

WILLIAM JAMES: THE MEANING
AND FUNCTION OF ART

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I

William James' prose works remain stimulating, not only because of the sensitivity of perception and depth of insight they reveal, but because of the lucidity and vigor of their style as well. With all his flair for stylistic expression, however, James wrote not one essay on prose style or his theory and practice of aesthetics. Perhaps he judged it best not to examine too critically that which he seemed almost by nature to be able to do so well.

It is not the writer's purpose, however, to discover why James never elaborated a theory of aesthetics, but to explore his writings (1) to reveal an important ingredient of his aesthetic views, his fear of pleasure for its own sake, (2) to present his thought on aesthetics, (3) to show how effectively he used the metaphor to communicate knowledge of psychology or to express his ethical and religious vision and (4) to see how his view of aesthetics fits his general notion of life and mind. Whatever else the reader wishes to see--the paradox of James' simplified aesthetic theory and his highly skilled practice, the puritanical or genteel spirit revealed by the fear of pleasure or the moral orientation of a scientist's writings--all this is the reader's own business. The writer's business is to piece together James' brief and scattered statements about aesthetics and the pleasures of art and to refer to his arguments for pragmatism, for the ethical and active life, and for the religious vision in order to read the implications of these for James' aesthetics. If the reader will grant this reading by implication, he will not fail to see how, for James, worthwhile art had to function as a means of communicating knowledge and of stimulating ethical action and religious thought.

II

It would be a mistake to think that James considered aesthetic pleasure as inherently good. He was certain, rather, that pleasure without practical purpose, even if it was aesthetic pleasure, meant the relaxation of control over one's creative powers and, hence, an inevitable softening of moral character. His attitude toward pleasure for its own sake is clear-

ly illustrated in his opinion of a speech which Chief Justice Holmes delivered before the Bar Association of Boston. Holmes had said, among other things, that life was an end in itself and that the only question as to whether it was worth living was whether one could get enough of it.¹

James reacted strongly to the hedonistic ideas he thought the speech implied: "It's all right for once, in the exuberance of youth," he wrote to a friend, "to celebrate mere vital excitement, *la joie de vivre*, as a protest against humdrum solemnity. But to make it systematic, and oppose it, as an ideal and a duty, to the ordinarily recognized duties, is to pervert it altogether--especially when one is a Chief Justice. . . . Mere excitement is an immature ideal, unworthy of the Supreme Court's official endorsement."²

Another example may serve to illustrate the extent of James' fear that too much pleasure might endanger one's character. In 1873, he wrote to his sister from Rome: "Italy is a very delightful place to dip into but no more. I can't imagine how, unless one is earnestly studying history in some way, it can in the long run help injuring all one's active powers. The weight of the past world here is fatal,--one ends by becoming its mere parasite instead of its equivalent. This worship, this dependence on other men is abnormal. The ancients did things by doing the business of their own day, not by gaping at their grandfather's tombs,--and the normal man today will do likewise."³

The notion that the normal man would look to the business of his own day was quite in keeping with James' conception of the importance of the active, ethical life in a changing world. For him, the world was full of novelty. One could accept the novelty and the consequent insecurity as a challenge to better living. On the other hand, one could attempt to escape by seeking safety in abstract systems which seemed to guarantee salvation from the very novelty and insecurity. The latter path, James asserted, was that of the rationalist.⁴ James' way, the way of the pragmatist, was to accept the universe as unsafe and to work for a salvation only possible but never guaranteed. Nowhere did he state his attitude more definitely than in "Pragmatism and Religion": "I find myself willing to take the universe to be really dangerous and adventurous, without therefore backing out and crying 'no play'. . . . I am willing that there should be real losses and real losers, and no total preservation of all that is. I can believe in the ideal as an ultimate, not as an origin, and as an extract, not the whole. When the cup is poured off, the dregs are left behind forever, but the possibility of what is poured off is sweet enough to accept."⁵

And the nature of the "possibility" James spoke of? It was the very possibility a man had of putting into living practice "the ideals which he frames."⁶ These ideals were for James humanistically moral: "Must my thoughts dwell night and day on my personal sins and blemishes," he asked

in the essay "Pragmatism's Conception of Truth," "because I truly have them?--or may I sink and ignore them in order to be a decent social unit, and not a mass of morbid melancholy and apology?"⁷ To be a "decent social unit" seems to have been a major shaping force in James' moralistic pragmatism.

