

william james
theodore dreiser

and the “anaesthetic revelation”

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In 1874 an eccentric amateur philosopher from New York claimed that he had, at last, discovered the key to the mystery of life. The key came with a whiff of laughing gas. In a rather bizarre essay, the author insisted that he and countless others had experienced, while under the influence of nitrous oxide, a mystical revelation of eternal truth. We could, of course, regard such claims as the lunatic swan song of a table-rapping fanatic were it not for the fact that the pamphlet and its author play an intriguing role in our philosophic and literary history. As biographers and cultural historians have made clear, late nineteenth-century philosophers, writers and scientists often dipped into pseudo-scientific pursuits in an effort to harmonize the evolutionary theories of Darwin and an increasingly mechanistic view of the universe with their own peculiar desires for a spiritual redefinition of man’s existence. The eccentric author in question then was not hailed as a mere fanatic. Moreover, he provides an illuminating link between two such seemingly diverse figures as William James, optimistic voice of American pragmatism, and Theodore Dreiser, tragedian of the American dream gone bad; both men knew the “Anaesthetic Revelation,” and both took it seriously.

William James’s obsession with mind-altering drugs, the occult and Eastern mysticism is well known, even though it was James who argued so persuasively for the necessity of empirical validation of any assumed truth. Nor does it appear out of character that Emerson’s brand of mysticism in his famous essay “Nature” is paradoxically interwoven with evolutionary

theories and Platonic idealism, buttressed at last by a Lockean insistence on concrete experience. Seldom is Theodore Dreiser thrown into the same basket with Emerson, James, Whitman and others as a writer or thinker deeply engrossed in spiritual questions. But from James to Dreiser we can draw a line of affinity; Benjamin Blood's "revelation" provides an interesting focus.

Caught between his need for religious solace and his defiance of absolutism, William James lived in a state of psychic limbo. A month before his death, the philosopher lamented in a memo to his son that he could not live to "round out" his system, which had become for him "too much like an arch built only on one side."¹ In his last published essay of the same month, however, James's lament exudes the passionate abandon of Nietzsche's *amor fati*: "there are no fortunes to be told," he rejoices, "no advice to be given—Farewell!"² Titled "A Pluralistic Mystic," this essay was in fact an enthusiastic tribute to James's life-long friendship with a little-known, self-proclaimed mystic, whose peculiar writings seem to offer the best of both religion and science. James's praise is unequivocal:

Not for the ignoble vulgar do I write this article, but only for those dialectic-mystic souls who have an irresistible taste, acquired or native, for higher flights of metaphysics. . . . Now for years my own taste, literary as well as philosophic, has been exquisitely titillated by a writer, the name of whom I think must be unknown to the readers of this article; so I no longer continue silent about the merits of BENJAMIN PAUL BLOOD. The author's maiden adventure was the *Anaesthetic Revelation*, a pamphlet printed privately at Amsterdam in 1874. I forgot how it fell into my hands, but it fascinated me so "weirdly" that I am conscious of its having been one of the stepping-stones of my thinking ever since. (739-40)

Blood, with whom James had corresponded and argued over the years, claimed that a state of "intense illumination or philosophic perception" could be attained through the use of anaesthetic agents. Upon observing nitrous-oxide intoxication over a fourteen-year period, Blood affirmed that in every case the reaction of the patient was identical with all others: "in those brief seconds of instant recall from stupor to recognition, each patient discovers something grotesque and unutterable about his own nature, the genius of being is revealed, and the mystery of life is understood at last as but a common thing."³ What that common thing was, however, seemed to have perplexed James in his initial encounter with the "revelation." It seems to have been nothing more than the realization, in that moment of coming to, that each person becomes vividly aware of his own uniqueness and that his "grotesque" individuality is itself an expression of God's creation. God is seen, then, not as a monistic, all-consuming One but in the diversity and change of human expression, not as the Absolute but as an ever-evolving pluralism. Under the influence of Blood's "revelation" the semi-comatose patient understands what it is to be Emerson's "Divine Man," but without the attendant monism of Emerson's absolutist position.

