

PART TWO— POETICS AND THE POLITICS OF "EXPERIENCE"

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6— **Symbolism, Pragmatism, and the Synthetic Self**

Through the associations that poets traced in the play of substitute sensations that language evoked, a complex and historically situated "self" emerged as a set of habituated responses that took shape in experience. Within philosophical circles in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, however, the question of what constituted "experience" was the subject of vexatious debate. Even arriving at a simple definition that might facilitate scientific discourse proved difficult. An international dictionary of philosophy and psychology published in 1902 with the goal of presenting the most up-to-date thinking on the workings of the mind gave two contrasting definitions for *experience*. The first, written by James Mark Baldwin (1861–1934) and George Stout (1860–1944), two philosophers with a strong interest in laboratory psychology, defined experience as "consciousness considered as a process taking place in time." It involved sensation but only as recorded in reflections upon previous events. Experience was a process of active categorization that typically took a verbal form. Experience was available to scientific study in representational processes that could be recorded. Their definition presumed that for all practical purposes, humans have no experience if they cannot put it into words.

The second definition came from William James (1842–1910), at the time the most respected living psychologist in the world but a man whose work rested more on increasingly outdated introspective methods rather than on observation and measurement of the behavior of experimental

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subjects. He defined experience as "the entire process of phenomena, of present data considered in their raw immediacy, *beforereflective* thought has analyzed them into subjective and objective aspects or ingredients" (my emphasis). For James, experience was the flow of thought and could not be separated from the body.

For those engaged in developing new methods of psychological measurement, that was too amorphous a definition, unsuitable for scientific observation. Baldwin and Stout took the unusual step of adding a rejoinder arguing that the difference between their position and James's reflected the distinction between psychological science and what they termed psychic or mental philosophy. Their definition took no position on the nature of the knowing subject. Experience could not be "raw unexperienced process" because such mental states were unavailable to the conscious mind and could not take a scientifically observable form. Experience defined as a process of representational reflection upon past sensory inputs allowed scientists to separate "objects of experience" from subjective internal reflection.^[1]

The choice between the Baldwin-Stout and the James formulations hinges on an underlying dispute over the boundaries of language. For Baldwin and Stout language was an autonomous system reflecting the innate categories that the mind used to structure sensations into perceptions. For James language was an incomplete, imperfect groping that never quite, no matter how brilliantly used, corresponded to the complexity and variety of sensations present in any given situation. In a subsequent essay, James clarified that experience was a representation, but one shaped by an active process of learning in preparation for action in the future, while a priori theories such as that proposed by Baldwin and Stout assumed that previous learning was of greater importance.^[2] The division frames a major theoretical crossroads at the beginning of the twentieth century. More was at stake in the definitional dispute than disciplinary distinctions or the ability of laboratory psychologists to measure behavioral outputs. James posed a raw experience that was immanent in the body, accessible to reflection for some period of time, and hence something from which one could learn. If "experience" were only a set of representations, as Baldwin and Stout maintained, the original sensations disappeared forever into the words and images available within a society. In nineteenth-century theories of language, words were historical accumulations that preserved and imparted the values, prejudices, and conventions of one's society. One would

never have the ability to think independently outside authority's strictures, for contradictions

could never be thought, much less expressed. While James's formulation was too optimistic about the ability of humans to take hold of raw sensation, his adversaries' position required that most sensory inputs simply have no effect.^[3]

Mallarmé's formulation of language, like James's, sought to loosen the grip that representational rules had on being, that is, on the "felt," or sensation, which if we follow Lockean psychology as most nineteenth-century intellectuals in both the French- and English-speaking worlds still did, was the source of new ideas. Mallarmé's position was more sophisticated than James's in that he more clearly took into account the fact that sensations could never be separated from the representational forms that made them accessible to consciousness. Yet by giving preference to the synthetic process in the formation of representations over the analytic, he highlighted the ways in which associational processes disrupted stable meaning and allowed an entry for a play of sensations (what James might have called "raw experience") against pre-given interpretations. Representations used for limited communicative purposes could ignore the fluctuation inherent to meaning. In all other situations, that flux drew people into what Mallarmé called the world of "dream and song." Even if consciousness produced itself through representations and hence always was an ideological mediator, the apparent uselessness of daydreaming and verbal artifice suggested chinks through which personal response could suspend, at least while emotion remained strong, the power of "official" modes of thought built into everyday language.^[4]

Mallarmé's conception of poetry as the hinge between language as a system of meaning and lived, embodied experience corresponds to the functions played by the more elusive concept of the "fringe," used by James to describe submerged aspects of relations that had not been integrated into a systematic representation of experience. One of the clearest presentations of the "fringe" can be found in the chapter "The Stream of Thought" in *The Principles of Psychology* (1890). As James argued his position that consciousness is an unsegmented flow of sensation and reflection, he criticized views of mind that overemphasized categorical operations by teasing out the analogical implications of fluids and containers:

The traditional psychology talks like one who should say a river consists of nothing but pailsful, spoonsful, quart-potsful, 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. 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. The significance, the value, of the image is all in this halo or penumbra that surrounds and escorts it,—or rather that is fused into one with it and has become bone of its bone and flesh of its flesh; leaving it, it is true, an image of the same thing it was before, but making it an image of that thing newly taken and freshly understood.^[5]

As a scientist, James strove for generalizations that rationally abstracted the most cogent features of phenomena—the containers that made water usable outside the stream. Nonetheless, he did not want to lose the concreteness of experience lying behind those abstractions, or as he put it on another occasion, those plunging toward the bowels of truth ought still to keep hold of its skin.^[6] His approach to both psychology and philosophy required defining a mode of reasoning that entered into dynamic, mutually critiquing relationships with sensation. He asked his readers to allow a theoretical problem to become an experience of life in order that they might then understand how experiences develop into theoretical models. In a striking parallel to Mallarmé's conception of poetry, James held that this synthetic foundation to reasoning was the process from which a self emerged.

Yet as James's imagery suggests, humans exist in time, and experience as such is irretrievable. Like water currents in a stream, no two mental states are ever identical, however similar they might be at first glance. All that is available to conscious reflection are different layers of representation, stylistically distinguished by the ratios of abstraction and embodiment found in any given image. James's concept of the "fringe" had within it two competing meanings that presage his later dispute with Baldwin and Stout. The fringe refers to ephemeral, concrete bodily experiences that precede conceptualization, and linger as emotional, physical memories. Bodily experience has a truth that is difficult to deny, especially if memory causes the heart to pound faster, tears to form, or a feeling of fear to crawl up the hairs of one's back. Still, the original sensations, however powerful their reverberations, are as much in the past as the situations of which they were a part. Every attempt to express them in the present involves a partial betrayal. Language forces the experience, the truth of which rests in

memories embedded in our nervous systems, to conform to logical patterns the truth of which rests upon a thinker's

ability to abstract from variegated but tangible events a few key features that might provide guidance for how to respond to future events.^[2] James stated that as we return to a past experience, it is "newly taken" and "freshly understood"—that is, it reappears as something distinct from itself. Some expressions are more successful than others in evoking physical memory. Those sensations have special force as a "revelation" of truth, in the sense that that which has been obscured by the passage of time comes into light as the focus of attention.

For Mallarmé what needed to be symbolized was experience that could be felt but could not (yet) be analyzed. Whether it ever attained a state of clarity where the interior content could then be made accessible for analysis was irrelevant for Mallarmé's purposes. For James, synthesis was a stepping-stone toward analysis, for what needed examination were the factors common to a number of otherwise disparate phenomena that allowed creative intelligence to link them together in a meaningful way. Analytic insight started with that flash of understanding that perceived the logic that had been at play unconsciously in poetic imagination. The problem was that the moment of inspiration might be blocked by an aesthetic preference for the rules that allowed coherent representations to form as part of a larger structure of thought that seemed to have a logical place for all ideas.

James pinpointed the danger involved in abstraction in a term critical to the development of modern philosophy: *Vorstellungen*—"representations"—Kant's term for the categories already present in our minds, a term that for empiricists represented the cleavage between experience and thought central to Kant's concept of the knowing subject. The mental operations that allowed people to examine and categorize their experiences stopped action if they became independent from experience, which then had to conform to the rules of logic if they were to escape being labeled illusions.

"Every *Vorstellung* can be represented in two ways," James noted, "by its constituents; by its signification.—and the signif[ication] is not exhausted by enumerating the constituents."^[8] The excess inherent to experience brought confusion, perhaps novelty and the beginnings of new approaches to meaning-formation. That form of excess was largely productive, although dangerous. The excess particular to significatory systems resulted from the formal ways in which language terms connected to each other, as well as from the demand for coherence that made meaning so much more important than the object itself that the interpretation

became the only reality most philosophers and scientists could accept. "Ideas disproportionate to any practical application" James labeled the problem of fetishized *Vorstellungen*.^[9]

The truth of the speakable rested in its continued connection with sensations that could not be reduced to words without falsification. Yet neither communication nor learning could proceed without a conventionalization that overwhelmed the "inward breath of life and health." If philosophers limited themselves to understanding the sufficient and necessary conditions of reason, they risked losing sight of the homely truth that "no one sees farther into a generalization than his own knowledge of details extends."^[10] Thinking about thought as an autonomous process—that is, theorizing only about the nature of the categories humans used and the logical limits they imposed upon cognition—would prove to be empty speculation losing hold of the relation of reason to sensation and will. Theoretical problems would become substitutes for the experience of life, rather than part and parcel of an ongoing process of self-reflection and decision making that led to actions that could not be revoked and consequences that could not be undone.

