyses of Shaftesbury's philosophical complexity, suggesting that his "philosophy of politeness" crystallized a discourse that would remain important in Anglophone writing for over a century, including specific constructions of the terms taste, virtue, adjustment, publicity, character, and politeness that usefully blur boundaries between ethics and aesthetics.⁸ In particular, Klein suggests that Shaftesbury, like James, bemoaned the detachment of philosophy from active life and desired "that philosophy should make people effective participants in the world."⁹

Shaftesbury, attempting to side-step the issues of free will and determinism, argues that virtue consists in arranging one's passions "so that they shall not clash with his environs."¹⁰ Fitting one's sentiments to externally-derived standards becomes the goal of cultivation. Each of these terms rests, in turn, on the notion that humans are social creatures and that the categories of good and evil – but not the propensity to act in accordance with either – are to a certain extent inborn properties of human nature. As Klein observes:

For Shaftesbury, the affections were only the foundations of human morality. Human morality, though it arose in the feelings, was a phenomenon of consciousness and rationality as well. While humans were naturally sociable and naturally capable of virtue, they were not, to speak precisely, naturally good or virtuous. Virtue required training and work, for virtue was not merely an affective disposition, but affection raised to a conscious principle in the rational agent by reflection on affection and the sorts of actions endorsed by affection.¹¹

A few features of Shaftesbury's thought become important in our consideration of James. The first is the figure of virtue he

constructs. Shaftesbury's trope of virtue is simultaneously public and private. It proceeds – to use a metaphor – from the wellspring of the affections to a terminus determined by public manners down a stream of action. The fitness of one's affections and the politeness of one's actions are subject to judgment, an evaluative instrument determined both by public norms and in public performance. The visibility, as it were, of one's conduct provides for the adjustment of that conduct, and the adjustment of conduct requires, in turn, the cultivation of one's affections. Or, to use Shaftesbury's words:

There is no creature, according to what has been already proved, who must not of necessity be ill in some degree by having any affection or aversion in a stronger degree than is suitable to his own private good or that of the system to which he is joined. For in either case the affection is ill and vicious.¹²

Put differently, Shaftesbury makes a distinction between private interest and public interest, but insists that the former is subordinate to the latter, and that each requires the proportional adjustment of affection to the particular context of one's "actual life."¹³

Before considering the connection between Smith and James, it is important to establish that Shaftesbury's construction of the figure of virtue persists in James's writing. Doing so requires a brief consideration of "Lecture IV: Pragmatism's Conception of Truth" in *Pragmatism*. There, James constructs true belief as virtuous belief – what is true is good in the way of belief – and suggests that the only determinant of truth is the "cash-value" of a belief, or its utility to the one who believes it.¹⁴ Digging a bit deeper, he writes:

"The true," to put it very briefly, is only the expedient in the way of our thinking, just as "the right" is only the expedient in the way of our behaving. Expedient in almost any fashion; and expedient in the long run and on the whole of course; for what meets expediently all the experience in sight won't

necessarily meet all farther experiences equally satisfactorily. Experience, as we know, has ways of boiling over, and making us correct our present formulas.¹⁵

He later clarifies that by “farther experiences” he means the future, and that the true is a purely “regulative postulate” meant to guide the processes of action tied to belief.¹⁶

James has taken the rhetorical structure of Shaftesbury’s trope of virtue and transposed it onto his trope of truths (by which he means “good beliefs”). “Verification” – not simply by the individual but by the individual “in conversation” – takes the place of Shaftesbury’s “environs.”¹⁷ Action, adjustment, and cultivation retain their meaning from Shaftesbury’s construction. The “affections” become the “beliefs.”¹⁸ So, in Shaftesbury’s moral sentimentalism, the affections lead to action judged according to outcomes in a context determined by public manners, and reason adjusts the affections to fit actions to those manners. In James’s pragmatism, beliefs lead to action judged according to outcomes in a context determined by public values, and reason adjusts the beliefs to fit actions to those values. Both suggest that private and public interests pertain to the cultivation of affections/beliefs, and that private interests are subordinate to – though distinct from – the systems in which they are embedded. The purpose of philosophy in each instance is to perfect the process of cultivation and help individuals act effectively in the world.

Smith provides James two figures lacking in Shaftesbury’s philosophy. The first is the figure of sentiment as a circuit linking experience, sensibility, and reason, a figure without which the explanation of “interior life” provided by James would be incomplete. The second is the dialectical construction of the tropes of duty and utility that allow James to construct his infamous “pragmatic test” of truth: its “cash-value in experiential terms.”¹⁹

Like Shaftesbury, Smith – as a moral philosopher and rhetorician – has received renewed attention. Stephen J. McKenna, in his *Adam Smith: The Rhetoric of Propriety*, connects Smith to the

classical rhetorical tradition and to the earlier philosophizing of Shaftesbury, Hutcheson, and Hume. McKenna writes that “Smith’s deployment of propriety in rhetoric and ethics was fully in accord with philosophical issues already well framed in the classical rhetorical tradition.”²⁰ He goes on to argue, building on previous notions circulated by Barbara Warnick, that “rhetorical propriety is fundamental for sympathy,”²¹ and that rhetorical propriety can be defined as “a rhetorical consensus between moral agents, one of whom is the principal or dative of sentiment, the other of whom is a spectator.”²² McKenna rightly interprets Smith’s theory of sentiment and sympathy as itself a rhetorical frame, one governed by the interaction between the spectator and the object of his concern.

As will become evident in my section on sentimental literature, James’s rhetorical purpose is different from Smith’s. Smith largely refrains from epistemologizing (to borrow Rorty’s phrase), while James re-frames epistemology as a rhetorical act, one that can only be understood in a narrative context. Nonetheless, James shares with Smith both a rich store of classical rhetorical education upon which to draw and a preoccupation with the sentimental circuit governing spectator and subject.

Following McKenna’s lead, what we must do, however, is properly articulate the trope of the sentimental circuit that Smith constructs. In my argument, this circuit is what in turn provides the particular rhetorical features of duty and utility in *Theory of Moral Sentiments* that allow James to develop his “pragmatist theory of truth.” Interestingly, Smith presents the central piece of his theory of sentiment through a brief narrative:

We see or think about a man being tortured on the rack; we think of ourselves enduring all the same torments, entering into his body (so to speak) and becoming in a way the same person as he is. In this manner we form some idea of his sensations, and even feel something that somewhat resembles them, though it is less intense. When his agonies are

brought home to us in this way, when we have adopted them and made them our own, they start to affect us and we then tremble and shudder at the thought of what he feels. Just as being in pain or distress of any kind arouses the most excessive sorrow, so conceiving or imagining being in pain or distress arouses some degree of the same emotion, the degree being large or small depending on how lively or dull the conception is.²³

Here, Smith outlines the four steps that lead to the creation of a sentiment. During an experience, an individual has immediate reactions to sensory information, a process he refers to as “sensibility.”²⁴ Sensibility leads one to imagine oneself in the place of the feeling subject, a kind of mirroring process Smith refers to as “sympathy.”²⁵ While engaged in sympathetic imagination, one then engages in a moral evaluation of the other’s experience. Based on one’s moral evaluation, one then develops a moral response, which Smith sometimes refers to as an “affection,” elsewhere as an “attitude.”²⁶ The outcome of this process – sensibility, sympathy, evaluation, and attitude – is a sentiment, which itself becomes a combination of a feeling, a belief, a commitment, and a moral disposition. Once secured, sentiments can then be cultivated, both by solidifying the sentiment through repeated engagement of it, and by seeking out related sentiments. Or, as Smith puts it: “So my thesis is that our fellow-feeling for the misery of others comes from our imaginatively changing places with the sufferer, thereby coming to conceive what he feels or even to feel what he feels.”²⁷ The concept of sentiment, rightly understood, is perhaps Smith’s most important contribution to sentimental literature and to James’s pragmatism. In its sophisticated form, it provides the basis for an entire literary aesthetic, social project, educational theory, and conception of philosophy.

An important move Smith makes is to evaluate sentiments on fundamentally consequentialist grounds. He writes that “The sentiment or affection of the heart that leads to some action can be

considered in two different relations: (1) in relation to the cause that arouses it, or the motive that gives rise to it; (2) in relation to the end that it proposes, or the effect that it tends to produce.”²⁸ Put differently, he thinks that sentiments should be praised or criticized based on either the cause or effect of the sentiment in question. He means that a sentiment could be deemed defective if it were either out of proportion with the experience that provoked it, as when one criticizes someone for reacting too emotionally to a jingle, or if the sentiment leads to harmful or merely inefficient outcomes, as when a response to a charity advertisement leads someone to donate half their rent money to a dubious cause. As Smith clarifies: “The propriety or impropriety...of the consequent action consists in the suitability or unsuitableness, the proportion or disproportion, that the affection seems to bear to the cause or object that arouses it. The merit or demerit of the action, the qualities by which it is entitled to reward or deserving of punishment, consists in the beneficial or harmful nature of the effects that the affection aims at or tends to produce.”²⁹ Of importance to our later discussion of James, Smith frames the evaluation of sentiments not on some intrinsic property of a sentiment, nor to what extent a sentiment “corresponds” to reality, nor to how “coherent” a sentiment is with other sentiments, but with regard to its appropriateness in adapting the individual to a stream of experience.

For Smith, one of sentiment’s primary values is in reinforcing ethical duty, but also in civilizing and perfecting duty, turning it from a cold process of rational rule-following into a warm process of fellow-feeling. The notion that there are different forms of rationality, and that some integrate logic and feeling, is central to James’s critique of Western philosophy, and to the ways in which he appeals to his audiences. Smith suggests that “a person’s regard for those general rules of conduct is his sense of duty, a driver of the greatest importance in human life, and the only driver that most people have to direct their actions.”³⁰ Far from thinking of this as an adequate state of affairs, Smith rejoins:

All the graceful and admired actions to which the benevolent affections would prompt us ought to be based as much on the passions themselves as on any concern with general rules of conduct. A benefactor will think he has been poorly repaid if the beneficiary, in acknowledging the help he has been given, is acting merely from a cold sense of duty, with no affection toward the benefactor personally.³¹

Here, Smith argues that part of moral evaluation of an act depends on the balance of sentiments driving the act. That a beneficiary should acknowledge the help of a benefactor is taken as a clear duty, but duty alone would be inappropriate to the beneficiary's moral obligations. He or she is also obliged to feel in proportion to their duty, proportion previously defined in relation to the cause of the sentiment (what the benefactor did) and the outcome of the sentiment (the reaction it would elicit from the benefactor). The notion of "appropriateness" in relation to sentiments – as they attach to duty – is perhaps Smith's second most important contribution to pragmatism.

The trope of utility, the third and final connection between Smith's theory of sentiments and James's pragmatism that I will consider, is also a fitting bridge between Smith and James in my larger argument. Smith writes, "Everyone who has thought hard about what constitutes the nature of beauty has seen that one of its principal sources is utility...The fitness of any system or machine to produce the end for which it was intended confers a certain rightness and beauty on the whole thing, making it a pleasure to think about – and this is so obvious that nobody has overlooked it."³² Here, utility is garnered as an integral component of beauty; further, it is defined primarily as the "fitting" of motives and consequences. Smith doesn't go quite so far as arguing that beauty is truth, and truth is beauty. He does suggest, however, that the sentiments of beauty and utility might bear a family resemblance. Smith continues:

Why is utility so pleasing? This has been answered by Hume. According to him, a thing's utility pleases its owner by continually suggesting to him the pleasure or convenience that it is fitted to promote. Every time he looks at it he is reminded of this pleasure, so that the object in question becomes a source of continual satisfaction and enjoyment. The spectator's sympathy leads him to have the sentiments of the owner, making him view the object in that same agreeable light.³³

Here, Smith introduces the idea that sentiments are contagious, and that sympathetic imagination always already includes sympathizing with another's sentiments. To ape his famous description of the person on the rack, we might say that when we see a person admiring an object, we imagine what we might feel by admiring that same object. We then cultivate sentiments toward that object, or objects of that type. Once this occurs, we might then find pleasure in considering an object fitted to its purpose even in the absence of the owner or designer of the object in question. As Smith writes, "An artifact's being skillfully designed so as to be suitable for some purpose is often valued more than is the purpose itself; exact adjustment of the means for attaining some convenience or pleasure is often valued more highly than the convenience or pleasure itself, though they would seem to be the sole source of the artifact's merit."³⁴ The utility of objects per se becomes compelling to us even if we don't ever intend to use an object for its purpose. One might make an analogy here to James's conception of beliefs and the process of agreement, by which one exposed to a belief well-fitted to its ends – having plentiful "cash-value" – might consider the belief beautiful even without adopting it.

To connect my discussion of Smith back to my primary argument, I would like to point out how Smith's tropes of sentiment, duty, action, and utility (some of which have overlap with Shaftesbury's) help James construct his "pragmatic theory of truth" and persuade his reader to adopt positive attitudes toward it. In the

opening paragraphs of “Lecture VI: Pragmatic Conception of Truth,” from *Pragmatism*, James writes, “Let me begin by reminding you of the fact that the possession of true thoughts means everywhere the possession of invaluable instruments of action; and that our duty to gain truth, so far from being a blank command from out of the blue, or a ‘stunt’ self-imposed by our intellect, can account for itself by excellent practical reasons.”³⁵ First, James defines “true thoughts” as “instruments of action.” Second, he states that individuals have a duty to gain truth, not as a vapid social norm, but for reasons that matter in practice.

He continues, “The importance to human life of having true beliefs about matters of fact is a thing too notorious. We live in a world of realities that can be infinitely useful or infinitely harmful. Ideas that tell us which of them to expect count as the true ideas in all this primary sphere of verification, and the pursuit of such ideas is a primary human duty. The possession of truth, so far from being here an end in itself, is only a preliminary means towards other vital satisfactions.”³⁶ Third, James creates an evaluative scheme for true beliefs, differentiating between utility and harm. Fourth, truth is re-positioned not as an end in itself, but as a cause of action, the consequences of which might be useful or harmful. He continues, “If I am lost in the woods and starved, and find what looks like a cow-path, it is of the utmost importance that I should think of a human habitation at the end of it, for if I do so and follow it, I save myself. The true thought is useful here because the house which is its object is useful.”³⁷ Through his anecdote, James reinforces the four points I covered above: truths are to James like sentiments are to Smith, and one should evaluate them based on how well they fit motives to consequences.

James then extends the Smithian trope of truths-as-sentiments to those truths that do not seem immediately useful: “The practical value of true ideas is thus primarily derived from the practical importance of their objects to us. Their objects are, indeed, not important at all times. I may on another occasion have no use for the house; and then my idea of it, however verifiable, will be practically irrelevant, and had better remain latent.”³⁸ Truths, like sentiments,

can be cultivated, and one has a duty to cultivate them. This duty is not – as it is in Smith’s theory – created by social conditions, but by the notion of “survival” borrowed from contemporary evolutionary theories. A truth can also, like sentiments can for Smith, be deployed in appropriate or inappropriate proportion, depending on the context in which the truth becomes useful or “activated.” James continues to one of his more frequently quoted lines: “You can say of it then either that ‘it is useful because it is true’ or that ‘it is true because it is useful.’ Both these phrases mean exactly the same thing, namely that here is an idea that gets fulfilled and can be verified. True is the name for whatever idea starts the verification-process, useful is the name for its completed function in experience.”³⁹ Here, James borrows the figuration of “truth-as-process” from Smith’s “sentiment-as-process.” A sentiment, once held, initiates the sentimental circuit, and it closes it. A true belief, once held, initiates a practice, and the evaluation of that practice by the lights of the true belief closes it.

James extends the analogy between his theory of truth and Smith’s theory of sentiments: “But in this world, just as certain foods are not only agreeable to our taste, but good for our teeth, our stomach, and our tissues; so certain ideas are not only agreeable to think about, or agreeable as supporting other ideas that we are fond of, but they are also helpful in life’s practical struggles.”⁴⁰ Our sentiments toward truths function like our sentiments toward objects, and for the same reasons. Our affections for certain ideas are not of a radically different type from our affections for foods, relationships, or works of art. Insofar as a belief is useful in at least one context, then it will be appropriate in that context, one will have a duty to store it up, and one will be praised for activating it in proper proportion (as was true in Shaftesbury).

TROPES FROM SENTIMENTAL LITERATURE

While James takes many of his rhetorical moves from moral sentimentalism, his style relies more heavily on narration than do the dense treatises of Shaftesbury and Smith. In particular, James

makes frequent use of free indirect discourse⁴¹ in his anecdotes, the effect of which is what Wayne Booth calls the creation of “sympathy through control of inside views.”⁴² Unlike his figures of virtue and truth-as-process, James’s narrative techniques more closely match those found in sentimental novels. Through his narrative technique, he constructs a motif of authentic feeling that in turn constructs his own philosophical persona as “William James, the moderate narrator.”

The first major trope James borrows from sentimental literature is the motif of authentic feeling. As Aaron Ritzenberg has pointed out, despite the attention sentimental literature gives feeling, deciphering which feelings are genuine, and which false, is often difficult.⁴³ Ultimately, however, part of the purpose of a sentimental novel is to reveal to the reader which characters are authentic, and which aren’t. For example, in Louisa May Alcott’s *Little Women*, honesty – as in Laurie’s “honest eyes”⁴⁴ – is a virtue admired independent of the feelings in question. While the Professor in Alcott’s story has “warmth, intimacy, and a tender capacity for expressing his affection—the feminine attributes Alcott admired and hoped men could acquire in a rational, feminist world,” it is noted that his beliefs, “while beautiful and true,” simply “wouldn’t pay.”⁴⁵ Yet, Jo, in her disgust at being forced, for financial reasons, to incorporate a superficial moralism into her children’s stories, implies that such affections are irrelevant if they’re not honest work.

Such motifs are ubiquitous throughout sentimental writing. As Bruce Burgett suggests, “the heart” is the “universal and pre-political point of affective identification” troped as “authentic feeling.”⁴⁶ Authentic feeling, in this sense, is to be contrasted with the manipulations of rakes and the crass ideology of many suitors in sentimental fiction. Indeed, as any reader of sentimental fiction knows, determining which heart is good, and which bad, is the primary thrust of every romantic plot, and a key to the moral universe of each novel.

Throughout his philosophical writings, James makes use of the motif of authentic feeling – with its related tropes of “heart,” “soul,” “sickness,” “health,” “good,” and “bad” – including when he insists

that only the “cash-value” of philosophical conceptions “for our actual experience” should be counted for or against such conceptions.⁴⁷ Eschewing entirely a purely speculative mode in philosophy, he instead insists that motivations and virtues of those engaged in philosophical discourse communities matter. Finding a philosopher or philosophy to follow is, in this regard, much like deciphering the virtues of a lover’s heart in sentimental fiction. More importantly, James adapts the motif of authentic feeling into the motif of authentic *belief*, thereby constructing one of pragmatism’s most well-known tests: whether or not a believer does, in fact, act on a belief is the final test of his having the belief in the first place. In other words, those who say they believe something in the hypothetical space of a philosophical discussion but then do not act in accordance with that belief receive special derision in James, who does not use the charge as a pure *tu quoque* objection, but instead as a measure of which objections can be said to inhere in practice and which only in conversation.