Art, in James' view, like other kinds of human thought and activity, had to serve a decent social function. Artistic celebration for the emotional experience could hardly seem really worthy just as the celebration of life for its own sake was believed to be "immature," a too dependent love of historic Rome injurious to the "active powers," and a worship of abstract systems something negative and unreal. His well-known comments on the subjects of "novel-reading," "theatre-going" and "indulgence in music" are typical expressions of this attitude. James proposed that "no matter how good one's sentiments may be, if one have [sic] not taken advantage of every concrete opportunity to act, one's character may remain entirely unaffected for the better." And he continued:

Every time a resolve or a fine glow of feeling evaporates without bearing practical fruit is worse than a chance lost. . . . There is no more contemptible type of human character than that of the nerveless sentimentalist and dreamer, who spends his life in a weltering sea of sensibility and emotion, but who never does a manly concrete deed. Rousseau, inflaming all the mothers of France, by his eloquence, to follow Nature and nurse their babies themselves, while he sends his own children to the foundling hospital, is the classical example of what I mean. . . . The habit of excessive novel-reading and theatre-going will produce true monsters in this line. The weeping of a Russian lady over the fictitious personages in the play, while her coachman is freezing to death on his seat outside, is the sort of thing that everywhere happens on a less glaring scale. Even the habit of excessive indulgence in music, for those who are neither performers themselves nor musically gifted enough to take it in a purely intellectual way, has probably a relaxing effect upon the character.⁸

If aesthetic pleasure by itself was to be shunned, however, it became valuable when it had a practical expression, when it stimulated constructive ethical action in the life of the individual. That James was convinced of the importance of this function for art seems clear from his negative reaction in the passage just quoted to the enjoyment of art forms for the sake of pure pleasure. He made his conviction that lasting art survived largely

because of its moral value positively clear in a statement about "the extraordinary tonic and consoling power" of the poetry of Dante and Wordsworth in his essay "Some Metaphysical Problems": "This need of an eternal moral order," he wrote, "is one of the deepest needs of our breast. And those poets, like Dante and Wordsworth, who live on the conviction of such an order, owe to that fact the extraordinary tonic and consoling power of their verse."⁹ But that James wished art to be what is more than a tonic and a consoling power, a stimulant to intellectual, moral, or religious human thought and action, will be discussed in more detail later in the paper, particularly by implication in his pairing of the ethical and aesthetic principles, in his belief that both these kinds of principle challenge a man to "translate" the raw materials of experience according to the "ideals he frames," in examples of James' use of the metaphor, in the consistency of the functional view of art with his notion of the usefulness of psychology and religion in improving human activity, and in his "pragmatic" reading of Whitman's poem "To You."

III

James did not, as has been observed, elaborate a theory of aesthetics. He did, however, in The Principles of Psychology briefly reveal what seemed to him to be the nature of the aesthetic principles. It is important to note that wherever in the work he spoke of the "aesthetic principles," he also spoke of the "ethical principles" or "moral principles."

He paired the two kinds of principle because he thought of them as belonging to the same inner world of human thought. Both were mental abstractions not matched by any kind of observable equivalents in the natural world. Thus they were not ideas produced in us by observation of the outer world.¹⁰

Of the two kinds of principle, James rated the moral as being the more distant from the natural world: ". . . though nature's materials lend themselves slowly and discouragingly to our translation of them into ethical forms, but more readily into aesthetic forms; to translation into scientific forms they lend themselves with relative ease and completeness."¹¹ James established, thus, a three levelled hierarchy of ideality--the moral, the aesthetic and the scientific.