James's fanciful image of people busily standing in the midst of flowing streams filling pots and pans is an allegory of the categorical activities that allow minds to live in flows of images as well as in flows of events. Logos brings order through measurement and separation. Words allow action to unfold, just as James's images stipulated the boundaries for the field of practical subjectivity, in other words, the representational processes that allow people to fix ephemeral events and transform them into "experience," which we can now label the first step in an ongoing process of ever more abstracted reflection. James aimed to refocus the attention of philosophers from the tools used to the users of the tools and their purposes, without denying that linguistic tools were pre-given and essential to forming even the simplest kind of knowledge of events that we recollect as a continuous life. His image is part and parcel of those tools precisely because of the power of language to arouse a sensuous response that is itself a new experience but one that apparently recalls sensations from the past.

The classifications that language applies come to mind through comparisons that the body provides: "The same outer object may suggest either of many realities formerly associated with it—for in the vicissitudes of our outer experience we are constantly liable to meet the same thing in the midst of differing

companions."[\[11\]](#) Instead of being universal attributes of mind, the pre-given in James is historical, a product of past re-

lationships. Since it would be impossible for the entirety of any event or relationship to be translated into representational systems, some and probably the larger part of sensation remains as a nonverbalized physical memory, usually fading away, but while still embedded in the nervous pathways partially and often unexpectedly accessible—a nonverbalized remainder that could be productive.

In *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, James specified the fringe as the source of subliminal states. Poetry and literature, he noted, often opened what he called "irrational doorways" onto facts that philosophy could not acknowledge, and poetry was a stage in a continuous process of refining sensation into analytic tools. Because poetic knowledge was more primitive than scientific, its lessons were more powerful emotionally. Along with a tentative representation of some aspect of widely shared experience was an exhortation to pay attention. More primitive than poetry, and for that reason all the more powerful, was religion, which James characterized as the place where the unruest aspects of experience pounded on the door for recognition. Faith demonstrated how powerful the psychological effects of the fringe could be.[\[12\]](#) But the link of sensation to verbal cues need not be so extraordinary. The fringe might take a symptomatic form in unexplainable physical reactions: an itch that will not go away, a nervous desire to leave, tears or laughter. For James, naming something was not the same thing as being conscious of it; the latter preceded and was probably the necessary condition for developing a name.

Language itself developed continuously in constantly belated responses to stimuli racing ahead of the mind's ability to label. The fringe "spreads out in all directions from any definite thought"; it is composed of "sense of relations near and remote, the dying echo of whence it came to us, the dawning sense of whither it is to lead." This formulation describes a process in which the memories of former sensations attached to words subvert the stability and logic of language from within. A concept—or signifier, to use a term coming into use in linguistics about the same time as James and Mallarmé were writing—involves connotations, which are experienced as specific, individual, physical sensations through memories and anticipations. By refusing to go away, the sensations sparked by subliminal associations overcome established habits and create a situation in which new habits become possible. Attempting to "speak the fringe" allows a possibility for productive action that has not been taught. The soul, newborn, feels an "immense elation and freedom, as the outlines of the confining selfhood melt down" in the process of language losing its aura of inevitability.[\[13\]](#)

Through such associations, the fringe reveals relationalities felt in the body, experiences that have not yet been incorporated into either truths or histories. The role of dreams, reveries, and emotional states in mediating the relationship of the self to its world took on greater importance for James, but not to the degree that he was prepared to accept Freud's focus on unconscious drives. Intelligence made no sense to James outside its problem-solving and choice-making capacities, which suggested that irrationality contributed to adaptation and served some positive function that natural selection had preserved. Subliminal states set off an alarm indicating that attention needed to be paid to things still outside the ken of cognition, but nonetheless shaping the consequences of relationships.[\[14\]](#) The apparent contradiction of logical reflection including irrational elements marked the boundaries of the scientific project. Rather than trying to reconcile religion and science, James posed them against each other as two distinct, incomplete modes of relating to the world. Religious motivations revealed the ways in which the vagueness inherent to thought and knowledge was not simply a useless hull to be milled away by the powerful grinding stone of modern science.

There is an inescapable conflict between language and body, which we can also model as a conflict between layers of representation (or *Vorstellungen*). That conflict is the source of the divided self, for there is no one modality, or level, of representation that is adequate. Negotiation between different ways of knowing takes place in narration, which therefore is a mode of self-understanding of place in the world that must resist all systems of representation while incorporating and reconciling them. "Truth" points to the future rather than serving as an affirmation of veracity. Abstractions based on the latter can be useful, but they falsify the future and carry with them the increasing likelihood of blindness to new developments, which then appear in social life as a fate punishing the hubris of overweening knowledge. The function of reflection, however, is not primarily to reproduce the past with veracity. Its most important task is to prepare humans for future encounters by giving them bases for comparison.

The self, James observed, cannot be the mental operations, which are, physiologically speaking, series of "excitements." The self is used to designate "all the things" that have the power to produce the special interior
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excitements that lead to action. The mind can never know itself because the stream of thought cannot be stopped or reversed. No total picture of the mind's contents is possible. One possesses only fragments captured in representations that are responses to particular situations.

The self as a position created through narrative allows the mind to stand outside itself and pay attention to its representations. The self appears within the flow of images as a sense of "sameness," but it takes shape only in narrations that are never identical.^[16] Each self-reflection is unique, and the differences that emerge can indicate the historical variety and complexity of any existence. Theory abstracts common features and presents specific instances as pragmatically identical. As long as nothing new enters into the situation, the abstracted representation provides an adequate image but at the price of eliminating differences that may become important in circumstances that the theorist has chosen to designate as secondary. Like any other form of representation, theoretical validity is limited by what an abstract model allows a person to do that he or she could not do otherwise. Generally, stable uniformity of conceptions was useful because it eliminated the confusions that would arise if attention focused directly on the flux of perceptual experience. Concepts achieved their stability by translating sensations into relationalities that model the effects two entities have on each other. Concepts exist within the flow of thought as independent moments but still may be neurally attached to a more embodied reflection. The self is neither rational process nor the sum of physical experience. It plays out as a narrative position that transcends the moment of its feeling and subordinates the stream of thought to a unifying, identity-giving process that corresponds roughly to a question: "Where do I fit into this story?"^[17]

James's tendency was to balance sensation (or the aesthetic) against reason. Each has its place, but truth seems to require physical confirmation. Yet he was aware that aesthetic processes were themselves movements toward abstraction and thus subject to the same problems of conventionalization as theory. In a letter to his brother, the novelist Henry James, William observed that the arts "reveal a deeper part of the universal life than all the mechanical and logical abstractions do." Still, he admitted that the drive toward a logical system was itself a product of aesthetic imagination, for he thought that interaction with the world was so haphazard and inherently fragmented that the desire for completeness arose from aesthetic considerations. Further, nothing intelligent could be said about aesthetic reflection because it resisted scientific knowledge and pointed back to each person's reservoir of raw experience, which remained a productive, if ineffable, excess in both individual and social life, a source into which humans dipped continuously to rethink identity, desire, and the meaning of past actions.^[18]

His image of water flows suggests that no two events are the same,

but neither will two buckets ever be the same. Thought categories, flotsam and jetsam on the flux of lives responding to events, are themselves shaped in the encounters of the moment. Similarities, however, will be greater. The containers, being abstractions, have a higher degree of repeatability than the contents, so they can stand in for the whole process. Such a substitution protects one from the ever-present force of the irrational, that which *is*, while permitting the transference of experiences between individuals. Of course, that which is transferred is never identical, but the shared ways in which categories are used provide a basis for comparison more secure than intuition of others' subjective states. James's allegory of streams and containers brings to the fore questions of relation and value. Note the equivalence of significance and value he draws. We make images in order to "freshly understand"—to face the new by modeling, or retouching, past experiences into forms to which we *can* return. The power of the forever-in-the-past represented in the present lies only in the representation itself, but it is a power only if it induces the new, that is, potential representations that take shape in the future. An image adequately stands for its object if it fosters the appearance of new images, which may in turn create the conditions that will make the factors that assisted in their coming to presence irrelevant. The images we use either affect how we act or dissolve away. The representation of the past is a catalyst for the presentation of a future that tells a person how to act in the present.^[19] The spell that creates these relationships is the locus of subjectivity, which otherwise is as elusive and nonrepeating as the streams of neural charges that provided James with his image of thought as analogous to a flowing river.

By invoking the associations that had historically become associated with words and images, Mallarmé's concept of poetry could not provide a theorized, that is, analytic, position for relating to the world, but it could resurrect those aspects of experience that science and organized social power must deny for its purposes, both practical and ideological. Reason is simply "crystallized sensation," Remy de Gourmont noted. Categories were comfortable, but they misled. Poets refreshed the sensations underlying intelligence and allowed vision to overcome illusion.^[20] Art also altered the fringe surrounding words, ideas, and images by providing new associations that either consciously or unconsciously entered into one's consideration. Poetry captured this process

of association-construction, Francis Vielé-Griffin, a young American disciple of Mallarmé, argued in distinctly Jamesian language, when line measure actually reflected the rhythms of an experience through systematizing

"pulses of muscular energy." Since the ego was a fluctuating process unfolding in time, it could be known only through the synthetic images that a person produced in dreams or in art.^[21] Years later in 1931, as an old man reflecting on the goals of his youth, Vielé-Griffin looked to "music" for the best metaphor for understanding the poetic aspects of human existence:

If instead of abstracting, one invoked during expressive work some yet unknown presence of the complete being, of its sensory and motor life, the participation of this veritable *resonator* might communicate other powers into discourse, restoring to it its entirely primitive character. Rhythm, gesture, vocal inflection through vowel timbre and accent introduce in a partial way the living body, reacting and acting—and they add to the completed expression the thought that it must if it is to suggest what is on the other side—the response, the act, the moment of a human being.

