Henry James in Context

Part of Literature in Context (/us/academic/subjects/literature/series/literature-context)

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DATE PUBLISHED: November 2010
AVAILABILITY: In stock
FORMAT: Hardback
ISBN: 9780521514613

Long misread as a novelist conspicuously lacking in historical consciousness, Henry James has often been viewed as detached from, and uninterested in, the social, political, and material realities of his time. As this volume demonstrates, however, James was acutely responsive not only to his era’s changing attitudes toward gender, sexuality, class, and ethnicity, but also to changing conditions of literary production and reception, the rise of consumerism and mass culture, and the emergence of new technologies and media, of new apprehensions of time and space. These essays portray the author and his works in the context of the modernity that determined, formed, interested, appalled, and/or provoked his always curious mind. With contributions from an international cast of distinguished scholars, Henry James in Context provides a map of leading edge work in contemporary James studies, an invaluable reference work for students and scholars, and a blueprint for possible future directions.

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Product details

DATE PUBLISHED: November 2010
FORMAT: Hardback
DIMENSIONS: 235 x 159 x 31 mm
WEIGHT: 0.97kg

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It could be argued that Henry James’s great subject was human psychology. That psychology, as a discipline and an aesthetic category, emerged almost contemporaneously with James’s literary career complicates such an argument. To address this convergence, we could place Henry James’s fiction in the explanatory context of nineteenth-century psychology and other discourses that conjured new forms of subjectivity. When James began writing fiction in the 1860s, thinkers interested in psychology were struggling to extricate the emerging discipline from centuries of metaphysical philosophical inquiry into the nature of the soul. The ‘laboratory revolution’ of the late nineteenth century redefined psychology as a physiological science based upon reaction-time experiments, cortical stimulation, dissection and vivisection rather than speculative inquiry. The ferment of positivism made it seem not only possible but also likely that laboratory science would ‘discover’ how the mind works and what human psychology, finally, is. Yet even those early psychologists most committed to physiological psychology, such as G. H. Lewes and Herbert Spencer, were unwilling to abandon older conceptions entirely. They paradoxically joined materialist/positivist explanations of human psychology as a product of classifiable and observable physical processes with idealist ones that attempted to preserve the elusive and unquantifiable qualities of the mind as creative force.

This paradox persists in recent discussions of consciousness in Henry James’s fiction. Despite the wide-ranging influence of post-structuralist theorizations of how human subjectivity and psychology are shaped and managed by external institutional discourses, James’s compelling evocation of the inwardness that we most associate with psychology makes it difficult to accept his fictional representations of consciousness as wholly determined by history or context. A number of literary critics have addressed this problem by emphasizing the extent to which James (surprisingly, given his long-standing reputation as the most ‘psychological’ of novelists) resisted and critiqued what has been termed ‘depth psychology’, or the idea that an individual’s real self,
his real psychology are hidden deep inside of him.\textsuperscript{2} Such accounts, however, of the difference between ‘psychology’ (static and located inside discrete individuals) and ‘consciousness’ (wandering, decoupled from notions of individual subjectivity) in his work perhaps overstate the extent to which James’s fiction pits these differing categories against one another, given that neither of these terms had settled or agreed-upon meanings for either nascent psychologists or fiction writers of the era.

William James, Henry’s elder brother and key figure in the history of psychology and philosophy, may be of help here. William was a shapeshifter. After spending fifteen years composing The Principles of Psychology (1890), which described consciousness from multiple perspectives and through a magisterial use of metaphor (Principles conceives consciousness multiply: as a stream, a spinning top, darkness, the flight and perch of a bird, namelessness, a set of linguistic conjunctions, and so on), William later questioned whether or not consciousness really exists. As Jill Kress has noted, his excessively metaphorical language ‘allows him to design the object he purports to be discovering; his later work radically challenges the existence of consciousness while still doing the linguistic work to produce it’\textsuperscript{3} Likewise, Henry James’s representations of psychology are multivalent, simultaneously discoveries and productions, and, in some instances, disavowals. In the preface to The Portrait of a Lady (1881), for example, he explains the key structural feature of the novel by describing the thought process by which he had arrived at it: “Place the centre of the subject in the young woman’s consciousness” I said to myself, “and you will get as interesting and as beautiful a difficulty as you could wish” (LC-2, 1079). We thus find James discovering in the consciousness of a young woman a new object for aesthetic inquiry. But he communicates this discovery to the reader via free indirect discourse, a formal innovation that allows writers and readers the illusion of having immediate access to a character’s psychological interior. His use of free indirect discourse to explain how he decided to make Isabel Archer’s ‘consciousness’ the ‘subject’ of the novel underscores how dependent such ‘consciousness’ is upon the aesthetic forms that give voice to it. Henry’s formal reiteration of how consciousness is designed and determined by the manner in which it is represented was precisely the point for both brothers; consciousness, they declared repeatedly, requires representation (in language, gesture, art) in order for us to grasp its existence.