The second trope James picks up from sentimental fiction – and perhaps his most effective form of persuasion – is the trope of the moderate narrator. As Margaret Cohen points out, sentimental narrators most often speak in “spare and understated fashion,” signifying their good sense, propriety, and by extension, their virtue.⁴⁸ A sample from the opening of Chapter 2 of *Sense and Sensibility* should suffice to illustrate the point, in this instance accentuated through Jane Austen’s characteristic use of free indirect discourse:

Mrs. John Dashwood did not at all approve of what her husband intended to do for his sisters. To take three thousand pounds from the fortune of their dear little boy would be impoverishing him to the most dreadful degree. She begged him to think again on the subject. How could he answer it to himself to rob his child, and his only child too, of so large a sum? And what possible claim could the Miss Dashwoods, who were related to him only by half blood, which

she considered as no relationship at all, have on his generosity to so large an amount.⁴⁹

Here, the narrator's tone is both what allows Austen to gain the reader's trust and what allows the narrator to function effectively as a vehicle of morals and manners, guiding the neophyte (more to be said on this below) into a proper love match.

Important points need to be made here. First is that moderation is itself, of course, a virtue in sentimental fiction. It is not, as many have pointed out, more important than authentic feeling or a fitting degree of affection. Nonetheless, sentimental novels tend to punish characters who are either too effusive or not effusive enough, as the occasion dictates. Propriety, not a set level of enthusiasm, is what governs the narrator's discrimination of fine feeling. Yet, as sometimes occurs in plots, overwhelming feeling is itself sometimes appropriate: at the death of child, for instance, or the rescue of an estranged young woman. Yet, immoderation is *never* proper for the narrator, whose ethos depends entirely on being perceived by the reader as a perfect arbiter of taste and decorum.

To be more direct: James leverages the generic convention of the moderate narrator widely consumed by his own readers by characterizing philosophical schools other than pragmatism as either too enthusiastic or too morbid, too hard-headed or tender-minded, too particular or too general. *Pragmatism*, by way of its master narrator (James), promises the reader not so much truth in any given matter, but appropriate belief. That is to say: belief fitted to the very bourgeois discourse community for which he writes.

Nevertheless, James does not offer his reader his own position – that of the Austenite narrator, secure in her station as elder and guide; instead, he offers the reader the position of (pragmatist) neophyte, the final trope he borrows from the sentimental tradition that we have time to consider in this essay. Just as, for Jane Tompkins, the sentimental novel insists that a young woman must learn to “control her passions on her own”⁵¹ if she is to enter maturity, James dramatizes philosophizing as the process by which the uninitiated “amateurs” to which he is speaking must learn to

control the equally dangerous passions of distinguishing and simplifying, lest they be led to ruin by either unrestrained empiricist or rationalist dogmatisms.⁵²

As I stated to in the introductory section, the purpose of this essay is to outline James's borrowing of tropes from the sentimental tradition, both from philosophers of moral sentimentalism and authors of sentimental literature. One way to simplify my project is to develop a genealogy of the phrase "the sentiment of rationality" that appears in James's *The Will to Believe*. While they are clearly close-knit, I will now somewhat shift course and cap my discussion by turning to the sentiment of rationality.

In "The Sentiment of Rationality," James constructs "philosophizing" as itself a narrative at the level of the individual philosopher, characterizing it as the process of moving from a state of confusion or uncertainty to a state of orderliness and fluidity. In particular, the sentiment of rationality is how a philosopher knows that he or she has, in Rorty's phrasing, gotten things to hang together in a sufficient way. The philosopher is then characterized as one who is particularly sensitive to the sentiment of rationality, making him or her analogous to Percy Bysshe Shelley's poet (whose superiority of feeling grants special power)⁵³ or Lydia Sigourney's sentimental traveler (whose superiority of empathy grants special power).⁵⁴ But, James tells his reader, the philosopher has so far been like Plato's winged stallions, improperly restrained in their intellectual passions. An overdeveloped passion for distinguishing or simplifying has driven most philosophy, and what is required is an appropriate moderation of the passions.

In short, James casts the pragmatist – this time synonymous with the moderate narrator himself – as the charioteer bridling each passion toward a virtuous end. In this way, the pragmatist narrator garners trust from the reader for the more abstract flights that proceed. The particular journey the reader is to take: a tour of great philosophies judged by aesthetic principles and all but one (pragmatism) found lacking. As James puts it, "No system of philosophy can hope to be universally accepted among men which grossly violates either of the two great aesthetic needs of our logical

nature, the need of unity or the need of clearness, or entirely subordinates the one to the other.”⁵⁵ James recasts philosophical judgment as the cultivation of the sentiment of rationality in relation to a pragmatist standard of unity and clearness. The issue – borrowing again from Shaftesbury – is one of the fitness of our taste to public standards.

The phrase “the sentiment of rationality” now appears in a proper genealogy. It emerges as an adaptation of two significant threads of intellectual culture prior to the twentieth century: moral sentimentalism from Shaftesbury and Smith and sentimental literature from Austen to Alcott. Clearly, the philosophical purposes to which James puts the trope of the sentiment of rationality add a great deal to the sentimental tradition. Pragmatism, in many ways, is the adaptation of sentimentalism to late modernity, a pluralistic counter-point to the positivistic, idealistic, and materialistic philosophies that regained prominence during the World Wars.

I have shown that James borrows the motif of authentic feeling and the motif of the moderate narrator from sentimental fiction. Further, I have shown that James borrows the tropes of virtue, politeness, action, sentiment, duty, and utility from moral philosophers like Shaftesbury and Smith. Together, the rhetorical resources James draws on don’t just make his arguments sophisticated and pleasurable; they also suggest how one might revisit scholarly efforts to understand 18th- and 19th-century culture more broadly. The literary qualities of his philosophy help us understand how generic divisions between analytical prose and literary language often underwrite deep assumptions about rationality, feeling, and argument. More importantly, perhaps, is the insight that *how* James wrote tells us as much about his desire to root false dichotomies between reason and feeling out of Western discourse as *what* he wrote.

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NOTES

¹ West, *American Evasion of Philosophy*; Rorty, *Philosophy and Social Hope*; McKenna, *The Task of Utopia*.

² McGann, *Poetics of Sensibility*; Samuels, *The Culture of Sentiment*; Luciano, *Arranging Grief*.

³ Kowalski, *Guide to William James's Reading*, 273.

⁴ Richardson, *William James*, 284-285.

⁵ Kowalski, *Guide to William James's Reading*, 276.

⁶ James, *The Letters*, 283.

⁷ Eger, *Bluestockings*, 4.

⁸ Klein, *Culture of Politeness*, 109.

⁹ Klein, *Characteristics*, viii.

¹⁰ Chisholm, *Encyclopædia Britannica*, 765.

¹¹ Klein, *Culture of Politeness*, 56.

¹² Klein, *Characteristics*, 190.

¹³ James, *The Meaning of Truth*, v.

¹⁴ James, *Pragmatism*, 46.

¹⁵ James, *Meaning of Truth*, vii.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 240.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, vii.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 219.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, v.

²⁰ McKenna, *Adam Smith*, 26.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 102.

²² *Ibid.*, 116.

²³ Smith, *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, 11.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 30.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 53.

²⁶ Ibid., 97.

²⁷ Ibid., 12.

²⁸ Ibid., 78.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid., 86

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid., 218.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ James, *Pragmatism*, 97.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid., 98.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 42.

⁴¹ An entry for Austen's *Emma* appears in *A Guide to William James's Reading*, showing that James quoted from it in *The Principles of Psychology*.

⁴² Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, 245.

⁴³ Ritzenberg, *The Sentimental Touch*, 2-7.

⁴⁴ Alcott, *Little Women*, 87.

⁴⁵ Elbert, *A Hunger for Home*, 216.

⁴⁶ Burgett, *Sentimental Bodies*, 17.

⁴⁷ James, *Pragmatism*, 46.

⁴⁸ Cohen, *The Sentimental Education*, 64.

⁴⁹ Austen, *Sense and Sensibility*, 9.

⁵¹ Tompkins, *Sensational Designs*, 165.

⁵² James, *Pragmatism*, 15.

⁵³ Shelley, *A Defence of Poetry*, 90.

⁵⁴ Sigourney, *Pleasant Memories*, 17.

⁵⁵ James, *The Will to Believe*, 66.

CHARACTER AND PERSUASION IN WILLIAM JAMES

JAMES JIANG



This article explores the centrality of character to the development of William James's late philosophy. It argues specifically for the influence of Victorian sage writing on *A Pluralistic Universe*. In the genre of sage writing, rhetorical persuasion is stretched to such an extreme of holistic experiential fidelity that it becomes hard to distinguish from religious conversion. I suggest that James was deeply invested in this genre as both a reader and, increasingly in his later work, as a practitioner, evolving a sage-like persona in the distinctly autobiographical arc of his 1908 lectures. By placing these lectures in the literary tradition of Emerson and Cardinal Newman, the article insists on the inseparability of style and content in considering James's philosophical writing.



When thinking about character, we have been more accustomed to recall the work of Henry rather than William James. However, as Rita Felski observes in her introduction to the 2011 special issue of *New Literary History* on character, literary scholars have begun to re-examine the concept as one that extends beyond novelistic figuration into the crossroads of “art and ethics, cognition and emotion, individual and social minds.”¹ Amanda Anderson, for one, has shown the extent to which character, far from being an outmoded armature of Victorian moralism, operates as an index of the “experiential vividness” of our intellectual and political commitments.² In a chapter on “Pragmatism and Character” in her 2006 study of contemporary academic debates, *The Way We Argue Now*, Anderson identified “a persistent concern with temperament and character, with *manner* broadly construed” as one of James’s (William’s, that is) most enduring legacies for American literary theory.³ According to Anderson, appeals to character in the pragmatist polemics of Stanley Fish, Barbara Herrnstein Smith, and Richard Rorty “move toward a descriptive thickness that evokes the literary” and it is no accident that all three theorists cited by Anderson have had a significant impact upon literary studies.⁴

Drawing on Anderson’s precedent, this essay will explore the centrality of character to James’s advocacy for “thickness” in philosophical thinking.⁵ Where Anderson takes character as primarily a kind of polemical strategy, I will take it to name the elusive quality of subjective facts that constituted James’s most prized scientific data. Gleaned most readily from genres of writing that offered personal testimony, such data possessed a value that consisted not so much in their experimental replicability as in their (auto)biographical uniqueness. Indeed, the “thicker method” in philosophy is one that keeps constantly in view the exigencies of lived experience and in what follows I will argue that James’s concern with the characterological or (in Anderson’s words) “existential” dimensions of thought constitutes a focal point for the entire horizon of his ethical and intellectual worldview.⁶ Character becomes the primary “thickening” agent for a philosophical outlook

in which, as James declares in the opening lecture of *A Pluralistic Universe*, “[a] man’s vision is the great fact about him.”⁷ What had been a mischievously tendentious emphasis on a philosopher’s temperament in the opening lecture of his 1907 *Pragmatism* deepened two years later into an almost mystical reverence for his or her “visionary” capacity. In order to understand this shift in lexical register, I will be reading James backward rather than forward, situating his writing in the context of what the literary scholar John Holloway was first to call Victorian sage writing.

The Victorian sage, as Holloway observed, aimed to “mediate a view of life” without a “standard bag of tools,” the very power of his “exposition” constituting his “proof.”⁸ The mainstays of the genre of sage writing were the non-fictional prose works of writers such as Thomas Carlyle, John Henry Newman, and Matthew Arnold (though Holloway also included novels by Thomas Hardy and George Eliot). In sage writing, *ethos* rather than *logos* functions as the predominant means of persuasion so that, as Gavin Budge has recently put it, “the validity of the truth claims made by the sage cannot be separated from the rhetorical performativity of his language.”⁹ The sage persuades through the seductive mystery of his character rather than through his dialectical dexterity.¹⁰ In this literary-philosophical genre, the rhetorical model of persuasion is stretched to such an extreme of holistic experiential fidelity that it becomes hard to distinguish from religious conversion. James was, I want to suggest, deeply invested in this genre both as a reader and, increasingly in his later work, as a practitioner, evolving a sage-like persona in the distinctly autobiographical lectures comprising *PU*, where James repeatedly invokes the limits of purely logical appeal in the face of a “perceptual flux” that never fails to run through our “[conceptual] net, however finely meshed.”¹¹ But before turning to *PU*, I want show that James’s very interest in character derived from his engagement with the sage writing tradition.

JAMES AND EMERSONIAN CHARACTER

James’s most decisive and consistent contact with the sage writing tradition came from his exposure to the writings of Ralph Waldo

Emerson. Not only was Emerson a close family friend of the Jameses, he also provided the most available model for the sage, the “secret” of whose “seership” was “somewhat incommunicable” as James put it in his 1903 address at the Emerson Centenary in Concord.¹² Emerson’s writings exemplified the manner in which “character infallibly proclaims itself”¹³ — a phrase that paraphrases the Emersonian dictum that “[h]uman character evermore publishes itself.”¹⁴ Indeed, the very conception of character that James inherits from Emerson is most forcibly expressed in the latter’s much overlooked essay on the topic:

This is that which we call Character, — a reserved force which acts directly by presence, and without means. It is conceived of as a certain undemonstrable force, a Familiar or a Genius, by whose impulses the man is guided, but whose counsels he cannot impart What others effect by talent or eloquence, this man accomplishes by some magnetism.¹⁵

Character, for Emerson, suffers not the indignity of proofs; its charm-like potency lies in its peremptory self-evidence. It is recessive yet efficacious; individuating yet ineffable.

While James never makes explicit reference to this essay, we can detect the residues of Emerson’s formulation in his critique of Herbert Spencer. In a review of Spencer’s two-volume *Autobiography*, James suggests the manner of Spencer’s intellectual shortcomings thus:

Compare [Spencer’s] type of mind with such an opposite type as Ruskin’s, or even as J. S. Mill’s, or Huxley’s, and you realize its peculiarity. Behind the work of those others was a background of overflowing mental temptations. The men loom larger than all their publications, and leave an impression of unexpressed potentialities....

[Spencer's] books seem to have expressed all that there was to express in his character.¹⁶

For Emerson, an encounter with someone of character was typified by an experience of incommensurability between cause and effect: "Sir Philip Sidney, the Earl of Essex, Sir Walter Raleigh, are men of great figure, and of few deeds.... [S]omewhat resided in these men which begot an expectation that outran all their performance."¹⁷ What James finds lacklustre about Spencer's mind is precisely the degree to which it *fails* to engender these kinds of expectations. Cause and effect, the man and his work, are much too commensurate. That Spencer's character could be summarized without remainder by his books points to a systematizing intellect as exhaustive as it was exhaustible. What for Emerson was a "reserved force" James has refigured as a reservoir of untapped intellectual vigour, a residuum of unexhausted and perhaps inexhaustible mental capacity, which he rather tellingly associates with "an opposite type," the type of mind epitomized by the sage pronouncements and suggestive visionary atmosphere of John Ruskin.¹⁸

If the Emersonian conception of character provided James with the key terms of his critique of Spencer's brand of systematic philosophy, it also helped him shape his therapeutic programme of hortatory ethics. Indeed, only two years after his valorization of Ruskin's "background of overflowing mental temptations," of the "impression" some writers leave "of unexpressed potentialities," James would formalize his interest in what Emerson had recognized as character's "reserved force" by outlining a study of latent reserves of power and energy in his 1906 presidential address to the American Philosophical Association, "The Energies of Men." Historians such as George Cotkin and Francesca Bordogna have argued persuasively that the social and epistemic marginality of the therapies cited in this address (which range from mind cure to brandy) are emblematic of James's practice as a "serial' transgressor of boundaries" — both the boundaries between the increasingly entrenched specializations within the academy and the boundary between the academy's professionalized elites and the

wider public.¹⁹ Yet what such accounts tend to overlook is the degree to which various genres of *writing* become a constitutive part of James's attempts to stretch the more orthodox parameters of scientific research. Take the following moment in James's address:

We all know persons who are models of excellence, but who belong to the extreme philistine type of mind. So deadly is their intellectual respectability that we can't converse about certain subjects at all, can't let our minds play over them, can't even mention them in their presence. I have numbered among my dearest friends persons thus inhibited intellectually, with whom I would gladly have been able to talk freely about certain interests of mine, certain authors, say, as Bernard Shaw, Chesterton, Edward Carpenter, H. G. Wells, but it wouldn't do, it made them too uncomfortable, they wouldn't play, I had to be silent. An intellect thus tied down by literality and decorum makes on one the same sort of impression that an able-bodied man would who should habituate himself to do his work with only one of his fingers, locking up the rest of his organism and leaving it unused.²⁰

The satirical relish of such a passage shows the extent to which James has absorbed Emerson's verbal theatrics. The image here of the "able-bodied man ... work[ing] with only one of his fingers" recalls Emerson's caricature of "the state of society" as "one in which the members have suffered amputation from the trunk, and strut about so many walking monsters — a good finger, a neck, a stomach, an elbow, but never a man."²¹ If the Emersonian pedigree of this anatomization remains covert, the references to Shaw, Chesterton, Carpenter, and Wells show more overtly the intellectual and stylistic company James is trying to keep. It is no accident that James's own satirical tirade should invoke the work of these satirists and social commentators, whose signature styles point to a

characterological excess that disturbs the settled habits and proprieties of academic specialization. As James showed in “On Some Hegelisms,” satirical portraiture and serious philosophical critique are far from mutually exclusive, even if the former (especially when directed at one’s colleagues) tests the expectations of a presidential address. James’s repeated incitement to engage with non-academic writing imaginatively, unencumbered by “literality and decorum,” strains the air of collegiality; his liberality with the conventions of the speech genre is matched by the grammatical liberality of the run-on sentences with their coaxing clausal cadences: “it wouldn’t do, it made them too uncomfortable, they wouldn’t play, I had to be silent.” The sentence performs its own breach of decorum just as the passage reaches its acerbic climax.