Remy de Gourmont argued that great writers provided their readers with a score that allowed them to recapitulate the physical sensations that had led to their ideas. Style was the specialization of sensibility. If a poetic work did not generate a physical response, it communicated neither ideas nor feelings. Because style grew from a historical imprint of sensations, it was involuntary and impossible to imitate. One always recognized pastiche because the ideo-emotive responses it generated had something uncomfortably false about them. Style could never be learned because it grew from the particular and historically determined organization of absentes present in any person's life.^[22]

James's hypothesis of the fringe provided an explanation that was unavailable to Mallarmé but increasingly became known to his disciples as the writings of James and other psychologists appeared in French journals and newspapers: crossed-out meanings remain present in the nervous system as a series of felt connections.^[23] Absentes are mobilized whenever language appears and form a halo around every phrase. Unwilled but perhaps desired alternative meanings lurk beneath the surface of every statement, ready to break through the social training one receives to ignore the irrelevant that can be promising simply because it signals difference in its most abstract and pure form. Out of these differences Mallarmé found, as if looking into a shattered glass, the location of a better self. This was a theme he explored persistently, although perhaps most clearly in "Les Fenêtres" (The Windows), an early poem written in 1863 in London, where he had eloped in defiance of his family, who adamantly disapproved of his choice of both career and wife. A dying man in a hospital sees a reflected image of himself in a window and feels

Je me mire et me vois ange! et je meurs, et j'aime
—Que la vitre soit l'art, soit la mysticité—
À renaitre, portant mon rêve en diadème,
Au ciel antérieur où fleurit la Beauté!

[I look at myself and I see an angel! and I die, and I want / —whether the window pane be art or a mystical vision— / to be reborn, carrying my dream as a crown, / in the earlier heaven where Beauty flourished.]

Everything earthly, present, and practical stalks him even in the "shelter" of his dreams, the poem's narrator confesses in the next quatrain. Formal semantic rules attempt to suppress the body's recollections by focusing expression tightly onto theme and the author's argument. In nineteenth-century France, academic education fetishized the precision and clarity of proper language. Lycée students memorized the rules provided in Nicolas Boileau's rhymed and metrical treatise, *L'Art poétique* (Poetic Art, 1674), which specified that the aim of the poet is to express the single "truth" of a situation by finding the exact words that convey concisely the author's interpretation. They learned Rivarol's dictum from 1784 that "what is not clear is not French," as well as La Bruyère's lesson that "among all the different expressions which can render one of our ideas, there is only one which is the right one, the true one."^[24]

By articulating a theory and practice based on the liberation rather than the suppression of rhetorical effects, the symbolists rejected the logically derived canons that had governed European criticism for several centuries. "I dislike prisons of any sort," Gourmont noted, "and that's why I permit myself to dismantle locks wherever I find [25]

them." In this the symbolists echoed the romantic poets, who nearly a century before had likewise celebrated their ability to create something new and reveal by force of will a higher order of logic. Despite Mallarmé's demurrals, young symbolists posited that the means of communication could be known scientifically, through a methodical experimental process that brought absent terms to the surface. The poet, understood broadly as any creative figure, claimed a form of knowledge as rigorous as but superior to mathematics or the physical sciences. Whereas scientists worked to explain what is, poets strove to comprehend what could be, given that language was not limited by its connections to what existed. To varying degrees, poets could determine the underlying laws governing symbolic interaction and utilize them to increase the power of artistic statements. By syntactically incorporating polyvalence into their statements, they acknowledged that the associational process communicated more than theses but a histori-

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cal register of desires and frustrations. Each synthetic statement was an experiment that tested the general extent of emotional responses to aspects of modern social relations as expressed in a verbal proposition that was often only formally logical. Poetic truth involved a reaction of the heart, an assent or a dissent that was more powerful than the structural logic of a phrase.^[26]

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Truth As Self-Representation

William James's philosophical resistance to enfolding experience into logical categories grew from the most personal and intimate aspects of his life.^[1] In 1867, when he was twenty-five years old, James began suffering from chronic debilitating pain in his lower back. His ailments spread to his digestion, his skin, and his sight. Inexplicable bouts of pain struck him at periodic but unpredictable moments. The high-spirited young man, well known as an ironic joker with friends and family, fell into what he termed feelings of "lassitude," depressions marked by conviction of personal failure and lack of confidence in his capacity to accomplish even the most minimal tasks of daily life. He tried the experimental treatments offered by mid-nineteenth-century medicine: electrical therapy, irrigation of his colon, blistering the skin on his back, as well as various exercise and dietary regimens. He enjoyed periods of temporary improvement, but inevitably pain and despair hit once more with even harder force. What twentieth-century medicine would recognize as a placebo effect suggested to nineteenth-century Americans that the illness was "neurasthenic," a breakdown of the nervous system caused by lack of character and will to confront the challenges of the modern world. When James failed to improve, his state was evidence that something was wrong with him, not with the state of medical diagnosis or treatment.

Some historians have assumed that James's problems were psychosomatic in order to explore the psychological contradictions of middle-class life in the nineteenth-century United States. James's symptoms, however,

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could as easily have been the result of physiological conditions not then known to or diagnosable by medical science. Frequent back pain, indigestion, and skin and eye problems are consistent with several types of degenerative diseases that late twentieth-century medicine has learned to recognize and treat, even if it remains unable to prevent or cure the conditions. To derive from his suffering speculative hypotheses about James's neurotic conditions normalizes and stabilizes systems of thought that gave priority to interpretive schemes over experience, ultimately suppressing challenges to the institutional power that has accumulated under the rubric of science.

Without doubt James developed neurotic symptoms. The evidence in his diaries and letters confirms deep anguish and turmoil, but the question is one of cause and effect. Organic illnesses that could not be adequately explained, much less cured, would likely generate strong feelings of guilt and resistance on the part of the sufferer. James was a divided patient, living both with hope that the causes of his symptoms might suddenly become clear and with cynicism that such a revelation could ever occur. James's feelings about the embryonic state of medical science, experienced by him both theoretically as a student and practically as a patient with a

chronic illness, appear humorously in a book review from 1868 where he wrote: "The pretensions of [medical 'scientists'] are premature and not . . . false. The absurdity they may contain is not that of a frog trying to look like an ox, but rather that of the embryo alligator furiously snapping its harmless jaws, while yet enclosed by the egg-shell."^[2]

He pondered suicide as a response that might preserve his dignity and supply proof that he did retain strength of will. Although his pain could not be explained by the representational systems available to doctors, the reality of pain and depression as personal nemeses pursuing him was inescapable. The truth of his body's sensations refused the facile assumptions of his day that he was his own victim. "I don't know whether you still consider my ailments to be imagination and humbug or not," he angrily wrote his brother Henry a few years later, "but I know myself that they are as real as any one's ailments ever were."^[3]

As the winter of 1867 progressed, James's physical and mental health deteriorated to the point that he broke off his medical studies. His parents sent him to Germany to see if doctors there might have answers to his problems. The eighteen months he spent abroad were often lonely. At first unable to communicate with any degree of facility, he spent his time reading, attending the theater, and going to art galleries. He moved around constantly, failing to find a niche that would allow him to focus

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his interests or, perhaps more accurately, that could overwhelm bodily sensations that increasingly reinforced a sentence of doom.

"Still the same Apathy and restlessness which for a month or more have weighed on me," James wrote in his diary not long after settling into a boardinghouse at Dresden. At the beginning of 1868, when he had been away from home nearly a year, the sense of uselessness and despair returned with a vengeance. Among the books he chose for a renewed effort at self-education was the *Odyssey*. He found Homer's reflections on the impotence of humans before evil to be quite comical and refreshing. He noted that

a given evil to the Homeric Greeks (like the mutilation of strangers by King Echetos . . .) seems to me to have been thought of as evil only transiently and to those whose lot it was to suffer by it; and they accepted it as part of their inevitable bad luck. Outsiders were not moved to a disinterested hatred of it *in se* [in and of itself] and denial of its right to darken the world. To the Greek existence was its own justification. Anything that *could* assert itself was as good as anything else.^[4]

He found Odysseus's advice to Penelope's suitors that they not pride themselves on their current prosperity particularly moving:

See, no beings of all who live and thrive on earth
are as vain and inconstant as humanity.
So long as the gods send health and blooming youth,
men are defiantly confident that no misfortune will ever strike.
But let the holy gods cultivate troubles,
then men carry their sorrows with impatience and despair.
As the days change that God in heaven sends us,
so change also the hearts of earth-dwelling men.
See, I myself was once lucky and sank
into many bad habits out of obstinacy and wantonness,
because my father protected me and my mighty brothers.
Therefore a man should never let his pride lead him into sin,
but instead take whatever the gods give him with humility!^[5]

These lines, remarked on by James in his diary and in a letter to his brother Henry, point toward the theory of emotions that James developed in the 1880s, one of his more important theoretical contributions to the development of modern psychological science. James argued, counterintuitively, that feelings followed from bodily actions. We cry and feel sad as our eyes fill with tears, themselves a physical response to specific kinds of stimuli. Like all other forms of mental action, emotions were complexes that synthesized bodily responses to environmental stimuli

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with a conceptual judgment about the nature of that stimulus that was accessible first and foremost in the body.^[6] A personal corollary might be that he was depressed because he was unable to act with vigor. His lack of

vigor was the mystery, the *evil* that had fallen on him inexplicably. James's theory of emotions enacted a rebellion against the prevailing belief that moral strength determined human fate.

James's theory of emotions points to an irony in Odysseus's advice: there is nothing noble in an automatic response. The unreflecting hearts of humans shift as the strands of time bring the new. They themselves simply respond to fate, which brings either joy or evil. Odysseus suggests to the suitors, who do not yet know that he himself will be the agent of their destruction, that their revels are evidence of profound ignorance. Even if evil is inescapable because it is the product of forces ineluctable to human understanding, humans still have the power to reflect upon the changing nature of the world and select responses that prepare them more effectively to meet change. Piety was good, but it left humans passive. For them to act to the degree that they could, they needed cunning as well, and James marked with approval sections where Odysseus, Penelope, and Telemachos beguiled the suitors with friendly words while keeping their own motives hidden.