The “Anaesthetic Revelation” is a cosmic joke of sorts, denying heavens, hells, hierarchies and rational logic in one fell swoop. The majestic and the absurd meet with equal dignity in Blood’s laughing-gas realm, which he labels the “tasteless water of souls,” and the naked life, as Blood chooses to call it, does not require sanity as the basic quality of intelligence since sanity itself is a mere variable moving up or down the musical gamut like the humming of a wheel (34). Sliding back and forth from scientific observation to metaphor and poetic allusion, Blood weaves a seductive allegory of human existence, which James must have found compatible with his own paradoxical temperament:

This thick net of space containing all worlds—this fate of being which contains both gods and men, is the capacity of the soul, and can be claimed as greater than us only by claiming a greater than the greatest, and denying God and safety. . . . The tales, whether they be true or false, are as substantial as the things of which they tell.

“We are such stuff
As dreams are made of, and our little life
Is rounded with a sleep.” (36-37)

James’s initial reaction to Blood’s revelation was to discard it as another Hegelian confusion, which like nitrous-oxide intoxication provided only “the immense sense of reconciliation which characterizes the ‘maudlin’ stage of alcoholic drunkenness.”⁴ In its resemblance to a whirlpool, James maintained, the vortex of Hegelian dialectic is the liveliest point, and “any one who has dipped into Hegel will recognize Mr. Blood to be one of the same tribe.”⁵ He also thought he recognized in Blood the characteristic orphic strains of transcendental idealism which reverberate throughout Emerson’s writings, lulling us into blissful acceptance. He was perhaps also thinking of his own father’s Swedenborgian mysticism, with which Blood, who had attended the elder James’s lectures, was quite familiar. “I listen to the felicitously-worded concept-music circling round itself,” James writes, “as on some drowsy summer noon one listens under the pines to the murmuring of leaves and insects and with as little thought of criticism.”⁶ What leads to James’s wholehearted embracing of the “revelation” toward the end of his life is his ultimate recognition in Blood of a sort of “‘left wing’ voice of defiance,” which breaks into “a radically pluralistic sound”:

I confess that the existence of this novel brand of mysticism has made my cowering mood depart. I feel now as if my own pluralism were not without the kind of support which mystical corroboration may confer.⁷

James’s desire to “have his religion and eat it too” seems to have been realized in Blood’s pluralistic mysticism, which was indeed that, as is evident in his later work, *Pluriverse: An Essay in the Philosophy of Pluralism* (1920). In this later essay Blood disparages “monism, or oneism in philosophy,” as “a vision through the lens of the human ego as a pattern

on which its cosmos is designed. . . . Monism is the general egotism which in idealism ends as pure solipsism.”⁸ Again, one gets the impression that Emerson’s “transparent eyeball” has become a solipsistic metaphor to Blood’s way of thinking.

To those familiar with biographies of the James family, it comes as no surprise that while drawn to supernatural phenomena, hallucinogenic drugs and mystical religions, James rejected his father’s own form of empirical mysticism, which he considered a form of absolutism. His sweeping claim for Blood’s genius can be best understood as another aspect of James’s fluctuating temperament and as a reflection of a type of rebellion against authority that has become the hallmark of his thought and writing. James’s sister Alice had aptly remarked in her journal that her brother’s intellectual life was “like a blob of mercury,” untouchable with the “mental finger.”⁹ And in spite of his apparent rebellion against “father’s ideas,” James demonstrated in his own brand of humanism a religiosity closely akin to James Senior’s empirical mysticism. For William James, as for his father, the empirical basis of human existence was the necessary foundation of man’s inner, spiritual life, and redemption was possible only in the existential realm of the living. “Every end, reason, motive, object of desire or aversion, ground of sorrow or joy that we feel,” James wrote, “is in the world of finite multifariousness, for only in that world does anything really happen, only there do events come to pass.”¹⁰ James published this statement a year before his death, and the history of his intellectual growth is recorded in the painful barriers he was forced to overcome in reaching this philosophical plateau. Bringing the rudiments of his father’s mysticism to their fruition as a modern, pragmatic humanism, James carried the religious seeds of American philosophy to their predictable maturation.