Such performativity demands an attention to style as an index of character — not just in James’ own writing, but in all textual production, where the rhetorical surface becomes a zone thick with authorial residues that might constitute its own kind of data amenable to analysis. This moment is symptomatic of the whole tenor of James’s research, which aimed at a knowledge of personal experience at its most subjectively intimate — at a direct acquaintance with the characterological density that could only be accessed through genres of writing that evinced some residue of personal idiosyncrasy. Works of literature and criticism, alongside the pieces of correspondence James cites in his address (from Colonel Baird Smith’s letter detailing the siege of Delhi in 1857 to a personal letter received from “a European friend who has submitted to Hatha Yoga training”),²² would come to comprise an archive of human subjectivity — an archive of what Emerson deemed “documents of character”²³ — that would provide indispensable data for any research program serious about grasping the texture of life in all its concrete and spontaneous complexity.

It is for this reason that biography is so central to the project outlined at the end of “The Energies of Men”:

We ought somehow to get a topographic survey made of the limits of human power in every conceivable direction, something like an ophthalmologist's chart of the limits of the human field of vision.... This would be an absolutely concrete study, to be carried on by using historical and biographical material mainly. The limits of power must be limits that have been realized in actual persons, and the various ways of unlocking the reserves of power must have been exemplified in individual lives. Laboratory experimentation can play but a small part.²⁴

On the one hand, James seems to be harking back to a Humean "science of man" that sought its data "from a cautious observation of human life," abandoning the laboratory for "the common course of the world."²⁵ On the other hand, the analogy between "vision" and "power" evinces the fundamentally Emersonian pedigree of James's project, especially in the continuity between "historical and biographical material" that it takes for granted. It is a continuity vouched for by Emerson: "We are always coming up with the emphatic facts of history in our private experience, and verifying them here. All history becomes subjective; in other words, there is properly no history; only biography."²⁶ What James's study amounts to is an Emersonian project of self-realization, a project that would enlist "absolutely concrete" methods in creating a subjective documentary archive that could then be used to revive the genius latent within each individual. Haunting the fringes of James purported aim to map out the various ways of "unlocking ... reserves of power" is Emerson's notion of character as a "reserved force." But where character is the preserve of an aristocratic elite (or perhaps of a Calvinist elect) for Emerson, James's "topographic survey" places it within reach of the *demos* rather than in the hands of an academic cadre. What James envisages is a truly democratic enterprise in which each one of us "in some measure may work," and "in some shape we have all worked at it in a more or less blind

and fragmentary way.”²⁷ With such a project, scientific research could no longer avoid tumbling to life’s erratic call.

It is hard not to quail at the outsize ambition of this survey, which aims to chart “the limits of human power *in every conceivable direction*.”²⁸ And yet James had already embarked on such “an absolutely concrete study,” in however small a way, in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. In those lectures, James proceeded by examining “those more developed subjective phenomena recorded in literature produced by articulate and fully self-conscious men, in works of piety and autobiography.”²⁹ The importance of *VRE* in James’s corpus has never been in danger of being understated, but one new dimension of its influence on James’s later work opens up once we acknowledge the strenuousness of his commitment to biographically-embedded phenomena. Indeed, as I will suggest in the second half of this article, *PU* might best be thought of as his own spiritual autobiography. In a series of eight lectures putatively surveying the “present situation in philosophy,” the confessional intimacy of personal testimony steadily overtakes the impersonal mode of professing knowledge. Insofar as theoretical arguments and debates are settled by “the whole drift of life,” the version of philosophy practiced by James in *PU* converges on a form of life writing.³⁰ As such, the lectures exemplify the very “thickness” of method James repeatedly advocates throughout *PU*, framed as they are by the existential predicament faced by the persona being projected from the lectern or the page — a persona evincing all the mystic qualities of the sage.

PHILOSOPHER AS SAGE IN A PLURALISTIC UNIVERSE

To insist that the crux of a philosopher’s “vision” was less a set of doctrines than “an idiosyncratic personal atmosphere” as James did in the opening lecture of *PU* was to suggest that the true philosopher did more than just persuade—he created converts.³¹ The philosopher, properly speaking, would have to evince the character of the sage. In order to see how James arrived at this stance, it is necessary to track the development of any early psychological insight regarding the nature of belief into a full-blown revolt against

the terms and conceptual grounding of philosophical logic in the later work.

In his chapter on “The Perception of Reality” in *The Principles of Psychology*, James came to the startling conclusion that “to conceive with passion is eo ipso to affirm.”³² To reach this conclusion, James drew upon what Walter Bagehot had called in an influential 1871 essay “The Emotion of Conviction.” Bagehot argued that belief consisted of two elements: the first, which he called “assent,” was “intellectual” and thus subject to “the laws of evidence”; the second was “emotional” and therefore unregulated by reason.³³ The whole point of Bagehot’s essay was to wrest this emotional element back into the fold of rationality, subjecting it to the same evidentiary procedures as the intellectual element to which it was co-ordinate. To stave off delusions of the fanatical or impracticable sort, matters of fact had to be insulated from the vivacity of one’s impressions. But what Bagehot seems to have suggested to James was precisely the degree to which the two elements of conviction — intellectual and emotional — were hopelessly intertwined. And in this James was already showing signs of a susceptibility to the workings of the genre of sage writing in which “exposition, as it develops, actually becomes proof.”³⁴

What was so compelling about the emotion of conviction, “one of the intensest of human emotions” according to Bagehot, was its physiological immediacy; when in the grips of the fervour of this emotion, “a hot flash seems to burn across the brain,” in the manner of “the prelude to a prophecy.”³⁵ It is for this reason that he counselled caution: “we must always ... be most careful that we do not permanently permit ourselves to feel a stronger conviction than the evidence justifies.”³⁶ But it was precisely a lack of epistemic caution that Bagehot saw being counselled by the sage writings of John Henry Newman, whose *Grammar of Assent* he had singled out for criticism.³⁷ In this seminal work justifying his faith, Newman distinguished between “notional assent” (to abstract principles — presumably the most a logician can hope for) and “Real Assent” (to beliefs speaking to the totality of our experience). “Real Assent,” as Holloway notes, “is directed towards assertions based on the whole

trend of our experience” and “naturally leads [one] in the end to some active and practical step like joining a church.”³⁸ Indeed, Newman invoked the esotericism of “Real Assent” as part of his vindication for converting to Catholicism:

Such minds it addresses both through the intellect and through the imagination; creating a certitude of its truths by arguments too various for enumeration, too personal and deep for words, too powerful and concurrent for refutation. Nor need reason come first and faith second ... but one and the same teaching is in different aspects both object and proof, and elicits one complex act both of inference and of assent.³⁹

For a sage writer such as Newman, there is no parsing “conviction” from “evidence,” no subjection of the former to the protocols of the latter, only “one complex act both of inference and of assent.” It is no surprise, then, that Newman’s writings should have rung alarm bells for Bagehot who saw in this “complex act” a complicity with outright irrationalism.

How far James ended up siding with Newman in the debate over whether it could be considered rational to permit conviction to outstrip the available evidence can be seen in the early psychologically-inflected essays on philosophy. Where Bagehot and Newman were prone to speak of “conviction” and “assent,” James’s preferred term was faith — understood as being “synonymous with working hypothesis” as he put it in “The Sentiment of Rationality.”⁴⁰ Our intellectual or scientific notions, as he was keen to point out, are as much predicated on a kind of experimental faith as our spiritual beliefs. For all its esotericism, then, what makes “Real Assent” *real* is precisely its tendency towards practical realization, towards the living out of a hypothesis that is compelling for being deeply desired.

It is only a small leap from the psychological principle that “*to conceive with passion is eo ipso to affirm*” towards an ethical stance in which “*faith creates its own verification*.”⁴¹ What the work post-

Principles suggests is the degree to which James may have already been reading against the grain of Bagehot's essay even as he had captured its central psychological insight. Yet there are moments where Bagehot's own incitements to belief seem to converge on Newman's notion of "Real Assent." Take, for instance, the following passage in "The Emotion of Conviction":

Dry minds, which give an intellectual "assent" to conclusions which feel no strong glow of faith in them, often do not know what their opinions are. They have every day to go over the arguments again, or to refer to a note-book to know what they believe. But intense convictions make a memory for themselves, and if they can be kept to the truths of which there is good evidence, they give a readiness of intellect, a confidence in action, a consistency in character, which are not to be had without them.⁴²

Bagehot never explains how it might be possible to reconcile "intellectual 'assent'" with the "strong glow of faith" without compromising either the evidentiary rigour of the former or the motivational impetus of the latter. Faced with this same choice in his later writing, James would end up taking the "emotion of conviction" over purely "intellectual 'assent,'" or to use his terms in *VRE*, our "vital attitude" over our facility with "logic-chopping."⁴³ While writing *Principles*, however, James, like Bagehot, still harboured some deeply entrenched rationalist compunctions. For the psychological insight that Bagehot provided to gain traction, James would need to investigate it further and he did so by delving into the very realm from which Bagehot had wanted the "emotion of conviction" quarantined: religious experience.

In a key passage of the lecture on "The Reality of the Unseen" in *VRE*, James makes a telltale equivalence between being able to "convince" and being able to "convert" that brings him very near to Newman's notion of "Real Assent" with its avowed sense of the paltriness of intellectual or "rationalist talk" in the context of "man's

whole mental life.”⁴⁴ With a greater emphasis on psychological and experiential holism comes an intensified commitment to the truth-value of intuitions that defy verbal and logical arbitration:

If you have intuitions at all, they come from a deeper level of your nature than the loquacious level which rationalism inhabits. Your whole subconscious life, your impulses, your faiths, your needs, your divinations, have prepared the premises, of which your consciousness now feels the weight of the result; and something in you absolutely *knows* that that result must be truer than logic-chopping rationalistic talk, however clever, that may contradict it.⁴⁵

The sentiment here is not at all far removed from Newman’s statement in *Apologia pro vita sua* that “the whole man moves; paper logic is but the record of it.”⁴⁶ For rationality to be fully rational, it must account for “the whole man,” conscious and subconscious. James offers his own summation: “The immediate assurance is the deep thing in us, the argument is but a surface exhibition. Instinct leads, intelligence does but follow.”⁴⁷ The aphoristic style of such pronouncements performs the very conviction that James is seeking to propound, testifying to the increasingly sage-like authority of his expository persona.

What seemed to Bagehot mere irrationalism appealed to James as a deeper rationality in which the work of persuasion assumed such a holistic and vitalistic hue that its only adequate epistemic model was that of religious conversion; its only adequate rhetorical model that of sage writing. Both these models come to the fore in *PU*, the series of eight lectures that James delivered in May 1908 at Manchester College. James structured these lectures around a revolt against intellectualist logic, a revolt that comes to a head in the sixth lecture where James finds himself converted to Henri Bergson’s radically anti-intellectualist stance. The unexpected corroboration of what he had always suspected yet could not offer wholesale assent

to — the fact that “the whole process of life is due to life’s violation of our logical axioms”⁴⁸ — bears all the marks of a spiritual rebirth, a miracle worked by contact with a sage:

As a [F]rench disciple of his well expresses it: “Bergson claims of us first of all a certain inner catastrophe, and not every one is capable of such a logical revolution. But those who have once found themselves flexible enough for the execution of such a psychological change of front, discover somehow that they can never return again to their ancient attitude of mind. They are now Bergsonians ... and possess the principal thoughts of the master all at once. They have understood in the fashion in which one loves, they have caught the whole melody and can thereafter admire at their leisure the originality, the fecundity, and the imaginative genius with which its author develops, transposes, and varies in a thousand ways by the orchestration of his style and dialectic, the original theme.”⁴⁹

The esoteric experience of “a certain inner catastrophe” becomes a mark of election to the “logical revolution.” The result is not simply “a psychological change of front,” but a change in ontological status that is akin to transubstantiation: “They are now Bergsonians.” James had argued in *VRE* that conversion was predominantly an “affective experience” rather than an exchange of doctrine.⁵⁰ Such is the emphasis here and throughout the lectures, where “confessing” becomes the primary mode of professing: “It may perhaps help to lessen the arduousness of the subject if I put the first part of what I have to say in the form of a direct personal confession”; “So much for the personal confession by which you have allowed me to introduce the subject.”⁵¹ The lectures follow the distinctively “affective” contours and moral arc of a spiritual narrative as James “confesses” to feeling “both resentful and envious” toward philosophical pantheists (who were allegedly

tasting the fruits of an illegitimate “intimacy” with the universe) before attaining the Bergsonian state of grace himself.⁵²

Bergson had provided James with the sanction to retain his “vital attitude” in the face of intellectualism’s desiccations. With Bergson’s blessing, life in *PU* becomes the final arbiter of philosophical questions:

The return to life can’t come about by talking. It is an *act*; to make you return to life, I must set an example for your imitation.... Or I must *point*, point to the mere *that* of life, and you by inner sympathy must fill out the *what* for yourselves.⁵³

The sage speaks from the paradoxical position of communicating the incommunicable, his predicament best summarized by Coleridge’s remark: “I assume a something the proof of which no man can give to another, yet every man can find for himself.”⁵⁴ One notes a consonance here between the pedagogical paradox embodied by the sage and the paradox implicit in Emerson’s notion of character as “a Familiar or a Genius, by whose impulses the man is guided, but whose counsels he cannot impart” — “cannot impart” except, of course, through exemplification. By placing itself as such a discursive limit, sage writing works through an exhortation to fellow feeling. The sage’s wisdom is transmitted not through instruction so much as through the occasions of *self*-instruction that he will come to inspire:

I had literally come to the end of my conceptual stock-in-trade, I was bankrupt intellectualistically, and had to change my base. No words of mine will probably convert you, for words can be the names only of concepts. But if any of you try sincerely and pertinaciously on your own separate accounts to intellectualize reality, you may be similarly driven to a change of front. I say no more: I must leave life to teach the lesson.⁵⁵

The tone here is “solemn, serious, and tender,” that is to say, characteristic of the religious temper, which dispenses with both “chaffing talk” and “heavy grumbling and complaint.”⁵⁶ In dramatizing his disenchantment with intellectualism as a personal crisis of faith, James has substituted for conceptual logic the logic of narrative. Insofar as one’s autobiography provides the proper context for one’s beliefs and commitments, it must be left to “life to teach the lesson.” This appeal to “life” may seem like a discursive dead-end, but it gestures towards a form of rationality that has been fleshed out, so to speak, by the vagaries of character and circumstance — a form of rationality that is not just an affair of the intellect, but a concert in which “intellect, will, taste and passion co-operate just as they do in practical affairs.”⁵⁷

CONCLUSION

PU reads as a kind of spiritual autobiography, recounting James’s move away from the “intellectualist handling” of reality that reduces philosophical thinking to “a post-mortem dissection” toward “the immediate experience of life” that “get[s] at the expanding centre of a human character.”⁵⁸ In its pedagogical gestures and the sense of urgency with which it presents its intellectual trouble as an existential predicament, it is also the work in which the influence of sage writing can be most deeply felt. This is not to suggest that James was consciously trying to imitate a Coleridge or a Newman but rather that the literary genre and the style of thought it accommodated provided some of the resources for James’s re-thinking of his philosophical method under the aspect of a vitalistic regard for intuition. James’s sympathy with the work of Bergson was part of a wider receptivity to a discursive form that privileged non-discursive moments of recognition and enlightenment. It might not be too much to claim that sage writing initiated James’s revolt against intellectualism’s “chaffing talk” without reducing him to a sceptic’s silence.

In trying to excavate a genealogy for James’s interest in character, this article has tried to suggest that a history of ideas cannot be conducted in isolation from the textures of the writing

through which such ideas are putatively transmitted. By treating James primarily as a writer in the foregoing pages, I do not mean to claim in the manner of Rorty that philosophy, or any of the other modes of inquiry in which James was engaged, ought to be considered a predominantly textual practice. But I do mean to claim that the *centrality of texts* to James's own research endeavours suggests the degree to which he thought of science as a humanistic enterprise, as well as the importance of all forms of literature (from the most institutionally sacred to the most ephemeral or anecdotal) to such a humanized science. Any notion of the so-called two cultures becomes impossible to sustain in the face of James's heterogeneous corpus.

The inseparability of style and content is all the more salient in a genre like sage writing which persuades through force of personality or character. While I have relied almost exclusively on internal evidence to bring out the influence of sage writing on James (the very idea of influence as a quasi-religious conversion is one that he derives from the genre), the way in which James's contemporaries perceived his work provides external support. As John Jay Chapman recollected, "[James] had not the gift of expression, but rather the gift of suggestion.... His mind was never quite in focus, and there was always something left over after each discharge of the battery."⁵⁹ James always had something in reserve, something which Emerson might have recognized as character in its most exalted sense.

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NOTES

- ¹ Felski, "Introduction," vi.
- ² Anderson, "Character and Ideology," 212.
- ³ Anderson, *The Way We Argue*, 116.
- ⁴ Ibid., 118.
- ⁵ James, *Pluralistic Universe*, passim. Hereafter cited *PU*.
- ⁶ Anderson, "Character and Ideology," 212.
- ⁷ James, *PU*, 14.
- ⁸ Holloway, *The Victorian Sage*, 8, 11-12. See also, Landow, *Elegant Jeremiahs*, 154-88; and Peterson, "Sage Writing," 399-413.
- ⁹ Budge, "Re-Thinking the Victorian Sage," 4.
- ¹⁰ I say "his" provisionally because, in Holloway's account, George Eliot is the exception who proves the rule about the gender of the Victorian sage. More recent scholarship has shown the extent to which women writers also assumed the sage persona. See the essays collected in *Victorian Sages and Cultural Discourse*, edited by Morgan.
- ¹¹ James, *PU*, 113.
- ¹² James, "Emerson," 114.

- ¹³ Ibid., 112-13.
- ¹⁴ Emerson, "Spiritual Laws," 90.
- ¹⁵ Emerson, "Character," 53.
- ¹⁶ James, "Herbert Spencer's *Autobiography*," 110.
- ¹⁷ Emerson, "Character," 54.
- ¹⁸ See Landow, "Ruskin as Victorian Sage," 89-110.
- ¹⁹ Bordogna, *William James at the Boundaries*, 1-19; Cotkin, *William James, Public Philosopher*, 112-15. On James's relationship to disciplinary formation, see also Croce, "The Non-Disciplinary William James."
- ²⁰ James, "The Energies of Men," 131.
- ²¹ Emerson, "The American Scholar," 53.
- ²² James, "The Energies of Men," 137.
- ²³ Emerson, "Character," 66.
- ²⁴ James, "The Energies of Men," 145.
- ²⁵ Hume, *Treatise on Human Nature*, xxiii. For the context of Hume's study, see Ahnert and Manning's introduction to *Character, Self, and Sociability*, 3-8.
- ²⁶ Emerson, "History," 6.
- ²⁷ James, "The Energies of Men," 145-46.
- ²⁸ Emphasis added.
- ²⁹ James, *Varieties of Religious Experience*, 12. Hereafter cited *VRE*.
- ³⁰ James, *PU*, 15.
- ³¹ Ibid.
- ³² James, *Principles of Psychology*, Vol.2, 936.
- ³³ Bagehot's essay first appeared in the April 1871 issue of the *Contemporary Review*. James's footnote reveals that he came across the essay in Bagehot's two-volume *Literary Studies*, edited by Hutton.
- ³⁴ Holloway, *The Victorian Sage*, 8.
- ³⁵ Bagehot, "The Emotion of Conviction," 414.
- ³⁶ Ibid.
- ³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Holloway, *The Victorian Sage*, 7.