This is a harsh vision that James took from Homer: the nature of the world is to bring evil; intelligence rests on duplicity; existence requires no justification beyond the solidity of its effects. This would appear as survival of the fittest with a vengeance. James was a student when the scientific community in Massachusetts debated the validity of Darwin's *Origin of the Species*.^[7] James had come to embrace the theory of natural selection, and while he read Homer, he wrote two reviews of Darwin's most recently published book, *The Variation of Animals and Plants under Domestication*.^[8] Two aspects of these reviews stand out in their relation to James's Homeric musings: first, James stressed the descriptive character of Darwin's work over its success as a statement of natural law. The strength of the book lay in its detailed account of behavior and phenomena. Conclusions could not be extrapolated from the premises on the basis of speculation, but the hypotheses Darwin advanced proved useful in describing regularities in the transmission of inherited characters, as well as exceptions. This removed the matter from the "jurisdiction of critics who are not zoologists, but mere reasoners . . . and leaves it to the learned tact of experts, which alone is able to weigh delicate facts against each other, and to decide how many possibilities make a probability, and how many small probabilities make an almost cer-

tainty."^[9] Darwin's rational weaknesses proved useful, for they focused attention away from the general theory onto concrete details. There were as yet few "laws" that naturalists could say governed biological development, but the working hypotheses Darwin proposed promoted further investigation.

This leads to a second striking feature in James's youthful critique of Darwin: James believed that the only law implied by "the greater mass of facts" Darwin compiled "seems to be that of Caprice,—caprice in inheriting, caprice in transmitting, caprice everywhere, in turn." Science proceeded by sending "laws" and "lawgivers" into limbo, but that did not negate the value of their work, "for a bad hypothesis is far better to work with than none at all." Darwin's work, for example, had stimulated a great deal of investigation pro and contra, leading to the publication of a "vast mass of bad anatomy, worse psychology, and statistics worse of all, made into an harmonious whole by an absurd broth of dogmatism on both sides." The consequence of all this miserable activity was that science was furthered. Work in new areas had proliferated and facts set down, "dug up or rescued from destruction which otherwise we might have waited for indefinitely."^[10] The very existence of rationalizing schemes provided their justification, for as assertions the activity they generated stimulated an active process of making sense of experience and giving priority to different factors. Like Homer's heroes, scientists struggled blind to the ultimate consequences of their actions. They deserved honor because they acted, not because they triumphed. Only a handful would leave work of direct value, and those usually because they learned how to see familiar things in a new way, not because they had a startling new insight or a rationally impeccable system for organizing the universe. "Scientific discovery," James noted in 1873, "is often nothing but the recognition of a fact that long stood knocking at the door of our senses, but was ignored."^[11] Darwinian science appealed to him because it renewed ancient wisdoms by revealing a possible set of mechanisms by which a universe only partially amenable to human purposes created the conditions within which individual lives and the histories of whole species unfolded without mercy or pity. Even to know a force did not mean it could be controlled. Science provided a necessary but not sufficient condition for attempting to ameliorate the evils plaguing human life. Those evils had a hardness and inexorability that mocked the well-known aphorism that knowledge is power. Science did, however, provide an antidote to the self-hatred that James saw coursing through himself and, by extension, through his society.

James's ideas on Darwin and science developed in a lengthy process of confronting his illness. Why endure it, why not choose suicide as the most perfect expression of the separation of the will from all forms of control? What does "truth" mean? What might it mean when one lives in a world of pain, inexplicable yet real, with the consequent confusion and depression, a sense of having been gripped by evil—and the inescapable question, "Why

not you?" There is no Job-like lesson. Faith is irrelevant. You fit into a world that does not need pity or mercy. Finitude is part of the warp and woof of your being. You are by nature inadequate, though usually just good enough. All that matters is to act. If there is pain, you can assume a responsibility to balance it with joy; if there is no pain, you can live as if there might be. You will discover conditions that can be ameliorated only by the choice of pity, mercy, and compassion. If you can solve the material basis of problems, so much the better. If not, the consolation remains that internal life has not been utterly annihilated.

"In the majority of men," James wrote from Germany in a letter to Thomas Wren Ward, an old school friend, "the process of growing into a clam mental state is not one of leveling, but of going around, difficulties. The problem they solve is not one of being, but of method."^[12] This tentative endorsement of habit retrieves a place for skepticism. To "go round" difficulties by settling in on questions of method works, but at the price of *not* solving questions of being. Faith and convention then fill the void. Habit works, "in the majority of men," because they do not, or they cease to, ask philosophical questions about their relation to the cosmos. That is fine and good, but it leaves the possibility that the activity in question, so valuable for getting something done, may still be inadequate.

"Whether any other kind of solution is possible, I don't know," James admitted. "Many men will say not; but I feel somehow, now, as if I had no right to an opinion on any subject, no right to open my mouth before others until I know some *one* thing as thoroughly as it can be known, no matter how insignificant it may be. After that I shall perhaps be able to think on general subjects."^[13] By focusing on mastering psychology as an empirical science, he hoped to achieve a position where he had earned the right to reopen questions of being, left temporarily suspended while he tackled questions of method. Positivism and its skeptical attitude toward prime causes provided a release from the tangles of speculative, rationalist philosophy seeking to resolve empirical contradictions through the application of logic. At the same time, it allowed him to know enough

details in one area so that he would recognize, in both body and soul, whether a philosophical hypothesis rang true. He could adopt the role of hardworking skeptic, taking ideas as games to be played so long as he showed that *some* were useful. One assumes work and belief for the moment as habits—a word that has as part of its meaning, at least for the multilingual James, the sense of "costumes"—that allow one to perform with a tentative, contingent understanding. Belief allows a person to stop the play of ideas and act with consistency and expectation. Values, then, are the results of action, some of which are self-generated, most of which come from external circumstances. Conditioning transforms repeated actions into ideals that we seem to be following, but in fact they are abstractions of internal automatisms. In this lie the roots of behaviorism, but for James the key lesson was not how to control people or modify their behavior but how to posit a way of talking about belief that did not rest on absolute mystical value and their fetishized representations.

In habit consciousness sinks into the body, but not to root there permanently as the master. What distinguished James from the dozens of character manuals published during his lifetime that emphasized the importance of developing good habits was his sense that work creates new realities, new experiences that must change ways of thinking and ways of responding. He did not want to confirm tried-and-true maxims. Nor did he think that habit reproduces the past faithfully. Hankerings over "what we are *not* doing" are part of the hard facts of human existence. They disturb, but they will not damage so long as we develop those habits that allow work to continue whether we feel like it or not.

"Bate not a jot of heart nor hope, but steer right onward," he advised his friend, despondent over the drabness of the business career he had undertaken on completing his Harvard education. Mark the phrase "nor hope," for not even pleasure has a special place. James told his friend that his own despondencies were assuaged by two facts: first, that he had a will; second, that as a human he "possessed a capacity for pleasure and pain of different kinds." Because humans suffer, they have the capacity to enjoy. He can choose then to "make the enjoyment of our brothers" the aim of his actions, and on that basis lead an active life that will involve both days of despair and days of elation, as well as days of just getting things done.

The form that making a contribution to the welfare of others takes is unimportant. To "contribute your mite in *any* way to the mass of the work which each generation subtracts from the tasks of the next" is to

enter into relations with others that have consequences. "Some individuals must needs be acting now in a somewhat different manner. You have modified their life; you are in *real* relation with them; you have in so far forth entered into their being." Humans are part of an evolutionary process, but an evolution that has become clearly cultural and social rather than biological:

Our predecessors, even apart from the physical link of generation, have made us what we are. Every thought you now have and every act and intention owes its complexion to the acts of your dead and living brothers. *Everything* we know and are is through men. We have no revelation but through man. Every sentiment that warms your gizzard, every brave act that ever made your pulse bound and your nostril open to a confident breath was a man's act. . . . man is *the best we know* your ideal is made up of traits suggested by past men's words and actions.

Since attitudes bounce up and down in the patter of accident and semichaos through which humans move, work pursued regularly produces results that cannot be predicted exactly. "Results should not be too voluntarily aimed at or too busily thought of. They are *sure* to float up of their own accord, from a long enough daily work at a given matter; and I think the work as a mere occupation ought to be the primary interest in us."^[14] Work has to be recognized by others to become part of the fate we collectively weave.

A few weeks later, James sailed home and renewed his studies in medicine. His sufferings did not abate, but he continued working. After completing his medical studies, he found employment as an instructor in physiology at Harvard. He published and moved up the academic ladder as a professor of psychology and philosophy. Until his death in 1910, James developed working hypotheses about consciousness that would require it to bridge determinism and agency. Drawing logical inferences upon the proposition that freedom was action that had significant consequences, James argued that "free-will means what is intelligible only after the fact."^[15] Truth was not a state of being to be discovered but a state of "becoming" in which a "self" appeared in time through acts of narration. The personal self emerged through discriminating between the symbolic "not-self" of representational systems and the irretrievable but ever-present buzz of the stream of thought. Subjectivity arose in the acts, repetitive but never identical, of making choice and subsequent action intelligible. In 1870, in the midst of another depression, James declared to himself that his first act of free will was to believe in free will. He con-

tinued by linking belief to the securing of habit and the work that would follow: "Recollect that only when habits of order are formed can we advance to really interesting fields of action. . . . Not in maxims, not in *Anschauungen* [intuitions], but in accumulated *actsof thought* lies salvation. . . . I will posit life (the real, the good) in the self-governing *resistance* of the ego to the world."^[16] This field of thought, with its topography of caprice, evil, and cunning as the conditions governing the relation of organisms and their environments, of facts defined as events requiring response, provided the platform for his work in *Principles of Psychology*. In this classic text, James surveyed a century's discussion on the nature of mental acts and redefined the terms used in the "science of the soul." Not being experimentally or statistically based, his approach struck many critics as anecdotal, narrative, and performative. He had given the world a strange kind of science, one grounding itself in history and not in the construction of predictive hypotheses. James's colleagues were not always sure that his psychology was science, but still they recognized that his statement of the discipline synthesized the state of knowledge in the field more masterfully than any of its competitors. Following his own interpretation of Darwin's success, James sacrificed logical consistency to the insights gained from sticking to details that resist easy abstraction.