Tracing the course of James’s troubled life as the eldest son in a highly competitive, neurotic household, we find a pattern emerging which can be characterized as both idealistic and adolescent. Moving from mentor to mentor, from LaFarge to Agassiz to Renouvier to Bergson, vacillating between hero worship and childish petulance, James demonstrates those qualities of an eternally questing Huck, forever “lighting out for the territory ahead of the rest,” ultimately resisting adoption and “sivilization,” but nevertheless content to float easy on a pragmatic raft which provides conscience and religion simultaneously. Just as Huck is sheltered by Nigger Jim’s superstitious but mystical faith in the signs of nature, James refused to relinquish his need for religious certitude. Experiencing the beauty of the “bright as glory” lightning against the “dark as sin” night, Huck admits (from the snugness of Jim’s cave) that he “wouldn’t want to be nowhere else but here. . . . Pass me along another hunk of fish and some hot cornbread,” he murmurs to Jim, who rejoins,

“Well, you wouldn’t ‘a’ been here ‘f it hadn’t ‘a’ ben for Jim. You’d ‘a’ ben down dah in de woods widout any diner, en gittin’ mos’ drowned, too; dat you would honey. Chickens knows when it’s gwyne to rain, en so do de birds, chile.”¹¹

James had long argued for a religious reading of his philosophical works; he too wanted the spiritual lightning along with his cornpone. In his essay on "Pragmatism and Religion," he defends pragmatism against the charge that it is a Godless system. Having completed *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902), James felt that his own pragmatism should be exempt from the charge of atheism: "Pragmatism can be called religious," he insisted, "if you allow that religion can be pluralistic or merely melioristic in type."¹² Blood was to complain in his *Pluriverse* that "finite sophistication keeps limiting existence to an All, or a One, not considering how these notions antagonize such an unlimited space" (73). The concept of pluralism and change had allowed James to accept the inarticulate experiences of mystical phenomena. Since the basis of his father's faith had been a negation of self in the larger selfhood of God, James survived only by asserting his will. As Gay Wilson Allen argues in his biography, for James the doctrine of free will was a "personal, intimate, fateful problem."¹³ Having long resisted the "primordial chaos" of mere physical sensation as an explanation of life, James found repugnant any philosophy or theory, including Freud's, which appeared to rob man of his will and his dignity. His father's mysticism seemed little higher than vegetable bliss, while Freud's theories with their sexual base seemed to chain man to a psycho-physical treadmill. As a result, James's interest in faith-healing and psychic research was very much a desperate search for spiritual renewal.

Violent as his need was to believe in the power of mind over matter, James also believed in the strength of religious feeling and its origins in the unconscious, unreasoning elements of life. James would have it both ways, and his intellectual fence-sitting resulted in disparagement from both camps; neither pure scientist nor poet, philosopher nor theologian, James was rarely analyzed as a consistent thinker. His religious views were ignored or ridiculed as aberrational and therefore regarded in isolation from the bulk of his work. With the appearance of a popular book of animal stories, *The Varieties* was quickly retitled by a scoffing audience as "Wild Religions I have Known," *The Will to Believe* becoming "Will to Make-Believe."¹⁴ It is fitting to see in James's final tribute to Blood a romantic dash of bravado, a leap into the unknown as a departing gesture of faith, Huck lighting out for the territory ahead. In this affirmation of mystery, James joins in Blood's exuberant claim:

"Simply," Blood writes to me, "*we do not know.*" But when we say, "we do not know," we are not to say it weakly and meekly, but with confidence. . . . Knowledge is and must ever be *secondary*—a witness rather than a principal—or a "principal"!—in the case. Therefore mysticism for me! (747-58)

Taking that courageous leap back into uncertainty was a spiritual victory for James. He no longer needed scientific proof of God's existence; the unknown as the all possible was the only assurance he needed. He also calls to mind the romantic heroes of his brother's fiction: Roderick Hudson tumbling over the abyss to pluck that unreachable flower for Christina

Light or Hyacinth Robinson caught between two worlds, a dark shadow of frozen potential.

James's attraction to Blood and the history of their correspondence becomes even more provocative when we realize that the equally controversial writer, Theodore Dreiser, was also sufficiently intrigued with Blood's "Anaesthetic Revelation" to find in it similarities with his own satirical play that first appeared in *The Smart Set* for February, 1915. Titled *Laughing Gas*, the play dramatizes in a grimly humorous fashion the semi-conscious struggle of a patient into awareness after an almost lethal dose of nitrous oxide. The play is included with others of a similar nature in Dreiser's *Plays of the Natural and the Supernatural*, published initially in 1916 and reissued in 1926. The second impression of the 1916 printing and the 1926 reissue contain an appended gathering which includes Blood's "Revelation" and James's reference to it in *The Will to Believe*.¹⁵ Dreiser establishes in his note of the gathering that his play was "not suggested or inspired by either of these comments. My attention was not called to them until two months after my own work had been published." The note is signed, "THE AUTHOR, New York, April, 1916" (4). Dreiser establishes the fact that he is not indebted to Blood for the subject of his play, so while it is impossible to claim the "Revelation" as a source or an influence for *Laughing Gas*, it is significant that Dreiser took the pains to have it appended in a separate gathering.