The "aesthetic principles," James thought, were "at bottom such axioms as that a note sounds good with its third and fifth, or that potatoes need salt"; that is "that when certain impressions come before our mind, one of them will seem to call for or repel the others as its companions."¹² He asserted that habit, the result of repeated awareness of the usual conjunctions of outer objects or events, only to a very limited extent explained these "aesthetic connections" between mental "impressions." Since it was

"notorious how seldom natural experiences" measured "up to our aesthetic demands," it was not possible to explain aesthetic tastes as mere results of habit formation. 13

Further, James held that many of the "so-called metaphysical principles" were based on aesthetic tastes or feelings: "Many of the so-called metaphysical principles are at bottom only expressions of aesthetic feeling. Nature is simple and invariable; makes no leaps, or makes nothing but leaps; is rationally intelligible; neither increases nor diminishes in quantity; flows from one principle, etc. etc., --what do all such principles express save our sense of how pleasantly our intellect would feel if it had a Nature of that sort to deal with?" 14

James believed too that the moral and aesthetic abstractions had a distinct function. They caused a man to be always trying to reform the substance of the world around him, to make him more than an observer or an appreciator, a creative individual. Further, men wished to be creative because the consistencies between their ideas of what ought to be were so much more harmonious than the unpatterned realities of the natural world. "The world of aesthetics and ethics," James wrote, "is an ideal world, a Utopia, a world which the outer relations persist in contradicting, but which we as stubbornly persist in striving to make actual." 15

The process of reform in response to either the moral or aesthetic challenge, James spoke of as a "translation" from the real into the ideal: "The translation, it is true, will probably never be ended. The perceptive order does not give way, nor the right conceptive substitute for it arise, at our bare word of command. It is often a deadly fight. . . . But victory after victory makes us sure that the essential doom of our enemy is defeat." 16

IV

Most writers worthy of the name are skilled in the use of metaphor. Yet few scientists have been better known for their efforts to "translate" experience into the patterned consistencies of prose through the use of such techniques as the metaphor than was William James. The continued popularity of The Principles of Psychology and The Varieties of Religious Experience attests not only to the freshness of James' ideas but also to his ability to describe lucidly and colorfully in metaphorical manner his experience of life. An example taken from The Principles of Psychology illustrates the point. There he effectively likened his sense of the stream of consciousness to the life of a bird: "As we take, in fact, a general view of the wonderful stream of our consciousness, what strikes us first is this different pace of its parts. Like a bird's life, it seems to be made of an alternation of flights and perchings." 17

Elsewhere James revealed forcefully his belief in the saving value of work, a belief consistent with his notion of the importance of the active, ethical life. His style was aimed at the layman. In a powerful metaphor used in "What Pragmatism Means" he likened knowledge to cash; knowledge, like cash, was useful. Its very value lay in its usefulness in achieving a higher level of living, "a program for more work," a program for changing "existing realities": "'God,' 'Matter,' 'Reason,' 'the Absolute,' 'Energy,' are so many solving names. You can rest when you have them. You are at the end of your metaphysical quest. But if you follow the pragmatic method, you cannot look on any such word as closing your quest. You must bring out of each word its practical cash-value, set it at work within the stream of your experience. It appears less as a solution, then, than as a program for more work, and more particularly as an indication of the ways in which existing realities may be changed."¹⁸

Much of the reason for the lasting power of James' writing lies in its moving expression of the religious need in human life. One really striking use of metaphor for this effect occurs in The Varieties of Religious Experience in James' description of the "sadness" that pervades every positivistic, agnostic or naturalistic scheme of philosophy. So powerful is the effect of this metaphorical passage upon the reader's imagination that he is pressed toward a new consideration of his own religious vision, toward an intellectual act of religious commitment or rejection:

For naturalism, fed on recent cosmological speculations, mankind is in a position similar to that of a set of people living on a frozen lake, surrounded by cliffs over which there is no escape, yet knowing that little by little the ice is melting, and the inevitable day drawing near when the last film of it will disappear, and to be drowned ignominiously will be the human creature's portion. The merrier the skating, the warmer and more sparkling the sun by day, and the ruddier the bonfires at night, the more poignant the sadness with which one must take in the meaning of the total situation.¹⁹