³⁹ Newman, *Grammar of Assent*, 484, qtd in Holloway, *The Victorian Sage*, 8.

⁴⁰ James, *The Will to Believe*, 79. This essay is a revised version of "The Sentiment of Rationality" first published in 1879 in *Mind* and included in *Essays in Philosophy*.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 80.

⁴² Bagehot, "The Emotion of Conviction," 421.

⁴³ James, *VRE*, 66-67.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ *Ibid.* 67.

⁴⁸ James, *PU*, 115.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 118-19.

⁵⁰ James, *VRE*, 201.

⁵¹ James, *PU*, 9,85,90.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 90.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 131.

⁵⁴ Coleridge, *Aids to Reflection*, 136, qtd in Holloway, *The Victorian Sage*, 4.

⁵⁵ James, *PU*, 132.

⁵⁶ James, *VRE*, 39.

⁵⁷ James, *Will to Believe*, 77.

⁵⁸ James, *PU*, 117.

⁵⁹ Chapman, *Memories and Milestones*, 20.

“A FEELING OF *IF* ”: THE EXPERIENCE OF GRAMMAR IN JAMES, STEIN, AND WHITEHEAD

MAUDE EMERSON



In his *Philosophical Investigations*, Ludwig Wittgenstein challenges William James's assertion that words like "if," "and," and "by" correspond to felt experiences. This controversy gets at the heart of debates over literary modernism, which is often aligned either with James's endeavor to represent the stream of experience or with Wittgenstein's articulation of its limits. I argue, however, that both Gertrude Stein and Alfred North Whitehead pursue the project of James's radical empiricism in ways that complicate distinctions between experience and structures, like logic and grammar, thought to lie outside of it. In the writings of Stein and Whitehead, "feeling[s] of if" are occasions that demand a more expansive conception of experience.



It has been remarked that Ludwig Wittgenstein seems to have written his *Philosophical Investigations* with a copy of William James's *The Principles of Psychology* open on his desk.¹ Wittgenstein's numerous references to James, both implicit and explicit, reveal the considerable influence of the American psychologist and philosopher on Wittgenstein's thought, as both a spur to criticism *and* a positive source for some of Wittgenstein's most important ways of thinking, as Russell Goodman demonstrates in his illuminating book on the two thinkers. One particular point of contest between them opens onto a key debate in literary studies. If Wittgenstein's side of the contest represents one possibility for twentieth-century literature, I will argue, Alfred North Whitehead and Gertrude Stein take up James's example in ways that suggest another.

Wittgenstein's most pointed disagreement with James arises over a famous passage from Chapter IX of *Principles*, "The Stream of Thought." "There is not a conjunction or a preposition," writes James,

and hardly an adverbial phrase, syntactic form, or inflection of voice, in human speech, that does not express some shading or other of relation which we at some moment actually feel to exist between the larger objects of our thought.... We ought to say a feeling of *and*, a feeling of *if*, a feeling of *but*, and a feeling of *by*, quite as readily as we say a feeling of *blue* or a feeling of *cold*. Yet we do not: so inveterate has our habit become of recognizing the existence of the substantive parts alone, that language almost refuses to lend itself to any other use.²

In Part II of the *Philosophical Investigations*, the fragment on the "Philosophy of Psychology," Wittgenstein interrogates James's "feeling of *if*." He doesn't mention James by name but seems to enter into conversation with him directly as he shifts from the first

person "we" and "I" in which the foregoing paragraphs are phrased to the second-person singular "you":

39. Are you sure that there is a single if-feeling, and not perhaps several? Have you tried saying the word in a great variety of contexts? For example, when it bears the principle sense of the sentence, and when the following word does.

40. Suppose we found a man who, speaking of how words felt to him, told us that "if" and "but" felt the *same*. – May we not believe him? "He doesn't play our game at all," one would like to say. Or even: "This is a different type of human being...."

41. One misjudges the psychological interest of the if-feeling if one regards it as the obvious correlate of a meaning; it needs, rather, to be seen in a different context, in that of the special circumstances in which it occurs.³

Wittgenstein may have taken James's assertion a bit too literally. James does not, I suspect, mean that there is "a single if-feeling," but that there are as many "feeling[s] of *if*" as there are hypothetical or conditional situations that might arise in the stream of thought. Even so, Wittgenstein's line of questioning leads him to a compelling contradiction of James's claim that the word "if" corresponds to a felt experience: "43. The if-feeling is not a feeling which accompanies the word 'if.'"⁴

Goodman writes of how frustrating James's error, as Wittgenstein saw it, must have been for Wittgenstein. For some of the most exciting moments in *Principles* are those in which James identifies and refutes precisely this type of error. James's method of scrupulous introspection often leads him to discover no experience, or a shifting myriad of experiences, where language gives us a static (or hypostatic) noun. Goodman writes, "[t]he lesson that one can recognize one's desk without an act of recognition, that one can rise up without an act of will, and that one can speak without a separate

layer of thought backing up one's words are the sort of positive lessons Wittgenstein was able to draw from James as he began reading *Principles* in the early 1930s."⁵ The most spectacular example of this maneuver occurs not in *Principles* but in the essay "Does Consciousness Exist?," in which James scours his experience for an entity corresponding to the word "consciousness" and comes up empty-handed. From Wittgenstein's perspective, the problem revealed by James's attachment to the feelings of *if*, *but*, and *by* is the problem of empiricism: as Goodman puts it, "[w]ith his general empiricism and his incipient radical empiricism, there is nothing in James's universe *other than experience*" for anything to be.⁶ Wittgenstein's investigations, in contrast, draw attention to things that we *don't* experience — things that belong, instead, to the logic of grammar.

Wittgenstein's divergence from James on the matter of *if* adumbrates the broader movement in twentieth-century philosophy known as the linguistic turn. But it also points to an ongoing question in the understanding of literary modernism (and, consequently, of the postmodernism that follows it). Is the primary impulse of modernism "to record or transcribe the movements & make-up of one's consciousness" — what Charles Bernstein calls "[t]he modernist assumption"?⁷ Or is modernism essentially critical of the impulse to represent experience, and concerned instead with the ways in which words either stop short of representation — existing as objects in their own right — or reach beyond it, articulating rational structures that transcend the particulars of "the stream of thought"? Clearly, the answer depends on which works and writers one takes to be central to modernism, not to mention which literary genres and forms of art, and any attempt at an answer must begin from the understanding that the works we describe as modernist follow not one pattern but many. Nonetheless, the question continues to generate conflicting accounts of the modernist field — and, in the case of Stein, of a single body of work. James, of course, seems to come down squarely on the side of experience. I want to suggest, however, that the writings of two of James's most penetrating and creative interpreters, Stein and Whitehead, develop

a central impulse of his thought in ways that trouble the distinction that Wittgenstein draws — and subsequent critics reinforce — between experience and grammar. In the same way that James's introspective investigations led him to revise the atomistic conception of experience that experimental psychology had inherited from empiricist philosophy, in the writings of Stein and Whitehead, "feeling[s] of *if*" arise within the field of experience and demand a more flexible, expansive conception of that field. One consequence of the "methodological postulate" of James's radical empiricism, that "[e]verything real must be experienceable somewhere and every kind of thing experienced must somewhere be real," is that experience ceases to look like the purely private realm of sensations and emotions — the realm that the modernist "stream of consciousness," for example, is often understood to describe — and appears, instead, as the complex fabric of the actual, from which individual subjects are only one type of event to emerge.⁸ By tracing the course of "a feeling of *if*" through Stein and Whitehead, I hope to contribute to a sense of James as not simply allied with subjectivist tendencies in literary modernism, but engaged in a profound reorganization of the concept of experience that informs our understanding of twentieth-century texts.

STEIN BETWEEN GRAMMAR AND EXPERIENCE

Stein's sense of grammar has been alternately aligned with James's and with Wittgenstein's. Like James, with whom she studied at Radcliffe in the 1890s, Stein is a champion of prepositions, articles, and conjunctions, the parts of speech that pass beneath notice but are "varied and alive" — that "work and as they work they live," as she writes in "Poetry and Grammar."⁹ For many scholars, this resemblance is more than superficial: Stein's writing, as they understand it, carries on James's project of describing the intricate workings of experience. Lyn Hejinian quotes the characterization of her writing that Stein, in the voice of Alice, offers in *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*: "Gertrude Stein, in her work, has always been possessed by the intellectual passion for exactitude in the description of inner and outer reality."¹⁰ From this perspective,

Stein's radically unconventional writing is a response to the challenge implicit in James's lines, quoted above: if "language almost refuses to lend itself" to experience as it actually occurs, then writing experience requires breaking the "inveterate... habit[s]" of language. This is what Hejinian means when she contends, *contra* nineteenth-century realists like Emile Zola, that realism *does* require a "special way of writing";¹¹ John Ashbery makes a similar point when he compares *Stanzas in Meditation* to the late novels of Henry James (themselves often discussed in relation to the psychological theories of Henry's brother): "If these works are highly complex and, for some, unreadable, it is not only because of the complicatedness of life, the subject, but also because they actually imitate its rhythm, its way of happening."¹² To designate Stein a realist in this sense is not to propose that she held a naïve view of language's referential capacity: as Hejinian explains, "Somewhat paradoxically perhaps, it is the autonomy of the writing — the high visibility of its devices and even its intrusive strangeness — that authenticates the accuracy of its portrayals and gives the work itself its authority."¹³ It is, however, to emphasize the mimetic function of her modes of composition. In addition to the general Jamesian project of analyzing and describing experience, scholars frequently relate Stein's work to James's particular theories. Her employment of repetition with difference, for example, seems an extension of his claim, in "The Stream of Thought," that "*no state*" of the mind or body "*once gone can recur and be identical with what it was before.*"¹⁴ (Indeed, Stein herself explains her use of repetition with reference to "what William James calls 'the Will to Live.'"¹⁵) Recently, both Lisi Schoenbach and Liesl Olson have connected Stein's modernism to James's conception of habit. And Wendy Steiner and Steven Meyer each advance versions of the argument that after her early opus *The Making of Americans*, Stein developed a style of writing intended to impart what James calls "knowledge of acquaintance," in contradistinction to the more abstract mode of "knowledge about."¹⁶

If many Stein scholars emphasize her Jamesian realism, however, other interpreters see her work, and modernism itself, in a

different light. Marjorie Perloff, one of Stein's most ardent and prolific explicators over the past several decades, casts Stein as a key progenitor of an avant-garde strain of modernism that has more in common with Wittgenstein's thought than with James's. Just as Wittgenstein denies that the word "if" names an event in the stream of thought that exists prior to its naming, the hallmark of the modernist aesthetic that Perloff champions is the "conviction that the poet begins, not with ideas to be embodied in words, but with the words themselves."¹⁷ In books like *Wittgenstein's Ladder* and *21st-Century Modernism: the "New" Poetics*, Perloff presents a Stein whose experiments with language are emphatically *not* intended to represent experience, but to highlight the materiality of language. Jennifer Ashton, in *From Modernism to Postmodernism: American Poetry and Theory in the Twentieth Century*, disagrees with this portrayal of Stein as a "literalist," but her own reading also echoes Wittgenstein's challenge to James's empiricism.¹⁸ Stein, Ashton argues, was not content with experience as an ultimate or sufficient category — and certainly not experience as James conceived it, as a continuously flowing stream of psychic states. In "The Gradual Making of the Making of Americans," for example, Stein describes encountering the limitations of writing in the mode of James's "knowledge of acquaintance": "When I was up against the difficulty of putting down the complete conception that I had gradually acquired by listening seeing feeling and experience, I was faced by the trouble that I had acquired all this knowledge gradually but when I had it I had it completely at one time."¹⁹ Ashton relates Stein's need for a language capable of expressing abstract wholes to mathematics — a structure that, like Wittgenstein's grammar, is not part of experience but prescribes "the logical conditions of its possibility."²⁰ The major transition in Stein's style, in Ashton's assessment, is "a movement from ... a phenomenological model of composition to a logical one."²¹

The divergence between James and Wittgenstein on the subject of *if* appears to be absolute. Either *if* belongs to experience or it belongs to grammar: in neither Wittgenstein's writing nor James's do we see the possibility of a middle ground. Ashton, likewise,

presents logic and experience as mutually exclusive. When it comes to the *ifs*, *ands*, and *bys* of Stein's writing, however, one would be hard pressed to discern between the phenomenological and the logical. Take, for example, the word "if" in "If I Told Him: A Completed Portrait of Picasso," which appears eighteen times in the first eight sentences:

If I told him would he like it. Would he like it if I told him. Would he like it would Napoleon would Napoleon would would he like it. If Napoleon if I told him if I told him if Napoleon. Would he like it if I told him if I told him if Napoleon....²²

For me, there is no question that these lines produce a feeling of *if*. The repetition of "if" and "would" produces in my mind a sustained feeling of conjecture, in which the state of conjecturing feels very definite while the content of the conjecture remains vague. It is entirely possible to understand this feeling as one color in a palette of psychic tones in which Stein has painted Picasso's portrait, in combination with other shades that emerge as the portrait continues, like presentness and exactitude. Whether the word *if* can produce a feeling of *if*, however, is a different question from whether it represents one. Furthermore, the "if" in "Picasso" has to be understood as a sound-particle and perhaps even a visual particle, entering into compositional relations in the portrait that have nothing to do with its conventional signification *or* its grammatical function.

The *ifs*, *ands*, and *buts* of *Stanzas in Meditation* remain more situated in their grammatical functioning. Unlike the *ifs* in the portrait of Picasso, these conjunctions and other "colorless connecting words," as Ashbery refers to them in his famous review of Stein's *Stanzas*,²³ do not lead double lives as elements in a sound-collage; rather, they enter into compositional relationships in the poem precisely on the basis of their grammatical function of establishing relationships between other language elements. As in the portrait of Picasso, the connections themselves are much more

precise than the matter they articulate. Both a logical and a phenomenological interpretation of this fact are available. The opening lines of Part Two, Stanza III feature the trailing wisps of narrative and the insistent presence of an unidentified "they" that characterize the poem as a whole:

They may lightly send it away to say
 That they will not change it if they may
 Nor indeed by the time that it is made
 They may indeed not be careful that they were
 thankful
 That they should distinguish which and whenever
 They were not unlikely to mean it more
 Than enough not to decide that they would not
 Or well indeed if it is not better
 That they are not cautious if she is sleepy
 And well prepared to be close to the fire
 Where it is as if outside it did resemble
 Or may be they will relinquish.²⁴

Of course, it is possible to conjecture about the matter under discussion in this stanza: maybe the first part is about a book manuscript sent off to a publisher. The picture of a sleepy woman, or perhaps a girl, emerges quite distinctly at the end of this passage, but it is conditioned by an "if" which is itself more definite than the sleepy figure, whose sleepiness, after all, is only a possibility: "if she is sleepy." On one hand, the definiteness of the logical operators in this stanza might be seen to confirm Wittgenstein's suspicion about the "feeling of *if*": through the vague and discontinuous context, the *ors*, *nors*, and *ifs* march on, establishing the form of continuous sense that is just that — mere form. In this way, *Stanzas in Meditation* might be said not to imitate experience but to expose experience's conditions of possibility. On the other hand, this specious continuity might be understood as accurately mimetic of the Jamesian "stream of thought," which is composed as much of feelings of transition and relation as it is of more stable impressions

like blue or cold — and which, James points out, is as liable to unfold according to the form of a thought as it is to its content.²⁵

Stein's poetry conveys the impression that experience and grammar are bound together in a way that makes it impossible to imagine excluding one from the operations of the other. And this impression is borne out by her statement from "The Gradual Making of the Making of Americans," "I was faced by the trouble that I had acquired all this knowledge gradually but when I had it I had it completely at one time." To repeat, Ashton sees Stein's shift from "a phenomenological model of composition to a logical one" as a definitive turn away from "experience itself as the defining feature of knowledge."²⁶ If we look closely at Stein's statement, however, we see that she is not opposing knowledge gained through experience to an abstract knowledge that exists outside of experience, but noticing the experience of two different kinds of knowing: "when I had it I had it completely at one time."²⁷ The form of Stein's remark is highly reminiscent of James's methodology: through an act of introspection, she discovers a multiplicity of distinct psychic states which our psychological vocabulary — or in this case, her own compositional practice — had failed to distinguish or accommodate. In this case, what she discovers is a demand for a language of abstraction emanating from within experience itself.

WHITEHEAD AND THE "IMAGINATIVE PERCEPTION OF EXPERIENCES"

In explaining the interest that mathematics held for Stein, Ashton quotes from Whitehead's popular *Introduction to Mathematics*: "Mathematics as a science commenced when first someone, probably a Greek, proved propositions about *any* things or about *some* things, without specification of definite particular things."²⁸ It isn't hard to see the pertinence of this conception of mathematics to the writer who preferred pronouns to nouns because "[t]hey represent someone but they are not its or his name [and i]n not being his or its name they already have a greater possibility of being something than if they were as a noun is the name of anything."²⁹

Both Stein and Whitehead here extol a way of speaking about the world that abstracts from particular experience. But by the time he writes *Process and Reality*, published in 1929, Whitehead is unequivocal about his philosophy's basis in a radical empiricism, expressed in what he calls the "reformed subjectivist principle": "that apart from the experience of subjects there is nothing, nothing, nothing, bare nothingness."³⁰ What Goodman, writing about Wittgenstein, criticizes in James as a shortcoming — that he can imagine nothing other than experience for anything to be — Whitehead, the mathematician, claims for himself in the strongest terms. Before he was able to reconcile his respect for logic with his commitment to empiricism, however, the relation between them struck him as a troubling dilemma.

Gertrude and Alice were guests of the Whiteheads on the day when England entered World War I. Because the war prevented them from returning to Paris, their weekend visit turned into a sojourn of more than two months at the Whiteheads' country house in Lockeridge. During that time, according to *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, "Gertrude Stein and Doctor Whitehead walked endlessly around the country. They talked of philosophy and history";³¹ "The long summer wore on ... , and Doctor Whitehead and Gertrude Stein never ceased wandering around in it and talking about all things."³² I am not the first reader to be tantalized by these references in *The Autobiography*.³³ What would Stein and Whitehead have discussed as they rambled through the English countryside in August through October of 1914? The war itself, certainly; but judging from Alice's remarks in *The Autobiography*, Stein's interest in the particulars of current events would quickly have been exhausted. As a writer, Stein had left behind the prose style of *Three Lives* and *The Making of Americans* and been working for several years in the more abstract modes of the portraits and *Tender Buttons*, which had appeared in print that May. As for Whitehead, his philosophy was in a moment of transition. *Principia Mathematica* had been published, and while he continued to teach mathematics during the war, in his writing, he began to turn to philosophy and the natural sciences.³⁴ This work would culminate

in the publication of *The Concept of Nature* in 1920 and *Science and the Modern World* in 1925.