Dreiser's source of information could have been Jacques Loeb, a physiologist and biological mechanist with whom Dreiser maintained a correspondence until the scientist's death in 1924, or Elmer Gates, an amateur scientist who had first introduced Dreiser to Loeb's physiological psychology.¹⁶ It is more likely Loeb, however, since Gates played an active part in Dreiser's life at a much earlier period. Gates and Loeb were both proponents of a mechanistic explanation of human behavior and, as Ellen Moers illustrates in her study, highly influential forces behind the ideas inherent in *Sister Carrie* and in *An American Tragedy*.¹⁷ Gates proposed that states of mind produced chemical changes in the body; good thoughts were beneficial physically while bad ones eventually led to mental and physical decline. Motives in human behavior were classified as arising from will or volition, the choice one makes out of habit, education or character, or from the unconscious acts that can sometimes result in tragedy, the unthinking, Pavlovian reaction to instinct.

Dreiser's concept of chemism and magnetism supplied the powerful metaphors for his fiction in which human beings in their tragic destinies are whirled like atoms in a vast machine. Dreiser hurls his own longing cry against this pitiless machine, much as James pits his will against the void, and thus mechanism functions only to cast into relief those very human qualities that Dreiser's world view denies. Hurstwood could be "but an inconspicuous drop in an ocean like New York" and "among the forces which sweep and play throughout the universe, untutored man is but a

wisp in the wind.”¹⁸ Immediately the human is perceived, our sympathy is engaged, and the “terrible” lies beyond the pale of everything that *is* man, everything that denies his individuality. Dreiser has transformed James’s anxiety into tragic art. The paradox works for Dreiser because it supplies the highest tension possible for an audience which can no longer view its heroes in epic dimensions but which demands something a bit more satisfying, nevertheless, than Huck’s fanciful escape. Embedded in this tension is Dreiser’s own desire for religious affirmation.

While James’s birth in the Astor Hotel was prophetically blessed by Emerson, Theodore Dreiser’s puny entrance into the world was “presided over by unearthly agents.”¹⁹ Fearing his death, his mother consulted an old German woman who reputedly possessed supernatural powers. After elaborate instructions, which included measuring him from head to toe and from finger-tip to finger-tip, chanting a solemn ritual and exposing his infant face to the light of the moon, Theodore recovered.²⁰ The desire to believe, one might conclude, was thus firmly implanted at the moment of Dreiser’s miraculous recovery. In his introduction to *The Novels of Theodore Dreiser*, Donald Pizer tells us that Dreiser was highly responsive to the popular philosophy and religion of his day, suggesting that “his disbelief was always to be accompanied [as was James’s] by a will to believe”:

From his earliest *Ev’ry Month* editorials of 1895 to his death in 1945, Dreiser argued that experience was chaotic, directionless, and valueless. At the same time, though in various ways and with various degrees of self-awareness, he sought to find evidence that it had both meaning and value.²¹

As with James’s philosophy, Dreiser’s views of life were an expression of his “ever growing and developing personality,” and just as James’s arch remained unfinished so Dreiser’s multiverse “required a fluctuating, wavering of the ragged-edged and the un-limited.”²² For Dreiser the psychic world and the physical world were never divided, and while described by those who knew him as “an awestruck mystic,” he was nevertheless regarded by most as a “ramping materialist.” Dreiser, of course, would not have seen any contradiction in two such opposing views of his character.

Dreiser’s *Plays* reveal his efforts to render his speculations into artistic form. Forwarding copies of the plays to H. L. Mencken for his opinion, Dreiser assured him that he was “not turning esoteric, metaphysical or spiritualistic. These are merely an effort at drama outside the ordinary limits of dramatic interpretation.”²³ Mencken did not understand what Dreiser was up to with *Laughing Gas* and dismissed it as inferior work. Reviews of the plays in this collection, however, were more sympathetic, seeing in them a strange, haunting power. In spite of Dreiser’s disclaimer, his philosophical speculations do indicate a deep absorption in questions of consciousness and will. In an essay on this theme Dreiser explores the nature of the dark force that rules our being. His title for the essay that was conceived between 1911 and 1925 is simply “It.”