By grounding choice in stimulus-response behaviors, James found a source that fit the prejudices of the day and rescued psychology from a pure rationalism that treated the soul as a suprasensible intelligence, detached from its body and sufficient unto itself with its categories and operations.^[17] Still, evolutionary-based science had a more far-reaching program, as James knew. "The craving for Monism at any cost is the parent of the entire evolution movement of our day," James had written in 1879. Evolutionary thought had found its most effective source of proof in Darwin's theories, for they explained the variety and connection of all organic creation. The source of the appeal that evolutionary theory held lay not in empirical findings but in its reworking of idealism: "The Philosophy of Evolution tries to show how the world at any given time may be conceived as absolutely identical, except in appearance, with itself at all past times."^[18]

James himself was caught in the contradictions of this genealogy. Metaphysical realism and epistemological nominalism tended to stress material conditions and a mechanical response. Idealism was grounded in philosophy and posited mind as the source of all reality. James's pragmatic synthesis allowed mind to come into being as a mechanical response to

material environment, one that was necessary for survival. But once created, the mind increasingly responded to stimuli by forming purposes that re-created the environment by imposing its vision on the conditions of existence. Evolutionary theory rooted mind firmly in the world of flesh and blood, but idealist philosophy provided tools more

adequate for discussing intentionality and selectivity as active forces.

As a subjective entity interacted with its world, it developed conceptions both of the objects within its purview and of appropriate actions toward them. Both these conceptions were "teleological instruments." Intelligence selected from the mass of information it could take in from the world those partial aspects that were essential *for its purposes*. It might be aware of other aspects, but that information tended to sink back into the fringe of the conception. Potentially that knowledge could be activated when needed at some future point. Practically the fringe represented a disturbance to effective goal-directed action. It had to be repressed or relegated to a zone of disrespectability and, ultimately, of terror. Additional qualities and properties that did not fit the aspect of experience as defined by intentions and goals had to remain unimportant accidents to be ignored.^[19] The self grew around this contradiction between its conceptions crafted toward specific goals and surplus experiences that had to be repressed. Subjectivity could not develop except as a teleological instrument, but that genesis introduced anxiety as inherent to subjective life—hence James had rediscovered the contradictions of will within epistemologies that focused on the relation of sensation and reason and placed this inherent conflict at the center of his own conception of the self. The processes that allowed certain organisms to master their environment with their own intentions also prompted interior chaos and froze the ability of the organism to act at all. The ability to imagine alternative realities that could become goals was the starting point for the repression of embodied experience and the fetishization of representations into systems.

What James contemptuously dismissed with the label "monist" theory controlled anxiety by externalizing intentions and postulating them as the warp and woof of the exterior world. Terror might still exist, but the selection of which areas in the fringe were to be stigmatized would mark the key political and subjective conflicts of a community. Terror should not be taken purely quantitatively. If the effect of terror was to freeze action and perhaps to undermine the vision of the external world that a specific social order had developed, its tensions had to be controlled. Areas of terror might be deflected into adjacent subjects, which

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then fit the telos more appropriately, so that terror might freeze individual action and lead to waste of human life but would nonetheless uphold and even reinforce collective discourses. Badness could come in two forms, safe and unsafe. Societies that did not want to see themselves as merely historical would tend to focus attention on the safe variety, while repressing more severely those areas that challenged the telos from which the historical formation sprang.^[20] Safe badness confirmed the power of transgression but reinforced existing principles of differentiation as the standards that must be disobeyed. The productivity of a telos should not blind us to the ways in which efforts and stratagems for enforcing its power over the imagination and experience of the world are precisely aimed at emphasizing individual weakness and the collapse of private will. As James observed, the "sentiment of rationality" involved a "feeling of sufficiency," of absoluteness, of an absence of all need to explain what rationality was, or to account for it, much less to justify its particular form. Rationality was that which allowed action to flow without reflection. It cannot be called "false consciousness," for rationality in this sense becomes the very essence of *consciousness*, the knowing-with that allows people to act within a meaningful conception of the world^[21].

When James argued that "proximate" and "ultimate" explanations were "essentially the same thing," he noted that the "ultimate" was the projection into a telos of the instrumental reasoning performed to achieve immediate goals. The inherent weakness and the source of pain for the individual working within a self-replicating intellectual structure was that knowledge is provisional. Systems constructed on that knowledge can work for securing limited goals, but they cannot provide a total set of categories that explains everything. James's distrust of social collectivities outside the family—his repudiation of the professionalization of his own disciplines, his concern about the separation of intellectuals from public life inherent in the consolidation of the modern university—was neither anarchist nor individualist. He was aware that modern institutions could not provide very much of what one needed to face a complex world, yet they had to act as if they did if they were ever to provide more. Mystery remained an essential attribute of the relation of humans to the world, but one against which social structures had to struggle and even deny in order to perpetuate themselves. To acknowledge mystery as ineluctable would not eliminate the search for knowledge but would undermine the institutions that had established themselves upon partial answers that had worked by effecting change in some way.^[22] For the in-

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stitution and those whose identities had taken shape within it, the fact of change was in and of itself sufficient justification of their existence. For the majority who stood outside the dominant institutions taking shape at the end of the nineteenth century, change might be welcome at times, but whether the consequences of new powers worked for good or ill were more important concerns.

8—

Poetry and the Translation of History into Truth

The comical image of pots, pans, and pails that James deployed to illuminate the relationship of categorization to the stream of thought proves to mask dark and perturbing undercurrents. James pointed to an inner experience beyond the scope of reason. A chaos sits at the core of the soul, "one great booming, buzzing confusion," he called it elsewhere in *The Principles of Psychology*.^[1] All reflection and abstraction spring from a physiological interiority that the conscious aspect of mind can never fully know. Physical experience stimulated a process that James, twenty-one years earlier as a Harvard medical student, had described as a "strange impulse to exorcise" sensation by "extracting the soul of it and throwing it off *in words*." The effort to translate experience into ever more highly abstracted categories inevitably failed to generate that physical response that a more general truth had emerged that still "fit" the body's recollections, "but each attempt to storm its inaccessible heights produces, with the pang of failure, a keener sense of the reality of the ineffable subject, and a more welcome submission to its yoke."^[2]

In this letter James specifically addressed the power of the arts to initiate processes of reflection that preserved without necessarily reconciling the connection between reason and sensation. He described what Mallarmé at more or less the same time suggested in his claim that poetic language brought into consciousness that particular and peculiar sensation that he called *l'absente*. The absent term could substitute for the forever unattainable original experience and make something lost in the past

usable in the present. The original sensation, being gone, was less important than the echo that lingered. Mallarmé presented the art of poetic language as a synthesizing approach to knowledge that locked objects to an emotional register. If a poem were successful as a symbolic representation, it allowed a previously lived experience to be refelt not directly as in a hallucination but paradoxically through a new, self-reflective lived experience that refused easy categorization. Synthetic knowledge reproduced experience, including its vanishing in time to a mere echo that yet can often be recaptured. Previous experience could be reshuffled into a judgment about the future and take the form of a premonition or anticipation that allowed one's responses to past events to congeal as a feeling one carried into the future. William James observed that in general emotions were more important to everyday life than an accurate rendering of empirical reality: "As a rule our sensations are merely contributory to our *opinions* about *things*. The *things* are the matter of knowledge, the sensations are overlooked. So true is this that everyone who learns to draw has painfully to discover what his sensations actually are. He never has been accustomed to noticing or caring what they are, so much more has he been concerned with the thing they reveal."^[3]

With a poem, interior experience has been transformed through labor into a representation the use of which is to stimulate sensory recall rather than simply to make an interpretive statement. By downplaying the importance of the interpretive message, Mallarmé cut through a debate of philosophers and psychologists about the definition of experience and put forward a practice that ostensibly allowed language to speak for life rather than for system. James's argument about experience became increasingly less important to psychology because his emphasis on a shifting subjective state was not suitable for the development of protocols that could compare the responses of thousands of individuals to identical stimuli. By default, the fine arts served as the place within modern society that recorded and reproduced the relationalities inherent to subjective response.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau, in his *Profession de foi* (1756), suggested that divine spirit and human mind were metaphors for each other. By investigating the foibles of human thought, one might glimpse the workings of God's plan. If, as Mallarmé did, one came to the conclusion that God was an idea with no material basis, then the human mind was clearly a puzzle, for it would be a metaphor for *le néant* (nothingness), the mindless urge to reproduce and grow that nineteenth-century mechanists posited as the motion of the universe. The human mind, however, re-

mained a clue to secrets of the cosmos that the term *God* had covered but never described. Science provided descriptions of processes and propositions for mechanisms, but scientists' work could not determine purposes or causes. Often, as in Darwin's principle of natural selection, the description offered was necessarily hostile to purpose. Poetry could reveal will on a cosmic level but only as *poetry*, that is, as a form of making that permitted authors to discover their intentions through what they wrought above and beyond their immediate plan. Poetry was a world of *lies*, Mallarmé had written in 1866 to one of his school friends: "Yes, *I know it*, we are only vain aspects of matter, but still sublime for having invented God and our soul. So sublime, my friend, that I give myself over to the spectacle of matter, which is all that exists, yet it launches itself into the Dream that nonetheless knows it has no existence. . . . In the face of Void [*le Rien*] which is truth, these glorious lies!" Two years earlier, Mallarmé had written his friend that "verse ought not to be composed from words, but from intentions, and all words disappear into sensations."^[4]