It is conceivable (although to imagine it is to engage in a speculative fiction — to entertain, that is, “a feeling of *if*”) that Stein and Whitehead discussed the problem of how the abstractions of logic, math, or grammar relate to the inchoate stream of experience. And it is possible to picture both of them straining toward a discovery which it would take Whitehead many more years to formulate, that the answer to the problem lay in radically reformulating the concept of experience. The problem itself arises in Whitehead’s writing two years after his walks with Stein. In September of 1916, he gave a lecture to the British Association for the Advancement of Science that broaches the relationship between the natural sciences and the “logical science” that was his field of expertise.³⁵ What is fascinating about this lecture, titled “The Organisation of Thought,” is how emphatically Whitehead affirms both the empirical basis *and* the logical basis of science without being able (a) to overcome what he still perceives as the incompatibility between the worlds designated by the two modes of thought, or (b) to clarify the relationship between them, beyond insisting that there is one.

Whitehead takes as the “starting-ground” of the sciences the world of which we are aware through sensory and felt experience: what he will later, in *The Concept of Nature*, define *as* nature. In “The Organisation of Thought” he writes that the task of science “is the discovery of the relations which exist within that flux of perceptions, sensations, and emotions which forms our experience of life. The panorama yielded by sight, sound, taste, smell, touch, and by more inchoate sensible feelings, is the sole field of its activity.”³⁶ There seems to be a possibility for a rapprochement between logic and empiricism here in the notion of “relations which exist within” the flux of perceptions, etc., but as the lecture continues, *even though* Whitehead continues to insist that “[s]cience is essentially logical,”³⁷ the two realms grow increasingly incompatible. Whitehead describes the relationship between the

sensory "panorama" and the organizing operations of scientific thought in terms reminiscent of Henri Bergson or James:

I insist on the radically untidy, ill-adjusted character of the fields of actual experience from which science starts.... This fact is concealed by the influence of language, moulded by science, which foists on us exact concepts as though they represented the immediate deliverances of experience. The result is that we imagine that we have immediate experience of a world of perfectly defined objects implicated in perfectly defined events which, as known to us by the direct deliverance of our senses, happen at exact instants of time, in a space formed by exact points, without parts and without magnitude: the neat, trim, tidy, exact world which is the goal of scientific thought.³⁸

By the time he arrives at *Science and the Modern World* and even *The Concept of Nature*, Whitehead will see modes of abstraction as much more tightly involved in "actual experience," so I find it fascinating that in 1916 he is still writing about them in such antagonistic terms. Even in this lecture, however, there is a building sense that "actual experience" as it is here understood is itself too trim and tidy a concept. Like Stein, he finds that it leaves out too much, and again like Stein, he finds this *through* his careful consideration of experience itself. Where Stein felt that her psychological vocabulary needed to expand to include the experience of "knowing something all at once," Whitehead feels the pressure of what, in the following passage, we might well call a "feeling of *if*." "[N]either common sense nor science," Whitehead avers,

can proceed with their task of thought organisation without departing in some respect from the strict consideration of what is actual in experience. Think

again of the chair. Among the experiences upon which its concept is based, I included our expectations of its future history. I should have gone further and included our imagination of all the possible experiences which in ordinary language we should call perceptions of the chair which might have occurred. This is a difficult question, and I do not see my way through it. But at present in the construction of a theory of space and of time, there seem insuperable difficulties if we refuse to admit ideal experiences.³⁹

By “ideal,” Whitehead simply means “not actual.” That is, these “perceptions of the chair which might have occurred” do not have the same actuality as perceptions of the chair that have in fact occurred. But they do have actuality as perceptions of possibilities — of ways in which the chair might or will be, *if* certain conditions arise. And Whitehead feels strongly that these perceptions are part of experience: he goes on to say, “[t]his imaginative perception of experiences, which, *if* they occurred, would be coherent with our actual experiences, seems fundamental in our lives. It is neither wholly arbitrary, nor yet fully determined. It is a vague background which is only made in part definite by isolated activities of thought.”⁴⁰ The feelings of possibility that were supposed to be departures “from the strict consideration of what is actual in experience” are discovered here *in* experience. At this stage, Whitehead cannot “see his way through” this; he can only pose it as “the fundamental question of scientific philosophy”: “How does exact thought apply to the fragmentary, vague continua of experience? I am not saying that it does not apply, quite the contrary. But I want to know how it applies.”⁴¹ Both Whitehead and Stein are Jamesians, I argue, in that they do not seek to articulate an alternative to experience, but make their writings a venue for creative and relentless inquiry into the “fundamental question[s]” that experience poses.

Sandford Schwartz, in *The Matrix of Modernism: Pound, Eliot, & Early 20th-Century Thought*, describes James as one of four representative philosophers (along with Bergson, Nietzsche, and Bradley) whose "sharp opposition between conceptual abstraction and the flux of concrete sensations" is mirrored in the work of modernist poets.⁴² This characterization of James is valid, of course; but a different James is reflected in the work of Stein and Whitehead. For this James, immediate experience is not simply a refuge from the dehumanizing abstractions of science and capitalism, as some critics imagine it to be.⁴³ Rather, James's way of conceiving experience becomes an impetus for what Bruno Latour calls "the most arduous question of Whitehead": "to decide whether or not empiricism can be renewed so that 'what is given in experience' is not simplified too much";⁴⁴ for Brian Massumi, too, James issues a call for "an expanded empiricism."⁴⁵ From both Whitehead's perspective and Stein's, James's conception of experience may indeed not be open *enough*; Latour explains that with James, "as with Bergson, rationalism is not given its full due."⁴⁶ Nonetheless, this James's characteristic impulse is to expand, rather than to exclude. His example discourages the either/or distinctions that critics often employ to talk about twentieth-century literature: either logic or experience, either modernist or postmodernist, either romantic or avant-garde. And it raises the question of whether it might be possible to describe a field of modernism with Stein at its center, which, in contrast to the familiar exclusionary rhetoric of Pound's "go in fear of abstractions" and Williams's "no ideas but in things," is defined by its attention the possibilities that experience tenders in the form of "a feeling of *if*."⁴⁷

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NOTES

¹ Gale, *The Divided Self*, 165, qtd in Goodman, *Wittgenstein and William James*, 61.

² William James, *The Principles of Psychology*, 1:245-46.

³ Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 190-91.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 191.

⁵ Goodman, *Wittgenstein and William James*, 88.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 84.

⁷ Bernstein, "Stray Straws and Straw Men," 46.

⁸ James, "The Experience of Activity," 160.

⁹ Stein, "Poetry and Grammar," 315-16. One of the first to comment on the relationship between Stein's and James's treatments of grammatical particles was Ronald B. Levinson, who suggested in a 1941 essay that Stein's more experimental pieces represent "the attempt to put into practice some notions of the ideal function of language, ...which were in all probability derived from

the distinguished teacher of her Radcliffe days, William James." Levinson, "Gertrude Stein, William James, and Grammar," 125.

¹⁰ Stein, *Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, 865–66, qtd in Hejinian, "Two Stein Talks," 89.

¹¹ Hejinian, 94.

¹² Ashbery, "The Impossible," 252.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ James, *Principles*, 1:230.

¹⁵ Stein, "Portraits and Repetition," 289.

¹⁶ See Steiner, *Exact Resemblance*, 29–30 and 41–42; Meyer, *Irresistible Dictation*, 6.

¹⁷ Perloff, *21st-Century Modernism*, 74.

¹⁸ Ashton, *From Modernism to Postmodernism*, 8. Ashton objects to Perloff's characterization of Stein on the grounds that literalism, while it counters the idea that language is *expressive of* experience, simply replaces it with an emphasis on the experience of the reader. By disengaging language from its referential function, that is, literalism produces an indeterminacy of meaning that solicits the participation of the reader, whose experience becomes an essential component in the construction of the text. "Stein, by contrast," Ashton contends, "insists on the autonomy of the work of art precisely by refusing any relation whatsoever between the work and anyone who might experience it, including the author herself." Ibid. 7–8.

¹⁹ Stein, "The Gradual Making of the Making of Americans," 277–78, qtd in Ashton, *From Modernism to Postmodernism*, 49.

²⁰ Ashton, *From Modernism to Postmodernism*, 33.

²¹ Ibid., 32.

²² Stein, *Writings*, I: 506.

²³ Ashbery, "The Impossible," 250.

²⁴ Stein, *Stanzas in Meditation*, 82–83.

²⁵ See James, "The Stream of Thought" in *Principles*, 259–65.

²⁶ Ashton, *From Modernism to Postmodernism*, 51.

²⁷ Stein, "The Gradual Making of the Making of Americans," 277-78, qtd in Ashton, *From Modernism to Postmodernism*, 49.

²⁸ Whitehead, *Introduction to Mathematics*, 7, qtd in Ashton, *From Modernism to Postmodernism*, 56.

²⁹ Stein, "Poetry and Grammar," 316.

³⁰ Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, 167.

³¹ Stein, *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, 807.

³² *Ibid.*, 812.

³³ Steven Meyer speculates that they might have discussed Whitehead's thoughts about rhythm and pattern that appear in his 1919 *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Natural Knowledge*, and which he might have begun to incubate by the time of his rambles with Stein. See Meyer, *Irresistible Dictation*, 180-84. My own imagining of this encounter has benefited from conversations with the Whitehead Reading Group at UC Berkeley of 2013-14, especially Lyn Hejinian and Chloé Thomas.

³⁴ See Lowe, *Alfred North Whitehead*, 92.

³⁵ Whitehead, "The Organisation of Thought," 105.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 109.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 114.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 110.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 112-113.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 113 (emphasis added).

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 110-11.

⁴² Schwartz, *The Matrix of Modernism*, 19.

⁴³ See Lentricchia, *Modernist Quartet*, 30-31 and Lears, *No Place of Grace*, 159.

⁴⁴ Latour, "What is Given in Experience?," 226.

⁴⁵ Massumi, "Too-Blue," 177-226. In focusing attention on this aspect of James, I follow the magnificent example of Steven Meyer in *Irresistible Dictation*, although for Meyer, James remains a figure of nineteenth-century science whose influence Stein outgrows as she develops in the direction of Whitehead's "more radical empiricism." Meyer, *Irresistible Dictation*, xx.

⁴⁶ Latour, "What is Given," 229.

⁴⁷ Pound, "A Few Don'ts by an Imagiste," 201; Williams, *Paterson*, 6.

ADVENTURES AT THE FRINGE OF THOUGHT: WILLIAM JAMES, MODERNISM, AND DISABILITY STUDIES

JILL MARSDEN



This paper argues that new direction can be found for the modernist concept of stream of consciousness by returning to William James's original insights of the "stream of thought" in order to identify the nature of its relationship to the literary technique. I show how early readings of William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* were inspired by a modernist cognizance of "stream of consciousness" narration but were "ableist" in their treatment of Benjy Compson's narrative. To develop a reading of cognitive impairment, I return to James's "stream of thought" to show how it can be reconciled with a disability studies account of "impersonal life."



It is surprising that the modernist concept of “stream of consciousness” should have its origin in the work of James. In the chapter “The Stream of Thought” in *Principles* he offers an account of thinking which seems to exceed the notion of mind as self-aware. Emphasizing the movement of thought rather than psychic states as such, James pays greatest attention to the vague and inchoate feelings at the “fringe” of consciousness, those dimly perceived phenomena which attenuate the distinction between the mind and the more diffuse forces that encompass it. He denies that the mind has to be conscious of its own cognitive function in order to be aware of the things that “appear” before it. It is ironic, then, that in the context of literary studies the concept of stream of consciousness should have become synonymous with self-reflective narration. Some of the most well-known characters in modernist fiction typically “linger over their own subtle impressions,” often verbalizing perceptions, judgements, memories and fantasies.¹ While James resists the “givens” of ordinary selfhood such as agency, intentionality, and introspection, commentators on “stream of consciousness writing” frequently presuppose them. In this way, a humanistic model of self-reflexivity is reinforced as a cultural norm, despite the fact that such fictions depend “on what writers and readers know least in life: how another mind thinks, another body feels.”² Accordingly, it is the purpose of this paper to show how James’s more radical position about the stream of thought might usefully supplement critical understanding of stream of consciousness fiction, particularly with reference to cognitively limited narrators. To this end, I bring James’s ideas into dialogue with recent scholarship in disability studies, which has sought to move from the register of the humanistic and personal to the vitalism of impersonal life. By integrating his ideas about “fringe awareness” and embodied cognition into literary appreciation of stream of consciousness, I suggest that it is possible to rethink the concept as non-deliberative, indeterminate, and materially grounded. Taking Faulkner’s *The Sound and the Fury* as my focus, I argue that the testimony of the cognitively impaired Benjy Compson can be read as just such an adventure at “the fringe of thought,” an account of a-

subjective life that has drifted free from its anchorage in the humanist register of consciousness.

THE STREAM OF THOUGHT

The phrase “the stream of consciousness” was first coined by James in his *Principles* to articulate the nature of “our minds as they actually live.”³ According to him there is an extensive “free water” of consciousness, which our focus on the individual “contents” of thought tends to negate:

The traditional psychology talks like one who should say a river consists of nothing but pailsful, spoonsful, quartpotsful, barrelsful, and other moulded forms of water. Even were the pails and the pots all actually standing in the stream, still between them the free water would continue to flow. It is just this free water of consciousness that psychologists resolutely overlook.⁴

In elaborating the metaphor of flow, James supplants the traditional model of mind as “container” of mental life, deflecting attention from the “contents” of cognition to their formative forces. In so doing, he develops a vocabulary of nascent affectivity, variously articulated in “The Stream of Thought” chapter as “*feelings of tendency*,”⁵ the “halo of felt relations,”⁶ and “mantle of felt affinity”⁷:

Every definite image in the mind is steeped and dyed in the free water that flows round it. With it goes the sense of its relations, near and remote, the dying echo of whence it came to us, the dawning sense of whither it is to lead.⁸

Insisting on the “re-instatement of the vague to its proper place in our mental life,”⁹ James deploys the terms “*psychic overtone, suffusion, or fringe*”¹⁰ to designate the dim awareness of relations

and unarticulated affinities that give rise to a sound, an image, or an idea. Throughout his account of the stream of consciousness, he accords priority to these pre-linguistic “comings and goings and contrasts” by means of which our coherent deliberations take shape.¹¹ Such phenomena generally go unacknowledged for according to James, there is a tendency to dwell on the “resting places” or ‘substantive parts’ of thought rather than the relational, “transitive parts.”¹² The function of the transitive vectors is to lead us from one substantive conclusion to another, since in James’s view, “the main aim of our thinking is at all times the attainment of some other substantive part than the one from which we have just been dislodged.”¹³ Consequently, it is difficult to appreciate the transitive parts of thought for what they really are because they are inevitably eclipsed by the conclusions to which they tend.

This emphasis on the fringes and flight paths of thought alerts the reader to the fact that “cognition” as a process of knowledge acquisition and understanding is grounded within a broader fund of pre-reflective relations. In fact, James asserts that “our own bodily position, attitude, condition, is one of the things of which *some* awareness, however inattentive, invariably accompanies the knowledge of whatever else we know.”¹⁴ This striking claim significantly undermines the equation of cognition with mentation. Not only do the movements and dispositions of the body contribute to the stream of thought, he suggests that they may play a conditioning role: “We think; and as we think we feel our bodily selves as the seat of the thinking.”¹⁵

This idea of an “embodied” dimension to cognition is just one aspect of a more audacious revision of conceptual terminology. James also proposes that “thinking” as such be interpreted as a broadly inclusive term for “every form of consciousness indiscriminately,”¹⁶ including feelings and sensations: “If we could say in English ‘it thinks,’ as we say ‘it rains’ or ‘it blows,’ we should be stating the fact most simply and with the minimum of assumption. As we cannot, we must simply say that *thought goes on*.”¹⁷ Rather than seeking to define and determine the various elements of thinking, James progressively undermines their

apparent certainties. For example, he claims that what we call “simple sensations” are actually the results of fine-honed “discriminative attention.”¹⁸ This is because “consciousness, from our natal day, is of a teeming multiplicity of objects and relations”¹⁹ and the patterns that we come to establish stem from the selective interest of our senses:

Out of what is in itself an undistinguishable, swarming *continuum*, devoid of distinction or emphasis, our senses make for us, by attending to this motion and ignoring that, a world full of contrasts, of sharp accents, of abrupt changes, of picturesque light and shade.²⁰

All of these remarks imply that for James the stream of thought eclipses the discrete form of the mind or self. However, for him it is a moot point whether there is “mere thought, which is nobody’s thought” for we have no means of ascertaining evidence of this from experience.²¹ Accordingly, James presents as elementary psychic facts the presupposition of the ownership of thought and the impenetrable barriers belonging to different personal minds: “The breaches between such thoughts are the most absolute breaches in nature.”²² He goes on to claim that “everyone will recognize this to be true,” provided that the existence of “something” corresponding to the term “personal mind” is all that is insisted on, “without any particular view of its nature being implied.”²³ This is an important qualification because it does not commit its author to any conviction concerning the essence of personhood. For James, thought is owned but each mind “keeps its own thoughts to itself.”²⁴

Compared to the wide remit of James’s stream of thought, the literary concept of stream of consciousness narration is more limited in scope. David Lodge situates stream of consciousness within the general “interiorized rendering of experience” for which the novel as a literary form is celebrated: “*Cogito, ergo sum* (‘I think, therefore I am’) could be its motto, though the novelist’s *cogito* includes not only reasoning but also emotions, sensations, memories and

fantasies.”²⁵ According to Lodge, “stream of consciousness was a phrase coined by William James [...] to characterize the continuous flow of thought and sensation in the human mind.”²⁶ In stream of consciousness narratives, the guiding perspective of an external narrator is held in abeyance, with the story told from the point of view of a character’s consciousness. Robert Humphrey offers the simple definition of stream of consciousness as “a *method* of representing inner awareness,”²⁷ although even this elementary formulation deviates from James’s more radical account of the pre-reflective stream. Humphrey makes reference to Henry James’s assertion that the “chamber of consciousness” is the chamber of experience: “Consciousness, then, is *where* we are aware of human experience.”²⁸ Not only does consciousness on this model figure as a site of self-awareness, it also serves as a repository for thought. Humphrey proposes that the critic ask both “What does consciousness contain?” and what is the “ultimate significance of what consciousness contains,” to the various writers who deploy the technique.²⁹ As we have identified above, William James rejects the metaphor of the container, insisting that it is the “free water” of consciousness that psychology has failed to address. It is worth reiterating that he does not circumscribe the limits of consciousness as such, even though he insists on the barriers between different minds.