For James, all real human need--for knowledge, for work, for religious vision--was known about in the beginning because it was felt in sensible experience. Reality for us, he believed, lay essentially in that experience.²⁰ Any human thought or activity which did not function there was not ultimately worthwhile. So, of rationalistic philosophy James disapproved in "The Thing and Its Relations" because it led the thinker away from sensible experience, because for it "those intellectual products are most true which, turning their face towards the Absolute, come nearest to symbolizing its ways of uniting the many and the one." But for the pragmatist, "only in

so far as they ["intellectual products"] lead us, successfully or unsuccessfully, back into sensible experience again, are our abstracts and universals true or false at all."²¹ He might have said the same for art. It had to have a practical function in the world of sensible experience. That the function had also to be ethical we know from his negative attitude toward over-indulgence in such things as "novel-reading," "theatre-going," the pleasures of music and the delights of historic Rome. And James' able use of such artistic techniques as the metaphor for the effects described above revealed his belief in the functional value of knowledge, morality, religion and the practice of art.

v

This pragmatic view that art needed to have value beyond that of pure pleasure is thoroughly consistent with William James' view of psychology and religion as instruments for the improvement of the human condition. Consider as examples his interests in making ill people well or in making ignorant people knowledgeable, interests which certainly led him into the field of psychology and which probably began with the emotional illness which gripped him as a young man.²² His study of psychology, he undoubtedly would have admitted, was good for his health; it helped him to be the bright and active kind of person he wanted to be; and, of course, it helped other people, his students and his readers, too. It was a study in which truth was not so much being discovered as created. But the effort of creativity was worthwhile if the truths it forged were effective in producing a better state of health--of character and knowledge.

Consider, too, his apologia for religion. In the "Conclusions" to The Varieties of Religious Experience, James observed that all religions have in common (1) a certain "sense that there is something wrong about us as we naturally stand," and (2) that "we are saved from the wrongness by making proper connection with the higher powers."²³ And he continued: "But that which produces effects within another reality [within us] must be termed a reality itself, so I feel as if we had no philosophic excuse for calling the unseen or mystical world unreal. . . . God is real since he produces real effects."²⁴ Thus, in our sense of salvation from wrongness through our sense of "connection with the higher powers," he argued, we find the justification for religion and the proof of God's reality.

In much the same way, James might have argued for the practice of art. The "aesthetic principles," the "ideal" patterns held in the mind, functioned as the guide to "translation" of the "natural," the bits of raw perceptual experience. Thus art was closely related to other human activities--psychology, philosophy and religion--in that it could be justified by its

usefulness in organizing human experience, in providing a very real salvation within the maze of the actual human situation.

Art, too, as James conceived of it, might function as a stimulant to ethical activity. This is precisely what he meant when in "Pragmatism and Religion" he commented on Whitman's poem "To You":

O I could sing such glories and grandeurs about you;
 You have not known what you are--you have slumbered
 upon yourself all your life; . . .
 You are he or she who is master or mistress over them,
 Master or mistress in your own right over Nature, elements, pain, passion, dissolution.

Noting that the poem could be interpreted as meaning that one should "look back, lie back" on his own "true principle of being" and that "this is the famous way of quietism, of indifferentism," the way to "the static One," James then asserted that the interpretation of the pragmatist was other than this: "But pragmatism sees another way to be respected also," he wrote, "the pluralistic way of interpreting the poem. The you so glorified, to which the hymn is sung, may mean your better possibilities phenomenally taken, or the specific redemptive effects even of your failures, upon yourself or others. It may mean your loyalty to the possibilities of others whom you admire and love so that you are willing to accept your own poor life, for it is that glory's partner."²⁵ The ethical ring of such phrases as "better possibilities," "specific redemptive effects" and "loyalty to the possibilities of others whom you admire and love" is unmistakable. Art taken as escape to the static One or as escape to pleasure for its own sake would lead inevitably to a weakening of moral fiber: the Russian lady who let herself too much relax into the enjoyment of the drama was sure to forget her coachman shivering on his seat outside the theater. To avoid pointless pleasure and to improve the condition of one's own character by active and ethical living was of prime importance in James' scheme of life. Toward this end art could serve a valuable function if one made use of his pleasure, if one put the "sentiments" excited by the aesthetic experience to practical, ethical work.