Both Jameses exploited a productive tension between psychology as an ahistorical and largely fixed quality of discrete individuals and psychology as a wandering stream ebbing and flowing and subject to continual revision. Such tension is evident in James’s recollection in A Small Boy and Others of
his experience of seeing the painting *The Children of Edward* (1831) by Paul Delaroche in the Louvre: ‘I had never heard of psychology in art or anywhere else – scarcely anyone then had; but I truly felt the nameless force at play here’ (*A*, 194). James economically points out the historically – and aesthetically – determined nature of psychology (there was no such thing in the 1850s) while leaving the door open for interpretations that allow ‘the psychological’ an extrahistorical existence (both he and Delaroche had somehow intuited this socially non-existent dimension of individual experience). We see this again in a 1901 letter to Sarah Orne Jewett in which James chides her for writing a historical novel:

You may multiply little facts that can be got from pictures and documents, relics and prints, as much as you like – the real thing is almost impossible to do, and in its absence the whole effect is nought; I mean the invention, the representation of the old consciousness – the soul, the sense, the horizon, the vision of individuals in whose minds half the things that make ours, that make the modern world, were non-existent. (*LL*, 360; emphasis in original)

In this circular critique of the inability of the historical novel to capture ‘the real thing’ – here the ‘consciousness’ of its characters – James first opposes things and minds and then reconciles them. ‘The real thing’, he declares, is not the mere setting and plot of a work of fiction, but the consciousness of its characters. James approximates his brother’s additive approach in characterizing consciousness as both metaphysical (‘the soul’) and physiological (‘sense’ and ‘vision’). James ultimately returns to the question of the relationship between things and minds; the reason a historical novel cannot present a full consciousness is because consciousness itself is historically situated and determined, enlivened by its intercourse with the things common to that particular world. James believes that the historical novel will always fail because it cannot imagine, from its own perspective in the present, how individuals experienced subjectivity in that previous time. He begins by decoupling the ‘relics and prints’ represented in a novel from its characters’ consciousness, but ends up showing how much consciousness is shaped by the world of things it apprehends.

James’s response to Jewett reveals the extent to which he believed in consciousness as a ‘real thing’. This ‘real thing’ was no simple quantity in James’s fiction or thought, and any statement James makes about consciousness, its realness or imagined nature, its location in the body or in the world, must be weighed against contrary comments he makes elsewhere. Sharon Cameron has noted how James curiously ‘contested’ the type of unbounded consciousness he created in *The Portrait of a Lady* in the preface
he wrote to the novel years later, which attends selectively to the self-contained ‘autonomy of Isabel Archer’s consciousness’.4 This sort of back and forth, this indecisiveness about the governing characteristics of human psychology – was it a volitional force? a receiving vessel? was it located in the body? the mind? or in the external world? – was James’s own inventive interpretive model. His representations of psychology always both reflected shared ideas about consciousness in his time and transcended those available discourses. Isabel Archer’s midnight vigil certainly reflects and is made possible by the esteem in which ‘introspection’ was held in the middle of the century as the most reliable method through which to arrive at psychological revelation. But the vigil also puts into play ambitious and original ideas about consciousness that suggest ‘the psychological’ is a quality that may exist disconnected from the discrete bodies and brains of individuals.