The latter point is a cardinal one for many would agree that the “privacy” of the “personal mind” is well represented in the most familiar stream of consciousness technique: interior monologue. This device is described by Lodge as one “in which the grammatical subject of the discourse is an ‘I’ and we, as it were, overhear the character verbalizing his or her thoughts as they occur.”³⁰ Once again, this particular rendering imports the very things that James succeeds in doing without: the self-intuiting, reflective subject, who gives substantive form to the ‘stream.’ Whilst on the face of things, it does not seem to matter that the literary re-casting of James’s ideas should cultivate a particular view of the “nature” of the mind, politically speaking, one must question the role which literature plays in reinforcing the norms which it helps to construct. As we

shall see, when it comes to the critical analysis of non-typical narrators, especially cognitively impaired ones, this humanist model of the self is taken as axiomatic. Contra James, both “ableist” commentators and their detractors assume that stream of consciousness narrative must refer back to a self-reflective subject.

READING BENJY COMPSON’S NARRATIVE IN *THE SOUND AND THE FURY*

The humanist values underpinning literary appreciation of stream of consciousness fiction come to the fore in the criticism of Faulkner’s modernist classic, *The Sound and the Fury*. The decline of the once genteel Compson family of Mississippi is told in four sections, the first of which is delivered by the cognitively impaired narrator, Benjy Compson. Benjy’s monologue is a non-chronological “stream” of moments from across the course of his thirty-three years, with minimal information as to the time, place, and meaning of what occurs. It is only as the novel advances and the reader is compelled to revisit moments of Benjy’s haphazard account that certain important coherences begin to emerge. For generations of readers, Benjy’s section has proved an intellectual challenge and a number of critics (Noel Polk, Stephen Ross, Wolfgang Iser, Donald Kartiganer) have questioned whether strictly speaking he can be regarded as a “narrator” at all. More recently, scholars analysing the novel from a disability perspective (Maria Truchan-Tataryn, Will Kanyusik, Alice Hall, James Berger) have questioned the “dehumanising” and ableist assumptions at work in these readings and have countered them with interpretations which vindicate Benjy’s humanity. It would seem that readers are inclined to either deny Benjy’s self-consciousness completely or to urgently insist that it is really there. To see what is at stake in this debate for our consideration of James, it is necessary to begin by briefly outlining the distinctive features of Benjy’s narrative stream.

Faulkner’s novel opens as follows:

Through the fence, between the curling flower spaces, I could see them hitting. They were coming

toward where the flag was and I went along the fence. Luster was hunting in the grass by the flower tree. They took the flag out, and they were hitting. Then they put the flag back and they went to the table, and he hit and the other hit. Then they went on, and I went along the fence. Luster came away from the flower tree and we went along the fence and they stopped and we stopped and I looked through the fence while Luster was hunting in the grass.³¹

At first glance this simple, repetitive syntax and lexis appear unremarkable, perhaps merely childlike and naive. On closer inspection, however, there are distinct oddities about the diction. For the first time reader the references to “hitting” seem peculiar. While the allusions to moving the flag and the words “Here, caddie” in a later paragraph confirm that a game of golf is being observed, Benjy’s description gives no indication of comprehending that the purpose of the game is to hit the ball. This is not the only incidence of a transitive verb being used intransitively. Benjy relates that Luster was “hunting” in the grass but when Luster’s own words are “reported” in Benjy’s narrative we learn that he is looking for a quarter which he lost there. Similarly, the words “Luster threw” which occur after we have been told about a bird “slanting and tilting” on a flag suggest that Luster threw a stone at the bird. In all these examples, Benjy describes activity rather than goal-driven actions, apparently failing to make inferences of cause and effect. In fact, it is noticeable that Benjy constantly describes occurrences as if things in the world move independently: “the spoon came up [...] the bowl went away.”³² It seems that for Benjy change is not apprehended according to the laws of causality and so there is no automatic assumption of a “doer” behind a deed.

It will be noted here that Benjy exemplifies James’s point that the stream of thinking “goes on” without reference to a self-regarding ego. Indeed, his monologue amply testifies to the sensible continuity of thought. As Leech and Short comment: “Benjy shows a tendency common in the writing of young children to string

sentences of paratactic and coordinated main clauses together instead of resorting to subordination or sentence division.”³³ However, since the clauses in Benjy’s sentences are excessively syndetic with no discriminating disjunctions, they do not distinguish major information from minor information. With few adverbs, syntactical variants or elementary cues such as question marks or exclamations, it is difficult for the reader to gauge Benjy’s understanding of his world.

Polk speaks for many commentators when he describes Benjy’s section of *The Sound and the Fury*, as a “monstrous violation of the fictional tradition that identifies a ‘narrator,’ especially a first person narrator, with a point of view and demands that narrators be self-conscious enough to describe what is happening to others and to themselves.”³⁴ Benjy is a prime example of James’s “personal mind” which keeps its thoughts to itself. Surprisingly, though, influential commentators such as Polk, Ross, Iser, and Kartiganer, seem loathe to take on the “vantage point” of the disabled narrator’s consciousness and are inclined to align themselves with the external chorus of voices that pass negative judgment on Benjy. These voices are interspersed with Benjy’s monologue and relay both the dialogue that characters have “about him” in his presence and their different responses to him as a mentally impaired individual.

“Now, just listen at you.” Luster said. “Hush up.”
 “What he moaning about now.”
 “Lawd knows.” Luster said. “He just starts like that....”³⁵

As is apparent from such passages, Benjy vocalises but does not speak: “*Can’t you shut up that moaning and slobbering, Luster said. Ain’t you shamed of yourself, making all this racket.*”³⁶ On this point, Polk professes that many commentators have deemed Benjy “pre-lingual” because he could not technically narrate his section. Of course, because interior monologue is by definition unspoken, this argument seems to mistake a literary convention for what it represents. However, Polk goes further:

But he is in fact *nonlingual*: the language of the Benjy section is *Faulkner's* language. Properly speaking, Benjy is not a narrator at all ... he is merely a filter, and not necessarily an ordering one, for the thousands of sense impressions he processes every day, which may remain just as confusing for him as they do for readers.³⁷

The claim that this is “actually *Faulkner's* language” could just as easily be applied to any of the novel's other “narrators.” Indeed, the question of who “speaks” is part of a more fundamental issue about *who is heard*. According to Polk, Benjy's narrative reproduces with extreme fidelity the speech that occurs in his vicinity: “Benjy is a passive receptor of these cinematic reels; he seems to have little control over what passes through his mind.”³⁸ Ross echoes this point, commenting that Benjy “records speech verbatim, like a tape recorder”³⁹ and that his “psyche is one-dimensional, without depth.”⁴⁰ Here it must be objected that the illusion that we can “overhear” the talk of characters about Benjy involves no greater leap of imagination than that required for “listening in” to his inner thoughts. There is no compulsion to regard these conversations as “part” of his monologue. In fact, to perceive Benjy as a means for reproducing the words of others, is to take notice of *their* words at the expense of tuning in to his “inner voice.”

These judgments about Benjy's passivity reveal the extent to which normative assumptions about agent-governed consciousness orientate literary criticism. For example, Iser describes Benjy's monologue as “a form of perception devoid of any active consciousness.”⁴¹ Noting the “aimlessness with which events are lumped together” in his non-chronological stream,⁴² Iser asserts that “what is missing” is a coherence between the individual sentences, which “seem to point in various directions without ever accomplishing the perception at which they are aimed.”⁴³ Here the absence of conventional perception is taken as evidence of “Benjy's lack of consciousness.”⁴⁴ Tellingly, Iser fails to quote a single word

from Benjy's section, citing instead from the "external" description of Benjy as "big," "shambling," and "drooling" which is given in the fourth section of the novel. For Iser, the possibility that Benjy's field of perception might be patterned according to other criteria is never entertained.

The presumption that Benjy's perceptions are aimless is echoed by Kartiganer who, taking for granted what constitutes "normal" consciousness, suggests that "the Benjy section represents extreme objectivity, a condition quite impossible to the ordinary conscious mind."⁴⁵ His argument rests on the assumption of "Benjy's inability to 'abstract' any order whatsoever"⁴⁶ from the general sensory flux:

Being an idiot, he is actually perception prior to consciousness, prior to the 'intelligent' view of experience which, seeing reality as a succession of objects, is never content to allow it to exist in that state, but must render it immediately – in the very act of vision – into schematic form.⁴⁷

For Kartiganer, Benjy's perception is "simply" a stream rather than something nuanced by selective interest. Apparently, James's notion of "discriminative attention" does not apply to the world of this character, who is at best minimally sentient:

He is absolutely static man, outside the flux of durational movement, and clearly free from time. Having no 'mind' his perceptions are not really that, but a 'part of things,' and thus he is truly at one with essential reality.⁴⁸

The commentators on Benjy's narrative who deem him to have no language (Polk), no agency (Ross), no intentionality (Iser) and no mind (Kartiganer), view the character as a mere conduit for the general "stream" of things. From their "external" vantage point, Benjy lacks the criteria for normal consciousness and, by extension, for full humanity. To some extent, these judgments are surprising

ones given that part of the power of Faulkner's achievement in *The Sound and the Fury* is to illustrate the contrast between the prejudices of other characters and what Benjy appears to "say" in his interior monologue.⁴⁹ Yet as Truchan-Tataryn argues, "the figure of Benjy's mindless, voiceless subhumanity continues to resonate through Faulknerian scholarship as a believable portrait of disability."⁵⁰ She maintains that "unquestioning acceptance" of Benjy as a "successful representation of intellectual disability" reveals "an underlying ableism in the literary critical endeavour and an academic acquiescence to dated socio-cultural constructions of disability."⁵¹ In particular, she takes issue with the way in which "Faulkner uses Benjy's inferiority to demarcate the humanity of others, but he does not illuminate Benjy's humanity."⁵² In Truchan-Tataryn's view, scholars have applauded Faulkner for constructing a "stream of consciousness that carries no engaged awareness" but have failed to query the socio-political investments served by the assumption that this reflects lived experience.⁵³

The reader should be reminded here that James's stream of thought also carries "no engaged awareness" although his invitation to readers to consider "*dumb* or anonymous psychic states" is not freighted with the socio-political concerns of representing disabled subjects.⁵⁴ As we shall presently see, this is something of a missed opportunity, especially because much recent work in literary disability studies remains anchored to a humanist ideology of the introspective subject. The reasons for this are spelt out by the sociologist, James Overboe, who argues that "a fundamental tenet of the disability movement continues to be the validation of one's own identity and politics based on various disabilities."⁵⁵ Underlying this politics of identity is the self-reflexive individual that is central to the modern idea of selfhood. From a humanist perspective, it is taken for granted that "a lack of self-reflexivity and intentionality" is "an inferior and questionable existence."⁵⁶

This is exemplified in recent commentary on *The Sound and the Fury* by Kanyusik, Hall, and Berger. For example, Kanyusik claims that Benjy "confronts the loss of self experienced by a person who is deprived of the capacity for self-narration by an ableist society."⁵⁷

According to Kanyusik, Faulkner's Benjy "narrates his struggle to differentiate himself from a societal view that constructs him as Other."⁵⁸ Such voluntarist language attributes unwarranted motivations to Benjy and re-positions the character within the self-reflective subjectivity that Faulkner so resolutely resists. For example, Kanyusik says that "Benji [sic] recalls his understanding of the events of his life that have led to his marginalization"⁵⁹ and that "in relating the trauma that has come to define him, Benji [sic] focuses on his sense of helplessness."⁶⁰ In describing the text in this way, Kanyusik attributes an emotional journey to Benjy for which there is no textual evidence. Equally tenuous are the claims that the "vacillation between indistinct impressions and precise description" in Benjy's narrative "denotes a clear conscious effort at understanding,"⁶¹ and that the frequent juxtaposition between his sister Caddy's kindness and Luster's indifference "suggests some understanding" of different "emotional meanings."⁶² Kanyusik struggles to impute will and desire to Benjy in order to vindicate his humanity but the enduring fascination of Faulkner's text is that it gives us an inner world entirely lacking in interiority.

A different approach is taken by Hall who emphasizes that Faulkner's depiction of Benjy "challenges widespread assumptions that equated mental impairment with complete sensory alienation."⁶³ She suggests that Benjy's section "challenges realist modes of seeing and conventions of narrative vision," and acknowledges the embodied nature of Benjy's perception of things, particularly his acute sense of smell.⁶⁴ As previously noted, there are abundant resources in James's work to identify evidence of "thinking" which bypasses the issue of self-awareness. However, Hall persists in referencing the "inner" life of Benjy, claiming that through this character Faulkner dramatizes "the relationship between external stimuli and interior emotional responses."⁶⁵ The same problem of textual support resurfaces here for there is very little indication of "interior emotional responses" in Benjy's narrative despite copious evidence of Benjy's synaesthesia: "I couldn't feel the gate at all, but I could smell the bright cold."⁶⁶

Mindful of what the reader can reasonably infer from Benjy's words, Berger approaches the text from an oblique angle, accentuating the ethics of the text rather than the content of Benjy's narrative. Citing David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder's argument that all of the Compson family are "explicitly judged in relation to their ability to imagine Benjy's humanity,"⁶⁷ Berger observes that Benjy's sister, Caddy, emerges as the character most inclined to respect "Benjy's feelings and point of view."⁶⁸ He goes on to assert that "Benjy's discourse is not intended to represent the consciousness of a severely cognitively impaired person; but it is intended to validate his social and ethical position [...], to render Benjy a full human subject."⁶⁹ This is an elegant solution to the perceived problem of establishing "full human subjectivity" for Benjy but it will be noticed that this is achieved at the expense of completely denying the validity of his stream of consciousness.

Truchan-Tataryn, Kanyusik, Hall, and Berger all seek to redress the ableist prejudices that have "dehumanised" the character of Benjy but in doing so they invoke a discourse of human subjectivity for which there is negligible textual corroboration. To accept that there is no emotional centre to Benjy seems to negate his humanity yet since the traditional markers of humanity are patently absent from his conscious "stream" this is something of an impasse in the critical work. The problem clearly lies with the humanist norms of consciousness that are tacitly presupposed in stream of consciousness narration. If we return to James's speculations in "The Stream of Thought," it will be readily conceded that for thought to "go on" it need not assume substantive form, or engage a self-intuiting subject. To pursue this direction within a literary disability studies framework, the challenge is to develop a non-humanist approach to cognitive impairment within which James's insights might be elaborated. As we shall now see, Overboe's recent Deleuzian account of impersonal life provides such a framework and by returning to James's ideas of "consciousness at the fringe" there is scope to rethink consciousness beyond self-reflective norms.

CONSCIOUSNESS AT THE FRINGE

It is to be recalled that in *Principles*, James formulates the phrase “stream of consciousness” to describe “our minds as they actually live.”⁷⁰ In the context of his meditations on this topic, he asserts a belief in the existence of the “personal mind” without committing himself to any partisan view of its nature. Indeed, James suggests that a thinker would be astounded “beyond measure to be let into his neighbour’s mind and to find how different the scenery there was from that in his own.”⁷¹ It is upon this tantalising possibility that modernist writers such as Faulkner trade. As noted at the outset, writers and readers can only speculate about how another mind thinks or another body feels. However, in the absence of an introspective voice in the narrative of Benjy, there has been a tendency in literary criticism to either dismiss the character as mindless (confirming ableist prejudices) or to assign to him a reflective selfhood that is textually unjustified. Whereas a character such as Molly Bloom in James Joyce’s *Ulysses* will periodically pass comment on the contents of her conscious “stream” (“I love flowers I’d love to have the whole place swimming in roses”),⁷² Benjy’s point of view is not made available to the reader.

This point of view may not be as imperative as commentators believe. According to James, it is “perfectly wanton” to assume that “the reflective consciousness of the self is essential to the cognitive function of thought.”⁷³ Benjy’s “adventures” endorse James’s position that self-awareness is not foundational and that consciousness is for the most part disengaged from deliberative agency. In “Affirming an Impersonal Life: A Different Register for Disability Studies,” Overboe challenges the humanist view of life that privileges cognition, intent, and agency.⁷⁴ Inspired by Deleuze’s proposal that prior to the personal consciousness of subjective identity there is an impersonal zone, a “transcendental field,” he suggests that disability studies might focus on the “impersonal” life that coexists with “the” life of an individual person. Overboe’s appeal to impersonal vitalism has striking resonance with James’s rejection of a foundational self. For James, individual sensibility is progressively and selectively crafted from a “teeming multiplicity”

of objects and relations, an idea which bears comparison with Deleuze's notion of the transcendental as "a pure stream of a-subjective consciousness [*pur courant de conscience a-subjectif*], a pre-reflexive impersonal consciousness, a qualitative duration of consciousness without a self."⁷⁵ This pure stream of consciousness does not imply the humanist values associated with a self for in place of the "subject" Deleuze presents the concept of "a" life. John Rajchman explains that for Deleuze, this indeterminate life is a potentiality or virtuality that exceeds a particular human life, hence "a life" is not to be confused with the individual life of a corresponding person:

For 'a' life is always singular. It is made up of 'singularities' that are 'preindividual' or 'subindividual,' which are then linked to others in a plan or 'plane' that is impersonal, like the 'it' in 'it's raining,' which is the condition of the singularity of a life.⁷⁶

This example calls to mind James's radically empiricist position: "If we could say in English 'it thinks, as we say 'it rains' or 'it blows,' we should be stating the fact most simply and with the minimum of assumption."⁷⁷ Interestingly, Rajchman goes on to suggest that our lives must be "indefinite or vague enough" to enter into relations with whatever precedes us "as constituted selves or conscious persons"⁷⁸: "The vagueness of 'a life' is not a deficiency to be corrected, but rather a resource or reserve of other possibilities, our connections."⁷⁹

One way of elucidating this is to consider the "impersonal existence" which begins in infancy and co-exists with the emerging "self" as language is acquired. Arguably, this impersonal life is constantly encountered at the limit or "fringe" of consciousness and is felt in the vague "halo" of relations which modernist writers like Faulkner succeed in tapping. If we abide with this insight, it is possible to see the value of a non-humanist approach to reading disability. The vocabulary of impersonal life is not dehumanising

because the accent is upon a-subjective “thinking” and not self-reflective consciousness.