Finally, James, as the writer has pointed out, mastered the techniques of style (1) for expressing his personal ideas and observations and (2) for pressing the reader toward reflection, commitment and action. He could use a metaphor, the comparison to a bird's life, to describe his notion of the "stream of consciousness"; or he could, by comparing the situation of the agnostic of his day to a party of doomed skaters, force the reader to analyse his position and move toward an act of religious commitment or rejection. Always, for James, art forms and artistic technique had to have function--a function of improving the human situation either by communicating knowledge of experience in psychology, philosophy, religion--or by

pushing the reader toward thoughts or commitments basic to ethical behaviour or religious vision.

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Footnotes:

¹ Ralph Barton Perry, The Thought and Character of William James, 2 vols. (Boston, 1935), II, 250.

² Ibid., 250-251.

³ Ibid., 258.

⁴ "A pragmatist turns his back resolutely and once for all upon a lot of inveterate habits dear to professional philosophers," James wrote in "What Pragmatism Means." "He turns away from abstraction and insufficiency, from verbal solutions, from bad a priori reasons, from fixed principles, closed systems, and pretended absolutes and origins. He turns towards concreteness and adequacy, towards facts, towards action and towards power. That means the empiricist temper regnant and the rationalist temper sincerely given up." William James, Pragmatism: A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking (New York, 1907), 51.

⁵ Ibid., 296.

⁶ Ibid., 298.

⁷ Ibid., 232.

⁸ William James, The Principles of Psychology, 2 vols. (New York, 1890), I, 125-126.

⁹ James, Pragmatism . . . , 106-107.

¹⁰ Writing of these aesthetic and moral principles, James asserted: "There are then ideal and inward relations amongst the objects of our thought which can in no intelligible sense whatever be interpreted as reproductions of the order of outer experience." [James' italics]; James, The Principles . . . , II, 639.

¹¹ Ibid., 640.

¹² Ibid., 672.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid., 639.

¹⁶ Ibid., 640.

¹⁷ James, The Principles . . . , I, 243.

¹⁸ James, Pragmatism . . . , 52-53.

¹⁹ William James, The Varieties of Religious Experience (New York, 1902), 141-142.

²⁰ In "Pragmatism and Humanism" James defined reality as having three parts: ". . . the first part of reality . . . is the flux of our sensa-

tions. Sensations are forced upon us, coming we know not whence. Over their nature, order and quantity we have as good as no control. . . . The second part of reality . . . is the relations that obtain between our sensations or between their copies in our minds. This part falls into two sub-parts: (1) the relations that are mutable and accidental, as those of date and place; and (2) those that are fixed and essential because they are grounded on the inner natures of their terms. Both sorts of relation are matters of immediate perception. . . . The third part of reality, additional to these perceptions (tho largely based upon them), is the previous truths of which every new inquiry takes account." James, Pragmatism . . . , 244-245. Even this "third part of reality," James believed, was dependent upon the perceptual order. In the essay "Percept and Concept--The Abuse of Concepts" he asserted: "All conceptual content is borrowed: to know what the concept 'color' means you must have seen red or blue, or green. To know what 'resistance' means, you must have made some effort. . . . To know what a 'proportion' means one must have compared ratios in some sensible case. You can create new concepts out of old elements, but the elements must have been perceptually given; and the famous world of universals would disappear like a soap-bubble if the definite contents of feeling, the thises and thats, which its terms severally denote, could be at once withdrawn." William James, Some Problems of Philosophy: A Beginning of an Introduction to Philosophy (New York, 1911), 79-80.

²¹ William James, Essays in Radical Empiricism (New York, 1912), 100.

²² This stormy period in the life of young James is fully described in Perry, Thought and Character . . . , Vol. I, chs. IX-XVII.

²³ James, The Varieties . . . , 508.

²⁴ Ibid., 516-517.

²⁵ James, Pragmatism . . . , 276-277.