Poetry lies not in the message but in a method of using words that permits alternative perspectives to emerge to the sensations. An alternative world is not by definition better or worse. Its value would lie purely in its difference and the kind of perceptual and cognitive exercises it permits. Aesthetic stimulation will vary in its intensity and nature. The key thing is that imagination be freed to explore that which is not immediately at hand and which slips around the easy answers societies provide their members. What the arts can reveal is a desire that *could* be but has not had the chance to emerge because the conditions of everyday life conspire against it. The self that poetry liberates is not one that already exists but a potential waiting to test itself in a text that can be known only after the exact self that created it has ceased to exist. The work, be it poem or painting, invokes a real world if (and only if) the subjective interest of a person is engaged. But this is a virtual reality that cannot be placed anywhere outside the work's representational strategies. In poetry, the imagination is freed from a desire for empirical precision if for no other reason than the absence of immediate respondents who can question and insist on clarification. The poetic speaker has stopped worrying about making meanings clear and explores associations for the sake of the sheer pleasure they give. In searching for the connections where mere words sparked a visceral reaction, Mallarmé believed that the self would appear in its independent and presumably most characteristic form. The self designated a set of preferred interpretations and links; it was that which a physical sensation of thrill—a *frisson*, or shudder, to

use a frequent term in the French documents—brought to the surface for recognition.^[5]

The symbolist movement of the 1880s announced an incipient theorization of subjectivity, one defined as potential relations to the world discovered in a person's intuitive leaps between concepts. Whether poets could provide either a valid or an adequate modeling of the historical actor is doubtful, since the activities that mattered to them as thinkers were only a small slice of human capacity. Yet they believed that poetry expressed the most uniquely human attributes. In outlining their conception of the self that emerged through poetic acts, we face a claim to represent and speak for humanity. The ability of poetic practice to play an autonomous political role in modern societies rested on this claim. As a result, the symbolist moment proves central to the construction of a public world scaled to private dreams.

Karl Marx argued that "public" in civil society means the primacy of particular interests.^[6] If we elaborate Marx's argument to take into account the putative role of the arts as a universal currency capable of moving between all forms of experience so that nothing may be absolutely foreign, then the story flowing from the emergence of symbolism becomes one of how a private interest, the arts as aesthetic imagination, staked out a claim as the generalized expression of humanity, or even more radically of human being. The material conditions of poetic practice, and this means much more than economics, privileged a claim that remains alive today at the end of the twentieth century. While the sciences and philosophy might not credit the claims of poets, aesthetic perspectives nonetheless flooded into public culture and in some critical cases—the case of Freud's theories proved particularly pertinent—provided one of the frameworks by which new ideas about the nature of human being and its relationships were disseminated to a broader public.

For symbolists, following the paths that Rousseau had laid out a century before, there were two types of language, a presupposition that required two types of self: purposive and poetic. Purposive language was a product of collective enterprise. Meaning was fixed through a process of negotiation, which meant then that what Mallarmé referred to as "everyday" language was the locus literally for common sense. For those who followed John Locke, knowledge came through sensation, and therefore each individual's knowledge was somewhat distinct. No one's original opinion could be shared exactly with somebody else, nor could the opinion of social betters (however defined) be substituted for that of the actual thinker without a falsification of experience and an inevitable tri-

umph of error. Nonetheless, even if sensation was the privileged source of truth about the external world, interpretation of the signs sensations presented involved a process particularly prone to mistakes. In daily life people corrected their conclusions through a continual process of testing working hypotheses against results. In both science and politics, truth was best achieved by subjecting each person's perception and understanding to processes of collective discussion that would be more likely (although not guaranteed) to weed out the errors inherent to individual interpretation.

Poetic language exercised the linguistic categories that put people into relationship with each other and with the universe surrounding them. Springing from the most general attributes of thought, it revealed the potentialities for relationality lying within the associations that mapped experience. Synthetic images are subject to multiple interpretations because all words signify more than one thing. Any given relationality extracted from words covered other equally compelling truths. Each individual element used in a complex image brings with it associations that either community usage or some accidental personal experience has attached to it. Images gain increased psychological vibrancy through connections to other possible meanings implicit in the associational subtext. Synthetic images are never flat statements. Nuances linger in the fringes, adding a sense of broader connections to any direct descriptive statement. Both speaker and listener experience the tension built into any given statement from potential meanings placed into a state of suspension. Specification of meaning involves a semiaware rejection of alternative interpretations. These could be suppressed as "nonsense," or they could add richness to meaning by augmenting the physical sensations invoked by language.^[2]

The science of philology had developed through the nineteenth century in comparative studies that examined both phonetic and semantic shifts. Mallarmé's *Les Mots anglais* defined the unique characteristics of English-language expression as resulting from the mixture of old Germanic and medieval French that occurred after the Norman Conquest. The accidents of dynastic rivalries had led to a language in which barbarian and Roman experience wrestled in every statement: "English offers a fatal and marvelous alliance of the barbaric germ from which the modern world was born with the ancient legacy which has provided the basis for education." This composite character made English the perfect language for expressing modern feelings, for English was defined at its core by the double character of the contemporary epoch, at once retrospective and forward-looking. French, on the other hand, because of its

"perfect neutrality," was the modern language most appropriate for poets to transform the formal principles of expression into dream.^[8]

Scholars tended to describe semantic associations at this time almost entirely in etymological terms. Mallarmé's conscious reflection on language repeated commonplace academic assumptions of his day. "To give a purer sense to the words of the tribe" was the task a poet assumed, even though the tribe would not honor the histories revealed in the language that it used for everyday purposes.^[9] By mirroring what university professors taught about the nature of language, Mallarmé was intelligently mediocre and used *Les Mots anglais* to counter with some success evaluations of his teaching performance that questioned his competence as a language instructor. His practice as a poet pointed to a more complex understanding of associative processes and foreshadowed the competing levels of meaning that Ferdinand de Saussure posited as inherent to any semantic event. In the posthumously published *Course in General Linguistics*, edited from his and students' lecture notes, Saussure outlined the basic types of association that occurred as a result of words' formal characteristics. Saussure was not concerned with the causes for particular associative links taking priority in any given case. That was the play of accident that related to individual performance rather than to the general rules for language systems that he began to compile.^[10]

More important to a practical determination of meaning was the concept of *value*, which was an oppositional relationship between words that allowed speakers to make different types of distinction inferences.^[11] Saussure's mentor Michel Bréal had introduced the concept of value into linguistic science in an essay first published in 1868, "Les Idées latentes du language" (The Latent Ideas of Language). Bréal noted that linguistic forms were incomplete and that words could not express even the most elementary information without the help of association. Language provided a skeletal framework for potential meaning. Listeners and readers had to flesh out meanings directed at them by drawing inferences based on their own experiences. "Understanding," Bréal concluded, occurs when recipients of a message complete from their own range of associations what the sender has only indicated. Language conveyed ideas about things by projecting a mental map of relations established through various mechanisms that conveyed difference and identity. Words had to suggest dissimilarities that could be exchanged, as well as similarities that could be compared. Without the evocation of potential alternative meanings that could then be judged for their relative fit, speakers and listeners would have no basis for fixing any meaning whatsoever. Languages develop as

new social or natural facts require speakers to make distinctions that they had not needed to consider previously.

Bréal's conception differed from Saussure's by stressing the active participation of speakers and listeners in the reconstruction of relationships linking words and phrases. The forms themselves are incomplete clues requiring the active participation of those using them and often have no logical consistency. Bréal pointed out that the suffix *-ier* indicated a broad range of potential meanings. Added onto words denoting many activities or substances, the suffix converted the root into a word designating a human occupation, but it also transformed a fruit into the tree that produced it. In these cases, the suffix expressed a general idea of productive relationships and was generally available to French speakers who needed to coin a word when something new appeared in daily practice. But that did not exhaust the work that *-ier* performed. The transformation of *prison* (prison) into *prisonnier* (prisoner), of *cheval* (horse) into *chevalier* (knight), *boeuf*^[*] (ox or beef), into *bouvier* (herdsman), or *lièvre* (hare) into *lièvrier* (greyhound) pointed to diverse sets of relations that are of an entirely different nature, indicating a free, creative use of an available grammatical form. Bréal concluded that the connection the suffix indicated was not logically consistent and could not be intuited. Verbal forms developed historically and have to be learned. A child, he thought, learned a word first through its connection with a single object or action. Through engagement with the world, she discovered the same word applied to different but similar contexts. She began to attach a generalized conception to the word to cover a variety of experiences. When she found the same word applied to a very different situation, she did not try to connect them but learned that the same sound can mean very different things depending on the other sounds accompanying it. Words detach themselves from their original immediate and concrete referents to become abstractions organized by rules rather than laws of identity and difference. Formal structures are useful because they provide the tools speakers need to limit the range of meanings that are likely to fit the context under discussion. Having a conventional rather than a logical relationship, they readily invite improvisation. To gain attention and make a point, speakers often utilize words in new ways that go against their formal attributes. The relationships between speakers, and the goals they have, shape the relationships between words and how they are received. "All you can do is provoke me to think," Bréal insisted and continued, "often the less explicit your provocation, the more effective it is."