Overboe’s agenda is to validate the lives of the cognitively disabled without recourse to the model of self-reflective subjectivity. By returning to James’s insights in *Principles* it is possible to go further than this and rethink stream of consciousness in an impersonal register as non-deliberative, indeterminate, and cognitively embodied. As we noted earlier, in Benjy’s narrative, transitive verbs are frequently used intransitively. When Benjy sees people through the fence “hitting” he does not add that they were hitting a ball. His descriptions reference movement and ongoing activity rather than aim-directed actions. Iser’s complaint that Benjy’s sentences never accomplish the perception at which they are aimed and fail to “come together to form a larger unit of meaning,”⁸⁰ misses the point that they evoke the “transitive” states of thinking, the flight paths that are always effaced by attention to the “conclusions” or “resting places” of thought.

If James is right to insist on the impossibility of catching thought in its flight, we must cultivate a sensitivity to the “vague.” In *The Sound and the Fury*, Benjy communicates comings and goings and contrasts in the moment of their evanescence. When he describes running from “the bright cold” into the “dark cold” it is reasonable to infer that he is going inside the house but other passages are more problematic⁸¹:

They came on. I opened the gate and they stopped, turning. I was trying to say, and I caught her, trying to say, and she screamed and I was trying to say and trying and the bright shapes began to stop and I tried to get out.⁸²

We do not need to be able to decipher Benjy’s rendition of things to be affected by its futile candour: “I tried to say....” What is felt at the “fringe” is yet to be translated into “substantive” thought. The “stream” escapes the containers which render experience “mine”; it is intensely “active” yet is without coherent form.

As mentioned earlier, James suggests that cognition is grounded within the flow of pre-reflective, embodied relations. This is something Kevin Booth has called the “felt possibilities of movement in the body schema or subject-body.”⁸³ Benjy’s stream of thought may not be introspective but it is intensely proprioceptive: “the ground kept sloping up”,⁸⁴ “the room went away, but I didn’t hush, and the room came back.”⁸⁵ At the non-conscious level of bodily thought, percepts perform cognitive functions of their own. For example, there is strong evidence in Faulkner’s novel that Benjy’s lingering at the fence is connected with an embodied cognitive schema. When Luster grumbles that Benjy snags his clothes on the fence every time they crawl through, it is followed by a reference to an earlier scene with Caddy: “‘Can’t you never crawl through here without snagging on that nail.’ *Caddy uncaught me and we crawled through.*”⁸⁶ Examples of this order give a material pattern for events which might otherwise appear to be arbitrarily “lumped together.” However, it is important to recognise that Benjy’s narrative implies processes of embodied thinking that cannot be directly represented. Although there may be textual cues for the triggering of involuntary memory, they resist easy translation into an ultimately rational world view.

As Charlene Haddock Seigfried observes, James creates “an original concrete analysis of human thinking as we experience it within our horizon of being in the world.”⁸⁷ Whilst Benjy may lack many linguistic things, he has a profound ability to see other “things.” According to James, “things” are nothing but special groups of sensible qualities “which happen practically or aesthetically to interest us” and upon which we therefore bestow substantive names⁸⁸:

But in itself, apart from my interest, a particular dust-wreath on a windy day is just as much of an individual thing, and just as much or as little deserves an individual name as my own body does.⁸⁹

When Benjy describes his field of vision through the fence, he looks “between the curling flower spaces” rather than between the plants (whether actual flowers or part of the fence design). The spaces have shape and movement (“curling”) and are not seen privatively as gaps. This aesthetic stance conjures a sense of Benjy’s world which belies the prejudice that he is a passive recipient of a random succession of objects. James suggests that what cannot be articulated is often regarded conceptually as equivalent to negation but it is erroneous to assume an emptiness of consciousness because a looked-for clarity fails to materialise.

We went to the library. Luster turned on the light.
The windows went black, and the tall dark place on
the wall came and I went and I touched it. It was like
a door only it wasn’t a door.⁹⁰

We might presume that the tall dark place that appears on the wall is a shadow (or the outline of where something used to hang) but like the “curling flower spaces” it has discernible reality in Benjy’s world. Like the door which is not a door, Benjy’s narrative promises access but is shut off from the inside. We are “locked out” of Benjy’s emotional life just as he may be “locked in” from the vantage point of those around him. What makes the reading experience an endlessly enriching one is the fact that the reader does not have to know what it is *means* to live in this world to feel the force of its “delicate idiosyncrasies.”⁹¹ To inhabit the narrative is to dwell at the fringe, to abide with thoughts that remain elusive.

Literature can reinforce presuppositions about what it is like to be a conscious subject or it can challenge them by imagining other landscapes of the mind. James’s notion of the stream of thought opens up new vistas of possibility for both interpreting modernist stream of consciousness and for disability studies. In his explorations of the “fringe,” he articulates a dynamics of thinking without recourse to the language of selfhood. As James insists, the minimal assumption of psychology is that “*thinking of some sort goes on.*”⁹² A cognitively impaired narrator such as Faulkner’s

Benjy may be deemed “mindless” according to the norms of rationality, but from the perspective of embodied cognition his testimony is rich in thought. If literature is involved in the discovery, invention, and creation of new affects, then James’s adventures at the fringe of thought open up the dizzying world of experience in default of epistemology. If ultimately we can agree with Kartiganer that Faulkner’s novel comes close to “the quality of a life in the process of becoming,”⁹³ it is because now we hear a different inflection in this suggestive phrase. It is “a” life that we encounter in Benjy’s narrative, a life which has “quality” in its pure becoming. There is no need to appeal to consciousness to make the case for the “singularity” of this life.

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NOTES

¹ James, *Modernist Futures*, 159. In this context, David James discusses Ian McEwan's character Henry Perowne from the novel *Saturday* (2005) but he has in mind characters such as Virginia Woolf's Clarissa Dalloway.

² Cohn, *The Transparent Mind*, 5-6.

³ James, *Principles*, 246.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid., 247.

⁷ Ibid., 250.

⁸ Ibid., 246.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid., 249.

¹¹ Ibid., 233.

¹² Ibid., 236.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid., 234-5.

¹⁵ Ibid., 235.

¹⁶ Ibid., 219-220.

¹⁷ Ibid., 220.

¹⁸ Ibid., 219.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid., 274.

²¹ Ibid., 221.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Lodge, *The Art of Fiction*, 42.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Humphrey, *Stream of Consciousness*, 2-3. There is a lack of consensus about whether stream of consciousness is a form of interior monologue or vice versa but for the purpose of the present discussion, I set this aside.

²⁸ Ibid., 7

²⁹ Ibid., 6.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Faulkner, *The Sound and the Fury*, 3.

³² Ibid., 17.

³³ Leech and Short, *Style in Fiction*, 165.

³⁴ Polk, "Trying Not to Say," 140.

³⁵ Faulkner, *The Sound and the Fury*, 11.

³⁶ Ibid. 6.

³⁷ Polk, "Trying Not to Say," 144.

³⁸ Ibid., 149.

³⁹ Ross, *Fiction's Inexhaustible Voice*, 179.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 172.

⁴¹ Iser, *The Implied Reader*, 139.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid., 138.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 140.

⁴⁵ Kartiganer, "The Sound and the Fury," 620.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 621.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 622.

⁴⁹ Oddly, in his subsequent commentaries on his text, Faulkner substantially distances himself from this humanist understanding of the Benjy character. In his 1933 introduction to *The Sound and the Fury*, he describes Benjy in uncompromisingly inhuman terms, begging the question of how to read the novel's opening section.

Unfortunately, it is beyond the confines of the current paper to address this interesting topic here.

⁵⁰ Truchan-Tataryn, "Textual Abuse," 160.

⁵¹ Ibid., 159-160.

⁵² Ibid., 161.

⁵³ Ibid., 165.

⁵⁴ James, *Principles*, 239.

⁵⁵ Overboe, "Affirming an Impersonal Life," 241.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Kanyusik, "Signifying Otherness," 177.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 181.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 183.

⁶¹ Ibid., 185.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Hall, *Disability and Modern Fiction*, 32.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 38.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 36.

⁶⁶ Faulkner, *The Sound and the Fury*, 5.

⁶⁷ Quoted in Berger, *The Disarticulate*, 85.

⁶⁸ Ibid. 86.

⁶⁹ Ibid. 89.

⁷⁰ James, *Principles*, 246.

⁷¹ Ibid., 260.

⁷² Joyce, *Ulysses*, 703.

⁷³ James, *Principles*, 264.

⁷⁴ Overboe, "Affirming an Impersonal Life," 242.

⁷⁵ Deleuze, "Immanence: Une Vie," 4; c.f. Boyman, "Immanence: a Life," 25.

⁷⁶ Rajchman, *The Deleuze Connections*, 84.

⁷⁷ James, *Principles*, 220.

⁷⁸ Rajchman, *The Deleuze Connections*, 84.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Iser, *The Implied Reader*, 138.

⁸¹ Faulkner, *The Sound and the Fury*, 5.

⁸² Ibid. 35-6.

⁸³ Booth, "The Meaning of the Social Body," 6.

⁸⁴ Faulkner, *The Sound and the Fury*, 14.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 29-30.

⁸⁶ Ibid. 3.

⁸⁷ Haddock Seigfried, *Radical Reconstruction of Philosophy*,
185.

⁸⁸ James, *Principles*, 274.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Faulkner, *The Sound and the Fury*, 41.

⁹¹ James, *Principles*, 239.

⁹² Ibid., 219.

⁹³ Kartiganer, "The Sound and the Fury," 616.

Notes for *American Philosophy: A Love Story*. By
John Kaag. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2016.
272pp. \$26

There is a strange daylight magic in this book. It is part memoir and part flyover of American philosophy, which, says Kaag, “from Jonathan Edwards in the eighteenth century . . . to Cornel West in this one, is about the possibilities of rebirth and renewal” (66). The book is also clearly and beautifully written. I picked it up for a quick look and couldn’t put it down. Not since Pirsig’s *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* have I read such a mesmerizing confluence of personal experience and formal thought.

A young philosophy professor dangling at the end of a failed marriage, depressed and not at all sure life is worth living, stumbles upon a magnificent abandoned stone library deep in the New Hampshire woods. The lost library is crammed with old rare incredibly valuable books — all the classics of American philosophy and its German, English, and French antecedents. As the narrator struggles with his life (and with the problem of what to do about this hidden treasure) so he struggles with the main lines of American thought from Transcendentalism to Pragmatism and beyond. A female colleague, a Kantian, joins him in his strange mission and in the string of personal experiences that follow, the narrator takes us back and forth from learning to love until he can answer the question is life worth living with a sly “it depends on the liver” (8) and a modestly rapturous “maybe” (235).

Kaag’s notion of philosophy is not technical or academic in the usual ways. Heidegger once started a class on Aristotle with a disdainful dismissal of the biographical. Of Aristotle’s life he said “He was born. He thought. He died.”¹ Heidegger had more reason

than most to avoid biographical illumination, but his low view of the subject is fairly common in some quarters. Not, however, with John Kaag, who writes “Royce’s lectures on German Idealism began where all philosophy does, in biography” (166). That is to say, in life. And if philosophy couldn’t help us lead better lives, most of us wouldn’t care two pins for it.

American Philosophy: A Love Story is saturated with William James’s thought and life. Even so, Kaag is, I think it fair to say, a Roycean; he is drawn more to a life with others — to community — than to individualism, however splendid. But he gives equal time to Emerson, Thoreau, James, Hocking, and so many others (Descartes, Hobbes, T.H. Huxley, etc., etc.) that I would advise a beginning student to read this book rather than those of Father Copleston or Will[iam James] Durant for an overview of American thought.

And beyond overview, Kaag has many new things for us, the relationship between Emerson and Henry Lee, that between William James and Pauline Goldmark, and that between Ernest Hocking and Pearl Buck. There is a fresh bit on Royce’s last words, another on the origins of Shady Hill School, a reappraisal of Jane Addams and much, much more.

American Philosophy: a Love Story is then a brightly written, thoroughly accessible, sometimes moving account of a young life in philosophy. (It is also an adventure story about the discovery of the lost library of Ernest Hocking.) Kaag teaches courage, risk-taking and above all reading. He would, I think, agree with the comment attributed to Borges that “you are not what you write, but what you have read.” And his book goes on my shelf with other books in which philosophy *lives*, with Jacques Barzun’s *A Stroll with William James*, Margaret Yourcenar’s *Memoirs of Hadrian*, Louis Menand’s *Metaphysical Club*, Stephen Greenblatt’s *The Swerve*, Richard Rubenstein’s *Aristotle’s Children*, Mary Renault’s *The Last of the Wine* and Simone de Beauvoir’s *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter*.

Kaag leaves us with what Goethe, Emerson, and William James all agreed on. In the beginning was not the word, but the deed, the act. The way forward is not twelve steps, or ten or three. It's just one. Don't sleep on it, sit on it, stand on it, or take it for a trial spin. *Take* the step, You have to do what you can, and you have to do it right now.

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NOTES

¹ Herman Philipse, *Heidegger's Philosophy of Being: A Critical Interpretation* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press 1999), xiii.

Notes for *Freedom and Limits*. By John Lachs. Edited by Patrick Shade. New York: Fordham University Press, 2014. 520pp. Cloth, \$125.00; paper, \$30

Freedom and Limits is a well-organized collection of thirty-two selections, offering a comprehensive insight into the work of 20th century American philosopher John Lachs. Lachs's writing spans more than fifty years; hence this volume reflects a variety of philosophical streams, notably pragmatism, pluralism, and epiphenomenalism. The essays are divided into five parts, each reflecting a major theme in Lachs's understanding of American philosophy: mind and reality; self and society; pluralism and choice-inclusive facts; meaningful living; and human advance and finite obligation. In sum, these deliberations contemplate the nature of society, revealing Lachs's enduring concern about the relationship of the community with regard to the individual. Selections are featured in chronological order by publication date, enabling readers — even those unfamiliar with Lachs — to follow the development of his philosophical thinking alongside dominant ideas of interest to him, namely finitude, immediacy, liberty, optimism, the individual as a unit of action and decision-making, choice-inclusive facts, reimmersion, and stoic pragmatism.

In this volume, Lachs seems to favor social utility over philosophical rigor. Accordingly, he tackles pragmatic concerns as a vehicle to demonstrate his disdain for uniformity and perfectionism, both of which he perceives as undermining the pursuit of a satisfactory human life. Navigating discussions in philosophical works by Dewey, Fichte, Hegel, James, Peirce, Royce, and, most extensively, Santayana, Lachs concludes that the variability and adaptability of human nature makes striving for a single ultimate or supreme good futile. Instead, Lachs offers a contrasting version of the good life whereby “good enough” ought

to be good. In this way, Lachs's philosophy attempts to radically transform philosophical thought away from idealism and perfectionism, which lead us to believe "everything needs to be improved," (449) into being concerned primarily with practical reforms as the only hope for the improvement of the human condition. Pragmatist philosophers should take special notice of the prologue and epilogue, as they provide pertinent insights into Lachs's personal stakes, as well as further elucidation the social usefulness which he values in and demands from philosophy. In these contributions, Lachs describes himself primarily as a public philosopher: "My passion is to deploy philosophy to deal with the important issues that face us as individuals, as a nation, and as members of the human race" (31). Many of the essays accordingly navigate various moral quandaries experienced in everyday life, such as helping refugees, assisted suicide, and education.

Lachs is keenly interested in how quests for perfection or infinite obligations impede human happiness. For him, happiness requires consideration of the social context, and thus social organization, in which people's actions and pursuits occurs. Yet, as his fervent discussion in the essay "The Transcendence of Materialism and Idealism in American Thought" (97-111) reveals, he is beleaguered by how materialism and idealism have long enthralled the Western tradition, leaving people gridlocked and diminished into functioning as mere living organisms in complex social contexts. Both materialism and idealism represent purely cognitive approaches to making sense of the world which, to Lachs, fall short. While they guide our understanding, they do not guide our practice. Instead, Lachs advocates for centering human activity, thereby turning the American philosophical tradition into a "more intelligent, more fulfilling, and more humane" activity (111). Later in the volume, during his most explicit and sustained discussion of William James, it seems Lachs fears such gridlock may evoke a kind of apathy, testing the limitations of moral philosophy in pragmatism. This could explain his interest in analyzing James's concept of the "moral holiday" in the essay by the same name (435-448). As Lachs summarizes, moral holidays adhere to this rationale: "if our

obligations are infinite but God picks up the slack and completes what we leave undone, then we might as well break from our labors and let the Deity take over” (435). Here, Lachs narrates James playfully targeting Royce in what becomes a three-person exploration of the moral impulses behind religion, or “the Absolute”, as a motivation for moral action in daily life, or conversely, whether there are any conditions in which “time away from moral efforts” is “justifiable” (447). Ultimately, Lachs laments the futility of many arguments for exemplary notions of human possibility since “we have no idea of what a perfect version of any of these properties [justice, power, mercy, and knowledge] might be like” (452). Lachs’s provocative volume invites readers to accept human finitude and (re)engage philosophy as a guide to life’s enduring societal challenges.

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Notes for “William James: The Pragmatic Romantic.” In
*Romantic Science and the Experience of Self: Transatlantic
Crosscurrents from William James to Oliver Sacks*. By Martin
Halliwell. New York: Routledge, 2016. 284pp. \$140

Martin Halliwell's *Romantic Science and the Experience of Self* explores various facets of romantic science after a nineteenth century conceptual shift to empirical science. As such, the author examines the work of five romantic scientists: William James, Otto Rank, Ludwig Binswanger, Erik Erikson, and Oliver Sacks. More specifically, Halliwell's stated goal is to consider “how and in what ways the self — the conscious self and the embodied self — has endured and developed as a theoretical construct within the medical humanities in the twentieth century” (12). To this end, his introduction describes the history of romantic science, a philosophy which was prevalent from the late eighteenth until the mid-nineteenth century, at which point a different theoretical approach to science took over: positivism. Halliwell distinguishes between positivist and romantic stances by describing positivists as confining social “truths” to natural science, while romantics look to “engage with dimensions of experience which normal science usually ignores” (4). That is, unlike positivists, romantics are reluctant to dismiss spirituality and other highly subjective experiences as being irrelevant to scientific study. Rather, romantic scientists (particularly those in the social sciences) see such experiences as essential to understanding the self from a therapeutic perspective. Establishing that romantics are interested in the mind's awareness of itself and of seeking to broaden, rather than to limit theoretical possibilities, Halliwell provides insight into James's influences, speculating as to why James chose to deviate from the fixed narratives of natural or “normal” science.

