

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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#### REFERENCES

Richardson, Robert D. 2006. *William James: In the Maelstrom of American Modernism: A Biography*. New York: Houghton Mifflin.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Richardson, *William James*, xiii.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.