The prevailing modes of psychological inquiry that circulated in the popular and professional cultures of the United States and England during James’s lifetime were (in loose chronological order): introspection, fads such as mesmerism and phrenology, physiological experiment and, finally, introspection (refigured as the ‘talking cure’) again.5 James often depicted historical phenomena such as mesmerism and physiological experiment as rich, symbolic, contemporary grounds of interest. In The Bostonians, Verena Tarrant is the only child of a mesmerist and Abolitionist; her own mesmeric/spiritualist performances (‘quackery’ [N-2, 888] Basil Ransom declares them) offer Henry James a sensational background against which to consider both ‘the woman-question’ (N-2, 885) and the increasingly frenzied mass culture of the late nineteenth century (the ‘roaring crowd’ ‘stamping and rapping’ [N-2, 1211, 1205]). In Washington Square, Dr Sloper’s clinical cruelty towards the daughter he treats more like a curious specimen than a family relation shows James critiquing the often reductionist positivism that underwrote the craze for physiological ‘proof’, even while that same character’s extremely perceptive ‘sensorium’ locates psychological perception in the body, as a sort of bodily sentience or embodied consciousness: ‘Mr Townsend has been a good deal in the house; there is something in the house that tells me so. We doctors, you know, end by acquiring fine perceptions, and it is impressed upon my sensorium that he has sat in these chairs, in a very easy attitude, and warmed himself at that fire’ (N-2, 138).

Ultimately, though, it was introspection, and the burgeoning discipline of psychology’s continuing interest in this subject, that occupied James throughout his career. The Romantic or Transcendental labour of introspection – the examined life – generally figured the endeavour positively, as a way to come to truthful revelations about the self. Introspection’s reliability, however, was
beginning to become suspect by the middle of the century. A representative example of such suspicion is Orestes Brownson’s review of the second self-declared psychology text published in the United States, S. S. Schmucker’s *Psychology, or Elements of a New System* (1842). Brownson articulates the confusion many were beginning to feel over how introspection could be a valuable *psychological* (as opposed to philosophical) tool:

what is called *internal* observation is not, strictly speaking, internal. If by *within* is meant within the *me* itself, we have no power with which to look within. The *me* is the observer, and, therefore, must needs be distinct from the object observed. It is all on the side of the *subject*, and do the best it can, it cannot turn it ever so swiftly, get on the side of the *object*. The object observed, be it then what it may, must be, strictly speaking, exterior to the *me*, and, therefore, veritably not-*me*.

The confusion of this passage arises from an increasing cultural awareness of the disparity between objective and subjective modes of scientific inquiry; this disparity becomes even more pronounced when the object of study is one’s own subjective psychological interior.

William James, notably, oriented himself against these earlier considerations of the role of introspection in psychological inquiry. In ‘On Some Omissions of Introspective Psychology’ (1884), the essay that begins working out the characteristics of what he for the first time termed ‘the wonderful stream of our consciousness’, James emphasizes the extent to which consciousness is made up of both transitive and substantive passages of thought and feeling, what he termed ‘an alternation of flights and perchings’. Such an emphasis on the mobile, elusive, gossamer nature of consciousness was a direct counter to earlier modes of introspective inquiry that often figured the mind engaged in introspection as a mind-turned-subject looking at itself as an object. It also countered the prevailing Associationist schools of thought that held that the mind builds individual associations into distinct ideas. William James’s emphasis on process, relation and movement fundamentally challenged such an atomistic approach.

William would ultimately champion introspection, but only insofar as it was *representational* work. Introspective analysis, he wrote, was like ‘trying to turn up the gas quickly enough to see how the darkness looks’. However futile the effort was, he none the less admits, ‘introspective observation is what we have to rely on first and foremost and always’. As with his brother, we need not reconcile these seemingly opposed positions. William did not believe that ‘looking into our own minds and reporting what we find there’ could ‘discover’ what the darkness inside looks like, but he did feel that introspection might reveal to its practitioners the extent to which *representations* of mental
processes both change and become a part of those processes’ fundamental nature.

This is an insight that Henry James also came to in the writing of his fiction, and it is a crucial one to keep in mind when interpreting some of the novelist’s most evocative depictions of introspective psychology – the ‘certain garden-like quality’ Isabel Archer finds in her own ‘nature’ (LC-2, 244); the ‘outlandish pagoda’ that rises before Maggie Verver’s mind; Lambert Strether’s belatedly achieved ‘real experience’. In these moments, characters represent to themselves the processes of their own consciousness via metaphor, symbol, analogy, and in doing so construct the possibilities of consciousness itself. The architectural, organic and relational figures that draw such stunning images of interiority for these novel’s readers, stimulated, as much as did William James and other influential nineteenth-century psychologists, readers to perceive the mind as deep, vast space, cultivated ground and/or connected field of relations.