Since James is the first scientist discussed in Halliwell's book, James's work is effectively positioned as being foundational to understanding the perspectives of scientists considered later in this text. Halliwell offers close readings of James's work, including excerpts from *The Principles of Psychology*, *The Will to Believe*, and *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, contextualizing James's ideas both socially and historically, including explanations of how he was influenced by the writings of the romantic poets, as well as Shopenhauer, and Nietzsche. Halliwell argues that James's interest in drawing from various disciplinary perspectives to formulate his views became the basis for the therapies he offered as a psychologist. More specifically, Halliwell writes that the therapeutic aspect of James's work "is a vital dimension of James's romantic science and should not be isolated from his theoretical interest in the active and experiencing self" (26). In this sense, Halliwell connects James's views to those of Emerson not only in terms of pragmatism and a uniquely American spirit of individualism, but also in terms of how we recognize our own consciousness, the therapeutic value of narrative, and how we recount narratives of the self ("self-telling").

According to Halliwell, James's perspectives deviated distinctly from prevailing cultural beliefs about selfhood, individuality, the will, and identity. For instance, James resists nineteenth-century scientists' need to define and determine how we articulate self-awareness, calling for a more open-ended form of "self-telling," that is, as a "discontinuous discourse" rather than a neat linear narrative (53). Like Emerson, Halliwell argues, James considers perception to be an "act" crucial to self-awareness and ultimately, self-help: "for James, without attention to and acknowledgement of narrative possibilities the individual cannot hope to locate him/herself in an open-ended universe" (60). More specifically, instead of adhering to the nineteenth-century belief that neurasthenia (now known simply as "depression") was strictly physiological in origin, James believed this affliction to be more complex. He realizes neurasthenia is a lack of energy, but understands energy as coming from a spiritual source, believing that if we inadvertently block the source

we become depressed. Further, James suggests that the common nineteenth-century solution to neurasthenia (bed rest and a lack of stimulation) might be the exact opposite of what is necessary to overcome it, particularly if neurasthenia is indeed a condition wherein a sense of meaningful connection to the world is missing. Thus, James asks his audience to broaden their approach to and beliefs about neurasthenia by considering possibilities other than those presented by mainstream — or what Halliwell terms “normal” — science.

By discussing subjectivity and different sociohistorical understandings of it — particularly with respect to the relationship between romantic and positivist science, Halliwell provides the reader with a comprehensive account of how James developed his unique version of romantic science. In turn, Halliwell’s work illuminates ways in which James made his mark on the (then) fledgling field of psychology, and moves on to consider how James’s ideas endured well into the twentieth century.

In examining the scholarship of James, Rank, Binswanger, Erikson, and Sacks, Halliwell believes that “the challenge for romantic scientists is to discover a method of inquiry which incorporates subjective interpretation without reverting to metaphysical speculation or dismissing creative expression as the epiphenomena of essential materialist creatures” (5). Halliwell also suggests that each of the men he discusses in this study did, in some way, hit upon such a “method of inquiry” — though often at great personal and professional cost.

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Notes for *The Religious Life: The Insights of William James*. By Donald Capps. Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2015. 245pp. \$31

William James's famous *The Varieties of Religious Experience* is based on a series of lectures presented at the University of Edinburgh in 1901 and 1902. One hundred years later, a wave of edited volumes celebrated *The Varieties'* centennial anniversary¹, followed by a stream of single-authored volumes on James's classic.² The most recent of these is Donald Capps's *The Religious Life: The Insights of William James*. Capps was the William Harte Felmeth Professor of Pastoral Theology at Princeton Theological Seminary until his recent and sudden death.³ His final book has been published posthumously, with the help of his son, John. Coupled with Capps's prior volumes on James, *The Religious Life* perfectly bookends a life dedicated to practical psychological-theological exploration.⁴

The Religious Life has two parts. Part I consists of eight chapters, which summarize and explain James's key topics in *The Varieties*. Part II contains three chapters; two are case studies of religious personages relevant to *The Varieties*, followed by a concluding integrative chapter. Thus, most of the book guides the reader through *The Varieties*, sometimes almost paragraph by paragraph.

The necessary contextual information for a new reader of *The Varieties* is provided in Chapter 1, including when and why it was written, James's background in psychology and philosophy, and an overview of James's personal and professional life. The chapter is exceptional in style and leaves the reader with a sense of the integrity and depth of James's life. This essay will provide an excellent introduction to any student's first reading of *The Varieties* and, in fact, we believe it is superior to the publisher-invited introductions to the various editions of *The Varieties*, which have been authored by such luminaries as Reinhold Niebuhr, Eugene Kennedy, Robert Coles, and Peter J. Gomes.

Capps believes that *The Varieties* was James's masterpiece (22), and thus he seeks to highlight many of the brilliant brushstrokes that make up his great work. In Part I, seven chapters each cover selective groups of James's lectures. Each chapter begins with a list of the lectures from *The Varieties* it covers as well as the overarching theme those lectures discuss. Capps then explicates numerous selections from the chapters, organizing them under helpful chapter headings that highlight key terms and themes. This approach can border on the repetitive but, that said, *The Religious Life* gives readers new to James a notable clarity that they would not find as easily in *The Varieties* itself. James's rhetorical and pedagogical style, in part, was to sympathetically lay out opposing arguments and then contest them with his own pragmatic perspective. Capps summarizes James's core arguments and highlights the opposing positions that James often leaves readers to infer on their own. Even Capps's footnotes offer new contextual information that brings *The Varieties* into sharper focus.

Despite its strengths, Part I of *The Religious Life* has a major shortcoming. After discussing in detail each of James's 1901 lectures (Lectures 1-10), Capps moves directly from the description of saintliness (Lectures 11-13) to prayer (Lecture 19). More specifically, from the ten lectures James delivered in 1902, Capps omits lectures on the pragmatic value of saintliness (Lectures 14-15), mysticism (Lectures 16-17), philosophy (Lecture 18), and James's conclusion (Lecture 20). This omission may cause difficulty for those reading Capps's book as a companion to *The Varieties*, given that the lectures on mysticism and his lecture on the philosophy of religion are among the most appreciated by students. The introduction to *The Religious Life* acknowledges that the book "does not cover all" of James's twenty lectures (xii), but the lectures omitted are too crucial to ignore for sheer brevity's sake and the introduction provides no explanation for this choice. (One cannot help but wonder if the author's sudden passing played a role in this omission.)

In Part II, Capps presents two remarkable case studies: Rev. Ansel Bourne (1826-1910), an itinerant preacher who experienced a

break in his personality at age 61, and Rev. Phillip Brooks (1835-1893), an Episcopal clergyman who served as the Rector of Boston's Trinity Church and, for some years, as a beloved preacher at Harvard University. Bourne's experience is especially relevant to James's lecture in *The Varieties* on "The Divided Self and the Process of Unification," and Brooks's life is especially relevant to the exemplary spiritual characteristics of the religious life James mentions in his lectures on conversion and saintliness. Capps is thorough in compiling information that brings both of these cases to life. These two chapters stand out as unique in publications on James's religious ideas, in part because Capps draws from pre-*Varieties* publications, as well as *The Varieties*, to demonstrate James's psychological insight into significant religious personages of his time.

In the final chapter, Capps moves from reflecting on "hope" and James's loss of his infant son Herman, to making claims about God's nature being one of hope and God being the original risk taker. Some readers may regard these ideas to be unfounded theological claims and others may see them as simply out of place in the final chapter. However, such "over-beliefs," as James would warmly call them, should not dissuade any potential readers because they do not detract from the exceptional work Capps has done in creating this book, nor does he appear to have produced them with any agenda other than that of showing his own eager agreement with some of James's beliefs.⁵ Capps, in fact, acknowledges in a footnote that he is taking some "liberty" in making these theological "suggestions." Regardless, in the final chapter Capps does correctly identify the important significance the concept of hope had for James, and the resulting essay makes a fitting conclusion.

The Religious Life: The Insights of William James is an excellent resource for those students and scholars who want a richer, deeper understanding of *The Varieties* and James's insights on the religious life. In this regard one would be hard pressed to find a better model of psychological-theological exploration.

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NOTES

¹ For example, Croce and Snarey, *James's Psychology of Religion*; Ferrari, *Varieties of Religious Experience: Centenary Essays*; Proudfoot, *James and a Science of Religion*; and Snarey, *Varieties of Religious Experience*.

² For example, Bridgers, *Contemporary Varieties of Religious Experience*; Carrette, *James's Hidden Religious Imagination*; Miller, *William James's Revolution*; and Slater, *James on Ethics and Faith*.

³ Shea, "Professor Dies of Injuries."

⁴ Cf. Capps, *Men, Religion and Melancholia*; Capps & Jacobs, *The Struggle for Life*; and Capps & Capps, *James and Dewey*.

⁵ James, *Varieties of Religious Experience*, 404-408.

RELATED SCHOLARLY PUBLICATIONS ON JAMES

November 2016 -April 2017



In recognition of the fact that James scholars are publishing articles in other academic journals, the editors feel that it is important to keep our readers informed of the diversity within Jamesian scholarship by drawing attention to relevant publications outside of *WJS*. The Periodicals section of the journal aims to provide our readers with information about related scholarly articles that address the life, work, and influence of James's thought. If you have recently published a peer-reviewed article on James or have noticed an omission from this list, please contact our Periodicals Editor, Kyle Bromhall, at periodicals@williamjamesstudies.org and we will include it at the next opportunity.



Berninger, Anja. "Thinking sadly: In favor of an adverbial theory of emotions." Philosophical Psychology 29:6 (2016): 799-812.

Introspective as well as empirical evidence indicates that emotions shape our thinking in numerous ways. Yet, this modificatory aspect of emotions has received relatively little interest in the philosophy of emotion. I give a detailed account of this aspect. Drawing both on the work of William James and adverbialist conceptions of perception, I sketch a theory of emotions that takes these aspects into consideration and suggest that we should understand emotions as manners of thinking.

Dalaqua, Gustavo Hessman. "Democracy and Truth: A Contingent Defense of Epistemic Democracy." Critical Review 29:1 (2017): 49-71.

Contrary to what some critics of epistemic democracy claim, the association between democracy and truth does not necessarily make the former inhospitable to conflict, contestation, and pluralism. With the help of John Stuart Mill and William James, truth can be interpreted so as to make it compatible with a democratic politics that appreciates conflict and dissent. In some circumstances, truth claims are politically relevant and should become the object of democratic deliberation.

Dieleman, Susan. "Pragmatist Tools for Public Administration." Administration & Society 49:2 (2017): 275-95.

In this article, I aim to resuscitate discussions about the value of pragmatism for public administration by identifying some pragmatist tools that can transform the structures and processes of the administrative state. First, public administrators, having adopted a pragmatist fallibilism, will be able to make decisions and act in the absence of certainty. Second, the pragmatist emphasis on participatory inquiry makes possible a more democratic administrative state. Third, pragmatism helps define a new role for experts and

expertise that can be used to realize the goals of democratic administration.

Glaze, Simon. "Adam Smith and William James on the Psychological Basis of Progress." Cambridge Journal of Economics 41:2 (2017): 349-65.

This paper identifies extensive connections between Adam Smith's and William James's accounts of the psychological basis of intellectual, material and moral progress. These connections are brought into focus through discussion of their shared circumspection towards claims to objective truth, which highlights Smith's distance from mainstream interpretations of his contributions to economics. The paper additionally argues that insight into the sustained emphases that Smith and James place upon the role of psychological satisfaction as a motivating factor in societal and personal progress can aid current efforts to draw upon their work and to reconcile the disciplines that they are widely credited with founding.

Hilberg, Nathan. "Cognitive Dissonance and 'The Will to Believe.'" Fudan Journal of the Humanities and Social Sciences 10:1 (March 2017): 87-102.

That we shape our beliefs to align with our actions should be of interest within philosophy of religion and philosophy generally. Cognitive dissonance, a psychological state in which an individual's beliefs and actions do not conform with each other, presents just such a situation. The idea that cognitive dissonance, by strict evidentialist standards, compromises our epistemic integrity since cognitive dissonance causes us to hold beliefs for which we do not have evidence, recalls the exchange between William Clifford and William James in which they discuss evidentialism, the idea that we should hold no beliefs for which we do not have evidence. In this paper I draw upon extant published research concerning cognitive dissonance

theory and religion. I also survey the Clifford–James debate, applying considerations from their exchange to cognitive dissonance and (religious) belief. I conclude by showing how cognitive dissonance can have ambiguous results as concerns the justification of beliefs and that philosophy could benefit from attending to factors impacting empirical aspects of belief formation such as cognitive dissonance.

Jenkins, Simon PR. "Beyond 'Crude Pragmatism' in Sports Coaching: Insights from C.S. Peirce, William James and John Dewey." International Journal of Sports Science & Coaching 12:1 (April 2017): 8-19.

There is a lack of clarity in the sports coaching literature about philosophical pragmatism, but the work of Classical Pragmatists such as C.S. Peirce, William James and John Dewey is worthy of attention by both practitioners and researchers. This stimulus article is divided into four sections: Pragmatic Temperament, which includes a discussion of how English Premier League soccer manager Arsène Wenger might be regarded as pragmatic; Communities of Inquiry, which makes reference to a philosophy group at English Premiership rugby union club Saracens; Mixed Methods Research, which examines the use of abduction, deduction and induction in research; and Reflection, which shows how Schön's reflective practice is a reworking of Dewey's theory of inquiry.

Koopman, Colin. "Unruly Pluralism and Inclusive Tolerance: The Normative Contribution of Jamesian Pragmatism to Non-ideal Theory." Political Studies Review 14:1 (2016): 27-38.

Much attention is focussed on recent debates in contemporary political philosophy concerning the relative merits of ideal theory and non-ideal theory. In one of their many forms, these debates take shape as a realist challenge to idealistic or utopian approaches to normative political theory. This article shows that the philosophical tradition of

pragmatism both instructively anticipates and also, more importantly, can today contribute to contemporary realism. It is shown how a political pragmatism, particularly one centred in William James's work, helps frame two key contributions that would be resources for the realist challenge to ideal theory. First is an orientation towards unruly pluralism as a feasibility condition that should constrain political theorising. Second is a procedural norm of inclusive tolerance that can help enact the motion of a liberal political vision under the constraints of unruly pluralism.

Lahav, Hagar. "William James in the Holy Land: Religious Experience and Secular-Believer Jewish Women in Israel." Israel Studies 22:2 (Summer 2017): 55-77.

The article attempts to broaden our understanding of faith and belief (Hebrew: *emuna*) in non-religious spheres in Israel, defining Israeli Jewish secular-believers as self-identified secular (Hebrew: *hiloni*) people who believe in "whatever may be considered as the divine." It analyzes the *emuna* discourse of secular-believer women, as manifested in their religious/spiritual feelings, experiences, and interpretations. Employing the theoretical lens provided by William James and his contemporary successors, the analysis reveals the deep-seated role of the Western, Protestant-oriented understanding of religiosity/spirituality as an individual and therapeutic path in the *emuna* discourse of secular-believer women. Furthermore, it underscores the centrality of gender and Jewish symbolism in this discourse, thereby resisting the universalistic impulse characteristic of James and his followers and suggesting that social particularities originating in religion and gender (and perhaps also ethnicity, class, and the like) should be taken into account in analysis of non-religious discourses concerning *emuna*.

Lekan, Todd. "The Marriage of Ideals and Strenuous Actions: Exploring William James' Account of Significant Life." *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society* 52:4 (October 2016): 576-597.

In his essay "What Makes a Life Significant," James argues that significant lives are based on a marriage of two components: consciously chosen ideals and bold energetic activity. James's metaphor of "marriage" richly indicates the relationship between ideals and courageous activity. As is the case in so many of his writings, James's metaphors perform philosophical functions by situating abstract concepts like a "significant life" in experiential contexts that reveal core aspects of their meanings. I offer a fresh interpretation of the two elements of significant living, and then explain how they are integrally connected, or, "married." James's account is worth another look, in part, because of the unique way it probes the issue of a meaningful life without presuming a single conception of the good life. He helps us to see how to address important issues of character in a pluralist age.

Liu, Xiaofei. "A Moral Reason to be a Mere Theist: Improving the Practical Argument." *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 79:2 (April 2016): 113-32.

This paper is an attempt to improve the practical argument for beliefs in God. Some theists, most famously Kant and William James, called our attention to a particular set of beliefs, the Jamesian-type beliefs, which are justified by virtue of their practical significance, and these theists tried to justify theistic beliefs on the exact same ground. I argue, contra the Jamesian tradition, that theistic beliefs are different from the Jamesian-type beliefs and thus cannot be justified on the same ground. I also argue that the practical argument, as it stands, faces a problem of self-defeat. I then construct a new practical argument that avoids both problems. According to this new argument, theistic beliefs

are rational to accept because such beliefs best supply us with motivation strong enough to carry out demanding moral tasks.

McNary-Zak, Bernadette. "Narrating Christian Conversion: Framing Tales of Two Nineteenth Century American Women." *Magistra* 22:2 (2016): 54-69.

First published in the early years of the twentieth century, William James's observation remains a relevant site for intellectual engagement and scholarly debate. Native American colonization and Christian missionary activity inform directly this context; in addition, Roman Catholic efforts to convert African Americans in the northeast region of the United States are also relevant considerations.

Meloni, Maurizio. "Disentangling Life: Darwin, Selectionism, and the Postgenomic Return of the Environment." *Studies in History and Philosophy of Biological and Biomedical Sciences* 62 (April 2017): 10-19.

In this paper, I analyze the disruptive impact of Darwinian selectionism for the century-long tradition in which the environment had a direct causative role in shaping an organism's traits. In the case of humans, the surrounding environment often determined not only the physical, but also the mental and moral features of individuals and whole populations. With its apparatus of indirect effects, random variations, and a much less harmonious view of nature and adaptation, Darwinian selectionism severed the deep imbrication of organism and milieu posited by these traditional environmentalist models. This move had radical implications well beyond strictly biological debates. In my essay, I discuss the problematization of the moral idiom of environmentalism by William James and August Weismann who adopted a selectionist view of the development of mental faculties. These debates show the complex moral discourse associated with the environmentalist-selectionist

dilemma. They also well illustrate how the moral reverberations of selectionism went well beyond the stereotyped associations with biological fatalism or passivity of the organism. Rereading them today may be helpful as a genealogical guide to the complex ethical quandaries unfolding in the current postgenomic scenario in which a revival of new environmentalist themes is taking place.

Viney, Wayne and Madisson Mullen. "Tempering the Foolish Faiths: William James and Ecology." Ecopsychology 9:1 (March 2017): 26-32.

Though William James was not an ecologist, his intellectual contributions are rich in implications for an informed philosophy of ecology. James repeatedly called attention to the importance of relations, diversity, intimacy, and the idea that everything that is genuinely real exists in an environment of other things. One of the more challenging contemporary tasks is the development of an overarching philosophical orientation that encourages ecological attitudes and studies. James's psychology and philosophy are uniquely situated to help with this task. The present work investigates ecological implications of James's pragmatism, pluralism, meliorism, and his views on the self and the world.