

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

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



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

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

THE STREAM OF THOUGHT

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Faulkner’s novel opens as follows:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

CONSCIOUSNESS AT THE FRINGE

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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NOTES

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

² Cohn, *The Transparent Mind*, 5-6.

³ James, *Principles*, 246.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*, 247.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 250.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 246.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 249.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 233.

¹² *Ibid.*, 236.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 234-5.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 235.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 219-220.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 220.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 219.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 274.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 221.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Lodge, *The Art of Fiction*, 42.

²⁶ Ibid.

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

²⁸ Ibid., 7

²⁹ Ibid., 6.

³⁰ Ibid.

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

³² Ibid., 17.

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

³⁴ Polk, "Trying Not to Say," 140.

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

³⁶ Ibid. 6.

³⁷ Polk, "Trying Not to Say," 144.

³⁸ Ibid., 149.

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

⁴⁰ Ibid., 172.

⁴¹ Iser, *The Implied Reader*, 139.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid., 138.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 140.

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

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 621.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 622.

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

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

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

⁵¹ Ibid., 159-160.

⁵² Ibid., 161.

⁵³ Ibid., 165.

⁵⁴ James, *Principles*, 239.

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

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Kanyusik, "Signifying Otherness," 177.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 181.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 183.

⁶¹ Ibid., 185.

⁶² Ibid.

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

⁶⁴ Ibid., 38.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 36.

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

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

⁶⁸ Ibid. 86.

⁶⁹ Ibid. 89.

⁷⁰ James, *Principles*, 246.

⁷¹ Ibid., 260.

⁷² Joyce, *Ulysses*, 703.

⁷³ James, *Principles*, 264.

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

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

⁷⁶ Rajchman, *The Deleuze Connections*, 84.

⁷⁷ James, *Principles*, 220.

⁷⁸ Rajchman, *The Deleuze Connections*, 84.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Iser, *The Implied Reader*, 138.

- ⁸¹ Faulkner, *The Sound and the Fury*, 5.
⁸² Ibid. 35-6.
⁸³ Booth, "The Meaning of the Social Body," 6.
⁸⁴ Faulkner, *The Sound and the Fury*, 14.
⁸⁵ Ibid., 29-30.
⁸⁶ Ibid. 3.
⁸⁷ Haddock Seigfried, *Radical Reconstruction of Philosophy*,
185.
⁸⁸ James, *Principles*, 274.
⁸⁹ Ibid.
⁹⁰ Faulkner, *The Sound and the Fury*, 41.
⁹¹ James, *Principles*, 239.
⁹² Ibid., 219.
⁹³ Kartiganer, "The Sound and the Fury," 616.