

CHARACTER AND PERSUASION IN WILLIAM JAMES

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



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

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

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

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

JAMES AND EMERSONIAN CHARACTER

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

PHILOSOPHER AS SAGE IN A PLURALISTIC UNIVERSE

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

CONCLUSION

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

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

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

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

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NOTES

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

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

³⁸ Holloway, *The Victorian Sage*, 7.

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

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

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 80.

⁴² Bagehot, “The Emotion of Conviction,” 421.

⁴³ James, *VRE*, 66-67.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ *Ibid.* 67.

⁴⁸ James, *PU*, 115.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 118-19.

⁵⁰ James, *VRE*, 201.

⁵¹ James, *PU*, 9,85,90.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 90.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 131.

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

⁵⁵ James, *PU*, 132.

⁵⁶ James, *VRE*, 39.

⁵⁷ James, *Will to Believe*, 77.

⁵⁸ James, *PU*, 117.

⁵⁹ Chapman, *Memories and Milestones*, 20.