In a later book outlining his theory of semantics, Bréal demonstrated

that words could never have a one-on-one identity with their referents. The multiple meanings contained within most words, augmented by the ways in which grammatical construction expanded semantic fields, were the result of an increasing need for multiple ways of making distinctions. Meaning was clarified by comparing categories of words that might fit a statement. As in music the harmonic scale was more important than individual notes. The result was messy and underscored for Bréal that there were different types of abstract thought, each equally appropriate for its cognitive task. "Language overflows the bounds of logic on every side. Its categories do not coincide with those of reason; grammatical groups have no necessary correlation to abstract concepts," he noted, openly chastising those who thought logical clarity was the necessary foundation of communication. Without overlapping fields of meaning that speakers had to negotiate, either the number of words would increase to a point where only an exceptional person could master the vocabulary or concepts would have to be simplified so that fewer distinctions could be made.^[12]

Mallarmé's *absente*, while ridiculed by many of his compatriots less familiar with developments in linguistic science, proved to be more than a fortuitous insight. He had pinpointed the basis for the recognition of meaning. He understood better than many more practical men how sense required a backdrop of nonsense to become visible. In most conversational situations, the possibility that a *plombier* (plumber) and a *pommier* (apple tree) might be comparable would likely arise only in the context of a joke or an accidental mishearing. The relationships indicated the degree to which language form structured the fringes of consciousness. Poets pursued these kinds of associations, largely put aside in other practical contexts, to confront the real but largely unreflected upon experiences generated within structures of representation.^[13] Poetry was similar to purposive or scientific language in the ways in which its speakers used abstract relations to trigger concrete reactions. Poets differed from other speakers in the delight they found in the paradoxical structures underlying communication, a joy that then led to creative works that could also be productive inquiries into the conditions of expression. Mallarmé's presentation differed from that taking shape in linguistic science in that he ignored questions of how language systematically created the conditions for meaning. In *Les Mots anglais* his etymological focus kept him concerned primarily with the associations possible in individual words, but he provided no rules for how to make connections. These connections had developed historically, he agreed, as much through chance as

through a love for order. Like any other aspect of living languages, one simply learned them and figured out how to use them as opportunities arose. Both semantic and structural associations could be deployed in particular contexts in ways that reflected either community or individual history. This was the type of association on which symbolists focused in particular, but in ways that revealed the more general principles of association that philologists were defining in more abstract and precise terms. Depending on the focus that the poet creates, a work can ironize either sensation or language. Both are deficient; they need each other, but they cannot occupy consciousness at the same time.

By insisting that the double meaning of *sens* as "meaning" and "sensation" not be sundered into two distinct value systems, symbolists in effect grounded aesthetic practice on the intersection of linguistic and psychological theory. Their explorations established tentative regimes of signification for representing in the most general terms possible ideologies of progress based on expanding knowledge of the natural order. Symbolists turned inward into the mysteries of thought and language in experiments that paralleled the hesitant investigations of psychologists and philologists. However ridiculous some of the results might have been, their method plummeted into the source of all knowledge. The carefully cultivated reputation that symbolist work was elite and difficult served as a code for professional discipline and the fragmentation of society into technically proficient, autonomous practices, whose findings appeared to be independent of social context. Independence from and disdain for "society" were essential if a self-designating elite were to bring the full capabilities of their practices to the surface and make them available for capital to deploy. The symbolists risked being precious, but in so doing they revealed the artificial environments taking shape wherever intellectual *practice* found a basis for challenging older rationalist visions of a necessary unity and hierarchy in nature. Symbolism could stand for new elite institutions fostering particular and limited sets of behaviors and personal attitudes deemed inherent to the expansion of knowledge, whether synthetic or analytic. Such institutions disciplined new subjectivities to conform to attitudes that led to effective contribution to the group practice. Practices had to be artificial environments if they were to offer the public something new. A paradox of modern science was that the assumption of totality by a fragment of knowledge was inherent to expanding the power of that discipline, both theoretically and practically. Fictions that created conditions for testing assumptions had become the prime source of new realities, that is, actions that had palpable effects

on the lives of millions. Poetry, to the degree that it explored the conditions of representation, provided a window onto modern power in its purest form.

In highlighting the technical aspects of poetic form, I suggest that the most "irrelevant" and specialized factors allowed elite experimental poetry to achieve the social force that it did. But "irrelevant" is here a relative category: in the arts technical questions of form and method can transform into the content entering public discourse. The new ways of thinking about the self implicit in William James's subordination of language to the body found its most public form of expression in works that emerged as arts professionals grappled with how to speak of themselves and their work as specialists *and* as representatives of humanity in general. When arts-based identities flow out into the world, as they must if the arts are to perform their basic social functions that lead to reimbursement and hence to reproduction, they enter other distinct worlds or domains. For influence to take place, analogic and syllogistic thinking must occur, so devices such as metaphor and metonymy reappear as keys to reception, although there is no guarantee that refiguration of images and motifs by those who discover ideas disseminated through public media will correspond to the configurative processes involved in aesthetic production. This contradiction lies behind such confusions as the separation of the arts from "society," as well as the myth of the difficulties of elite culture.

Between James, scientist turned philosopher, and Mallarmé, a poet and dreamer, a theoretical and practical picture of what "synthetic knowledge" meant in the 1880s and the stakes it appeared to have become clear. Pragmatism and symbolism were two parallel experiments in the reconstruction of "science," meaning, in this case, theorized knowledge rather than self-correcting practices for observing and classifying natural phenomena. In their parallel critiques of scientific determinism through the invocation of historical content buried within apparently structural phenomena, we see why avant-garde cultural figures for decades to come could claim to possess a mode of thought equal to, if not superior to, natural science—although in the process they persistently confused categories of historical and natural that others kept distinct.

For symbolists, subjectivity occurred on two parallel, simultaneous levels, both of which were always present in any statement. There was the subject of the present moment, connected to immediate needs and problem-solving efforts. It was a subject that worked with its respondents to make expression as precise as possible. Second, there were sub-

liminal subjects emerging mysteriously from pasts concatenated in verbal forms. These subjects took shape in the pervasive, underlying realm of connections that gave aura to all expression. This realm of dream subjectivity provided the terrain for the immediate, practical efforts of poets. Mallarmé and his followers provided a praxis of the subject, not a theory. They knew that the signs formed by associations are not transparent. They are simply the starting points for a process of interpretation. One must reach out for the absent, which itself is never singular but dances around the various levels of registers—semantic, structural, and historical—corresponding to the ways in which words can be parsed. There can be no direct correspondence because language exceeded all of the conditions to which it might be applied. As James argued, men and women participate on a stage that is largely unknown to them, and one in which their presence or their hopes are strictly irrelevant. Language had developed its special tension of linking the general and the specific as a way of coping with the fundamental ignorance within which most human action occurred. The nature of the tools through which the subject became manifest was shaped by a necessity for excess if language was to communicate either rational purposes or daydreams. In that excess lay an opening for hope to reenter and transform action by positing the equal reality of what was not present and immediately obvious.

In his preface to René Ghil's *Le Traité du Verbe*, Mallarmé compared language to an old coin whose features had eroded away after years of passing from hand to hand in a variety of exchanges. The heads and the tails were no longer as distinguishable as they had been when the coin was freshly minted. The two sides of the coin would be frequently confused, but nonetheless they served distinct purposes even if both were always necessarily present. In another essay, Mallarmé observed that an archaeologist who exhumed an ancient coin had to be interested in both the sacred image presented on the face and the "brutal universal number" on the reverse.^[14] Its value as currency required both, and so did words require both purpose and emotional engagement. Whenever one describes a situation, however objective one attempts to be, there is always a fringe of embodied, emotional response; hence, Mallarmé concluded that with "every effort at style," however incomplete or awkward, "there is versification" and a revelation of the poetry within a speaker's soul, that is, of the potentiality to reconstruct the relationships that have engaged the speaker. There was no statement that was simply factual or descriptive.^[15]

In Mallarmé the semantic entity disappeared into an identification of

the relation between a word and its unsaid pairs. The spoken word exists with other words in a sentence, but the unsaid words are linked to the spoken in a relation that must take place, in part, in the imagination. Difference, which helped locate the possible meanings of a word, provided a channel to the unconscious. It involved a feeling that was about the relations pointed to, judgment that was more in the way of a mood, that is, a physical response. Mallarmé's lexical fixation, which he carried from his studies in English usage into his poetic reconstructions of the French language, shifted emphasis from the communicative functions of a statement to the necessary associations that provided each word with a range of possible meanings. The utterance was undercut by mobilization of subtexts. For Mallarmé, a poem brought to the surface the critical differences that mattered to a speaker, allowing a congealing of an unconscious that was not bound by its communicative imperatives.

In a letter that William James wrote to his brother Henry pondering the difficulties of the allusive style that Henry had pushed to new heights in his late novels *The Ambassadors*, *Wings of the Dove*, and *The Golden Bowl*, the psychologist-philosopher complained of the amount of work readers had to bring to Henry's fiction. The novelist's literary ideal clearly had become to refuse to describe any action or object directly, "but by dint of breathing and sighing all round and round it, to arouse in the reader who may have had a similar perception already (Heaven help him if he hasn't!) the illusion of a solid object, made . . . wholly out of impalpable materials, air, and the prismatic interferences of light, ingeniously [sic] focused by mirrors upon empty space." But William recognized that however impatient he might be with Henry's dilation of experience, the reflection it stimulated stripped away the veils masking the complex machinery that transforms perception into speech. "The complication of innuendo and associative reference on the enormous scale to which you give way to it," he noted, "does so build out the matter for the reader that the result is to solidify by the mere bulk of the process, the like perception from which he has to start." Henry's books became catalysts for something more important than communicative clarity; they permitted readers to overcome the automatic and schematic nature of perception: "As air, by dint of its volume, will weigh like a corporeal body[,] so [a reader's] own poor little initial perception, swathed in this gigantic envelopment [sic] of suggestive atmosphere, grows like a germ into something vastly bigger and more substantial."^[16]

Since these unconscious processes were revealed in poems and novels committed to paper, a literary work

was never a present unconscious,

even if likely related to it. The underlying patterns of associations in a poem were historical and in development. They were redolent of habits, for favored patterns repeated themselves even if they were no longer quite appropriate. But this was not the same sense of unconsciousness that Freud would posit: there is no determinative infancy phase in which patterns of family relations are locked into particular psychic configurations relating language and body. The unconscious was not inherently libidinal. Indeed, with Mallarmé, there was a lifting out of the body into a realm of spirit where the mind was concerned with the abstract relations of concepts as signs of a personal history that could be transcended. Recognition of the processes that were typical of one's own thought patterns led to a crystallization of the will, known through its ordering of experiences into representations freed from the conventionalizing constraints of purposive communication. Consciousness, that word that occupied William James and so puzzled him that he finally repudiated it as meaningless, was in Mallarmé a thinking with the principles of differentiation that related speakers to their worlds. In articulating this absent side of experience, Mallarmé liberated speech from the immediate stimulus-response mechanisms that mid-nineteenth-century science had identified as its origin.^[17]