But Henry’s insights into consciousness did not move in lockstep with William’s. Henry’s 1897 novel What Maisie Knew is a useful example. William had by this time developed a theory of consciousness that emphasized its alternating transitive and substantive workings, its function as a volitional, selecting agent and the necessity of introspection for communicating these qualities of individual consciousness to others. In What Maisie Knew Henry builds on and in important ways revises his brother’s careful theorizing. The novel’s subject – the ‘small expanding consciousness’ of ‘the infant mind’ (LC-2, 1157; 1160) – allows Henry an irreverent representation of human psychology; in the novel, James foregrounds the conflict between older, entrenched views about the mind as passively imprinted upon by experience and newer theorizations of the mind as volitional force. On one hand, Maisie is the familiar empty vessel of childhood; her mother and father ‘poured into her little gravely-gazing soul as into a boundless receptacle’ bad intentions and ‘evil’ thoughts that acted as ‘missive[s] that dropped into her memory with the dry rattle of a letter falling into a pillar-box’ (N-4, 405).

On the other hand, like his brother, Henry critiques the simplistic idea of the passive mind by emphasizing the importance of selective attention in constituting Maisie’s consciousness. In fact, the novel’s experimental focalization offers Maisie as the selecting agency of consciousness itself: ‘I settled – to the question of giving it all, the whole situation around her, but of giving it only through the occasions and connexions of her proximity and her attention’ (LC-2, 1160). But James’s decision to focalize the novel through a child’s point of view acts also as a refusal to have his main character engage in a traditional mode of introspection. This is not to say that Maisie lacks self-consciousness.
or, using William’s terms, that her consciousness is comprised only of substantive perches with none of the transitive flights between. Indeed, we are told that ‘from the first Maisie not only felt [the strain], but knew she felt it’ (N-4, 402) and that the ‘moral revolution . . . accomplished in the depths of her nature’ was her realization of ‘the strange office she filled’, a realization that led to ‘a new feeling, the feeling of danger; on which a new remedy rose to meet it, the idea of an inner self or, in other words, of concealment’ (N-4, 405–6).

The young girl is thus rather implausibly fully conversant with the transitive and substantive workings of her own consciousness; she repeatedly not only knows (or feels) but knows she knows (or feels). Such extremely sensitive perception, however, is implausible only if it must be arrived at solely via careful introspecting. William James wrote in *Principles* that, ‘If to have feelings or thoughts in their immediacy were enough, babies in the cradle would be psychologists, and infallible ones. But the psychologist must not only have his mental states in their absolute veritableness, he must report them and write about them, name them, classify and compare them and trace their relations to other things’. Henry’s characterization of Maisie, his insistence that ‘the muddled state too is one of the very sharpest of the realities’ (LC-2, 1164), flies directly in the face of such a statement. For William, the muddle of consciousness must be carefully indexed, its constituent parts named, classified and compared before ‘relations’ can be traced. William had theorized a new form of consciousness that flows and reacts and exists not in isolation from but in relation to the world; but that consciousness remained, for the man trained in comparative anatomy and physiology, in the individual mind. For Henry, ‘relations’ precede and call the muddle of the mind itself into being.