Associations springing from the playful nature of language wound up linking the various social spheres in which people were actors. Each sphere involved a symbolic register with its own set of connections and a sense of how the relations indexed came together in a predictable manner. Symbolic registers were separated by the distinct temporal divisions that channeled each person's activities. But, residing in language and in a psychological entity that if not unified at least was bounded, the registers also coexisted on top of each other. The logic of situations limited the open-ended fluctuation of registers in order to make particular evocations relevant and others superfluous. Genres and repertoires provided ready-made responses that allowed the fluctuation to be controlled. Habit established a preferred entry point for organizing the absent elements that allowed symbols to have meaning into patterns that had become familiar and comfortable. A sense of identity in this case means only a sense that particular sets of associations "fit."^[18] The new experimental psychology had confirmed what theologians had preached about the necessity of developing good character habits: the body tends toward reflex automatisms. Situations will always be somewhat unique, and no two mental experiences will ever be identical, but performance tends to the cliché, the tried and true that has received positive responses from what-

ever audience has been in attendance. The organization of symbols into habits allowed one to face a changing world with relatively flexible but nonetheless predictable responses. Habits are predispositions, but not blueprints. Further, psychologists observed that habits had contradictory emotions surrounding their performance. Even as one acted out an apparently mechanical response, there were intimations of other ways of being located in a general nervousness.^[19]

The arbitrary nature of signs, which allowed sounds to transmute so that peoples and their experiences grew apart and allowed meanings to slide imperceptibly into new cognitive universes, suggested that one of the key sources of knowledge was imperfect. Not simply in the normal, ordinary human way in which things of the earth never quite fit the tasks imposed upon them. No, the problem was that language itself was imperfect as a mode of communication. Clarity of statement was not possible, much less a transparent transfer of experience. Those who worked with language and sought to write a "true poem" in which "words bore their things with them" were doomed from the outset to be failures and washouts, people for whom the term *raté* was entirely appropriate.^[20] A poetics of the will based in its manifestation in texts required locating a position within poetry that could secure faith in the revelatory power of expression and leap over the technical inadequacies of signifiers.

The symbol was a readily accessible alternative to the sign. It could not be used with the same precision, but it returned speakers to a reality that their bodies could affirm or deny. The symbol sprang from the gap between language and raw experience. If it worked as a representation at all, that success was due to an image that was equally a cognitive, emotional, and physiological response.^[21] But a response to what? The physical experience had vanished. It could never be repeated, although it could be recalled, that is, brought into the mind as a focus of attention that would involve an echo of the physical sensations associated with the original experience the symbol evoked, but refused to name, leaving that task to mere signifiers such as words. The symbol emerged as a response to an event that called forth words in a vain effort to describe. In the course of time, all words lost their emotional force and became merely conventional signs of a set of ideas.^[22]

The etymological conceit underlying much nineteenth-century philology suggested that one might still glimpse original encounters that had supposedly begun the process of word formation. The original forms of words had

been symbols as well as signs. Concepts emerged as a necessity to respond to experience that could not yet be logicized. "Language

is a faithful mirror of all the social facts of the past," Georges Saint-Mieux noted.^[23] Buried inside the history of a word was a symbol of an experience before it had become conventional. Symbolism treated all of language and its uses as a record of an ongoing encounter with mystery. The French adjective *feu* (deceased), Remy de Gourmont noted, derived from the Latin *fatatum*, "that which has accomplished its destiny (*fatum*)."^[24] Pagan fatalism still lived in the word, which then metonymically connected to French conceptions of fire (*feu* used as a noun). The antique meaning seemed to have become obscure, but a poet could make it live again so that readers would recognize in themselves the vestiges of a past lived only virtually through the inherited language that constructed their social imaginary. For this reason Gourmont argued that the modern aesthetic symbol had broken free from metaphor, nor was it a form of allegory. The association of images that it induced did not substitute one range of ideas for another but instead freed words from their purposive chains so that they could initiate an embodied response that would reveal both the "I" and the objects surrounding it in relationships that had become obscure.

Mallarmé's approach to language was a way of allowing experience to be created through language while simultaneously disrupting the linguistic scheme by incorporating a part of experience that lies outside the descriptive and logical aspects of language. Still everything must be conventionalized as it is made practical. Flexible, escalating scales of alienation and opposition were needed to refresh the novelty of concepts. Bréal and Saussure's formulations tell us that if everything corresponds, if all experiences involve associations, some principle of differentiation is needed or all that will result is a chaos in which all elements are different. Gaps or intervals are necessary to locate the particulars of a speech event into forms that suggest action to be taken in the future. Each moment requires internal difference for it to be separated from the flux around it. The logic of internal oppositions brings clarity, and for this a speaker's intention mattered not one bit, for the opposition was both arbitrary and analytic. The historical development of cultural phenomena undermines their logical imperatives, although in returning to the forms as forms one can always find logic. All representation, as William James learned early, proceeds within an internal framework that allows meanings to take shape in the principles governing the relationships within the representational system. This is what both Bréal and Saussure meant when they argued that value is more important than signification. Discrimination between orders of experience and determination of the rel-

event relationship posited in a statement created the subject as a necessary mediating term.

Value is the precondition for experience and a sense of structure that makes subsequent action feel appropriate because value distinctions establish hierarchies of relationships among the components of any situation. A symbolic radical establishes the rules of value by suggesting the most salient relationship around which all meanings both present and absent might arrange themselves. Mallarmé's symbolic role in the narrative lives of his disciples affirmed Michel Bréal's observation on the social origins of language: "To express a desire, to issue orders, to mark taking possession of persons or of things—these were the primary uses of language. For many men they are still pretty much the only ones."^[25] The young poets of the mid-1880s adopted Mallarmé as the symbol of their defiance of a literary world that they deemed cliquish and highly conventionalized, but which they wished to take over and transform into their own. Mallarmé stood as the symbolic gate through which the contradictory elements of their own professional aspirations could be temporarily organized into a pattern that made sense, soothed anxieties, and fostered productivity. A radical motif such as the figure Mallarmé provided for his disciples organized the competing registers in a way that affirmed the meaning that the narrator had drawn from the story, although "meaning" usually had more to do with affirmation that one's hopes could be fulfilled than with lessons learned.

Love, for example, has often served as a symbol covering the multiple attractions a person abides, and it can be tinged with a variety of auras promising the distinct pleasures of sexual liaisons, comradeship, family sentimentality, or submission to the divine, for love itself is an empty container the relational contents of which vary with personal history. In the professional worlds that writers occupied, irony allowed the distinctive registers to jostle against each other, and in that disturbance each, with apparent hardheaded self-knowledge, located their particular historical position. Irony, however, masks an ordering that allowed one to extract a promise of redemption from the jaws of misunderstanding.

A powerful example of how particular discursive themes organize competing registers into a system that

affirms value can be found in discussions of the erotic, particularly the scandalous issue of "free love" that occupied a great deal of imagination and argument in both France and the United States. This motif helped marked the end of the power that genteel norms had over public discourse and contributed to the emergence of a franker, more brutal evaluation of the power of sexuality in

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social life and in the development of character. To test the role of synthetic knowledge in creating a professional social position for young intellectuals, I will consider how the theme of the erotic provided an entry point for coordinating a variety of social relationships that were often in conflict with each other. The role of sexuality in discourse will prove to be complex and not at all evidence for the classical Freudian hypothesis that sexual instincts motivate psychic performances. To speak of sexuality became a critical entry point for speaking of personal ambitions, the contradictions of social status, business interests, political loyalties, theories of professional practice, and metaphysical beliefs. Each set of registers flowed through the symbolic gate provided by discursive motifs such as "free love" to result in images of the self as actor creating history through relationships with other actors. The difficulties inherent to professional ambitions were covered by ideas about the truths that sexual experience revealed about individuals and their societies. The conviction that sexuality had a privileged position in explaining human action and social structure, however, was consonant with a belief that one's work, and hence life, was in harmony with universal cosmic laws. "Love" served to align registers of experience into a unified subjective response that countered the terror of social relationships with a promise of transcendence lying within the very fiber of the body and its ability to bring into being something new. The seemingly universal economy of erotic desire, however, enunciated a claim for power of a particular class of intellectuals who, despite all their particularities of nationality, race, gender, and education, had to claim that they represented the most general, widespread, and best attributes of humanity at large precisely because they were poets. Sexuality as a natural force appeared to invest the poet with a power that could overcome the arbitrary and socially conventional nature of the institutions within which he had to work.

As in France, young literary professionals in the United States responded to a rapid growth in the print media that created opportunities but provided little security. The restless energy that ambition required became more productive when channeled into habitual repertoires of behavior and self-representation. These created particular patterns of response that helped establish a position for oneself as an effective participant within an industrializing profession. Heightened emotion and excitement were necessary conditions of participation, but they exacerbated tensions, not the least of which was the perpetual likelihood of not being good enough, of falling into that worst of all fates that terrified Camille Mauclair, being proven a "washout." Symbolic work required

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finding ways of representing the self that affirmed mastery of universal processes, while not deflating the various tensions that fired the engines of ambition. Symbols, privileged as sites of truth because they were supposed to be expressions of an embodied and therefore personal experience, leapt out of psychology and into social relations by organizing responses to the world into a structure of beliefs that provided a feeling of "reality-coefficient."[\[26\]](#)

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