Having arrived at the muddle of consciousness (certainly as evocative a description as William’s ‘stream’), we might pause to note the extent to which such a description of human psychology is itself a product of time and context, of the ‘relics and prints’ of a particular place. In other words, we might be wary of repeating the ‘discovery’ narrative so often articulated in scientific and aesthetic accounts of human psychology. Though it is generally accepted that Henry James’s fictional explorations of consciousness became more ‘complex’ over the course of his career, it would perhaps be more accurate to say that they became more recognizable to readers now steeped in an understanding of consciousness those later works helped to develop. If his earlier works seem less interested in the ‘muddle’, it is not because James had not yet ‘discovered’ it, but that psychology took a different form in those works.
In *Roderick Hudson*, for example, James addresses a number of issues that shaped psychological inquiry prior to the turn of the century, namely, the relationship between the body and the mind and the circulation of mental energy. Though James asserts in his preface from 1907 that ‘[t]he centre of interest throughout “Roderick” is in Rowland Mallet’s consciousness’ (*LC-*2, 1050), the novel itself offers a number of fascinating psychological themes that have little to do with the focalized investigations into consciousness that would become the hallmark of James’s later work. Rather, *Roderick Hudson* engages what Jane Thrailkill calls an ‘experience-based, full-bodied emotive realism’ that insists upon the corporeality of psychology. The doomed sculptor Roderick Hudson is repeatedly described in terms of his ‘organism’ (*N*-1, 197), ‘nerves and senses’ (*N*-1, 498) and the various blockages (‘chronic obstruction’ [*N*-1, 234]) his mental energy encounters. But, though passionate in the manner of the stereotypical Romantic artist, Hudson is surprisingly often described in terms of the mind, rather than of the heart: he taps his forehead (rather than his chest) to indicate the location of his artistic inspiration (*N*-1, 197), he excitedly describes how ‘the material of thought that life pours into us ... all melt like water into water ... The curious thing is that the more the mind takes in, the more it has space for’ (*N*-1, 224), and his downfall begins and ends not with an excision of passion from his breast but with ‘the dead blank of [his] mind’ (*N*-1, 313), his ‘poor dead brain’ (*N*-1, 465). The novel’s relocation of artistic inspiration from the heart and soul to the mind mirrors developments in psychological experimentation of the era, while its fascinating insistence upon the interface between the body and the mind (its interest in both the embodied mind and the thinking body) reminds us that the decorporealized consciousness James honed in his later fiction was perhaps as much a relinquishing of possibility as it was a radical refusal of the terms of ‘Victorian’ or depth psychology.

Ultimately, psychology was most interesting to James when considered as ‘a new remedy’, rather than a divine or ahistorical given or a solely biological quality that could be discovered or proven. These remedies take different forms over time. Such an approach allowed James not only to consider consciousness for its own sake, but also to consider how discourses of psychological interiority inflect and are inflected by social and cultural issues. Maisie – who in the first paragraph of the novel is valued precisely at ‘twenty six hundred pounds’ (*N*-4, 397) – experiences a fractured, externalized consciousness in part because of what Bill Brown has called ‘a dialectic of person and thing’ in modernity. *Roderick Hudson* draws multiple striking parallels between persons and animals – between Christina...
Light and her dog Stentorello, between Sam Singleton and ‘some curious little insect with a remarkable mechanical instinct in its antennae’ (N-i, 483) – and so raises questions, likewise raised in defences of and attacks on evolutionary theory, about the role of psychology in differentiating human and animal. The representations of human psychology in Henry James’s fiction can finally only be understood – as he insisted to Sarah Orne Jewett they must be – as in dialogue with the social and material world that inspired them and that they, in turn, shaped.

NOTES

1. The word psychology has been in use in English since the seventeenth century. Its etymological definition of ‘science of the soul’ caused problems for thinkers of the Enlightenment through to the middle of the nineteenth century. Only once scientists abandoned the pursuit of the ontological implications of psychological inquiry, did the course of study gain ground as an academic and scientific discipline. Such an historical development has been described as the movement ‘from soul to mind’. See Edward S. Reed, From Soul to Mind: The Emergence of Psychology from Erasmus Darwin to William James (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1997).


4. Cameron, Thinking in James, pp. 55, 63.

5. Fascinatingly, the most epistemic-shifting category of nineteenth-century psychological inquiry – the ‘discovery’ of the unconscious – seems to have been somewhat uninspiring to James as a fictional subject. Cameron suggests that the ‘notion of the contingency of the conscious mind, its dynamic dependence on an unconscious to which the conscious mind is, through repression, structurally oblivious, seems assaultive to something like a Jamesian first principle: that there be nothing “outside” consciousness, at least nothing determining of consciousness, that has a constituting hold over it’ (p. 174 n. 9).


8. Ibid., 3.


10. Ibid.

12. This is a conflict that William James addressed in his first important professional publication, ‘Remarks on Spencer’s Definition of Mind as Correspondence’ (1878), which attempted to debunk Herbert Spencer’s theory that the mind is a passive receiver of experience.


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