We say so often that we control our minds, but do we? . . .

If the body complains that it cannot, that it lacks strength, It, in the subconscious where It dwells, grieves or curses, sets up a darkling mood of sorrow, a giant despair that may wreck the very machinery of the organism itself and so free It from Its bondage.

Dark, central force that rules in our midst, that sings whether we will or no, plays whether we will or no, decides, whether the circumstances seem propitious or no, reads, dreams, mourns. . . .
It!

The wonder of It!²⁴

In a later poem called "Machine," Dreiser gives us a lyrical rendition of man's humanistic strivings within his limitations as mere mechanism. Published in a 1926 collection titled *Moods*, this poem seems to offer a paradoxical religious synthesis without denying man his capacity for will. The logic, however, is simply that of the poem itself:

How comes a machine to be dancing?
Singing?
Running?
Playing?
Laughing?
Brooding?
Weeping?
A machine
Most carefully
And artfully constructed
And yet manufactured by billions
And that by reasons of chemicals
And elements
Most carefully compounded
Goes?
A machine that any blow will break
And that ordinary wear and tear
Will cause to disintegrate
And stranger still
That grief
And disappointment
If you please
Will cause it to destroy itself!²⁵

Such speculations and their poetic counterparts lead quite naturally to the dramatic humor or pathos of Dreiser's philosophic plays.

Laughing Gas is a good example of Dreiser's metaphorical transformation of laboratory science into speculative drama. The protagonist, Jason Vatabeel, is an eminent physician who himself must submit to surgery. "Well, Jason, here you are, a victim of surgery after all!" Fenway Bail, the operating surgeon, gloats. As the nitrous oxide takes effect Vatabeel drifts off into the rhythm of the universe, "Om! Om! Om! Om! Om! Om!," and is transported into the realm of spirit. The forces of the

universe then collect in an allegorical drama of life, accompanied always by the “Om! Om!” of the vast machine. Alcephoran is a power of physics that generates ideas ceaselessly as in a mood, without form or thought. “Deep, deep and involute are the ways and the substance of things,” Alcephoran chants, “an endless sinking, an endless rising!” As Vatabeel speeds toward death (his tumor lies critically close to the carotid artery), shadows appear.

The First Shadow blames Vatabeel’s decline on Valerian, “an element inimical to him. . . . It may be that he will live.” Vatabeel begins to experience “a vast depression as of endless space and unutterable loneliness,” and engages in a colloquy with the spirits on the meaning of life. Demyaphon, who appears only as thoughts placed in the dreamer’s mind, cynically asserts, “To that which you seek there is no solution. A tool, a machine, you spin and spin on a given course through new worlds and old. Vain, vain! For you there is no great end.” As the anaesthesia is increased, Vatabeel’s thoughts in the character of Demyaphon become one with the laughing gas itself. A sense of something formless comes over Vatabeel, and he is conscious of a desire to smile also, though in a hopeless mechanical way. “I am laughing gas, for one thing,” Demyaphon proclaims. “You will laugh with me because of me, shortly. You will not be able to help yourself. You are a mere machine run by forces which you cannot understand.” Demyaphon tells Vatabeel that in order to live, he must create himself anew. “Round and round . . . the same difficulty, the same operation . . . your whole life repeated detail by detail. . . . Now if you live you must make an effort or die.” (The gas smiles.) Vatabeel struggles desperately to assist himself to live. The struggle, of course, is against the machine. “I must live, I must try, I do not want to die. . . . Think of our being mere machines to be used by others!” (He struggles again without physically stirring.) Vatabeel struggles to establish himself on a new plane, but his greatest struggle comes with acceptance of the machine. “What if I do go round and round! I am a man! Beyond this, what? Nothing? I serve!” This ultimate acceptance of both the machine and of his own humanness thus rekindles the spark of life in Vatabeel. While the mode is comic, the gesture is the classic one of religious faith. As Vatabeel comes to life, he is vibrated by the vast machine until he becomes one with a multiverse of uncontrollable laughter. “Oh, ho! ho! ho! I see it all now! Oh, what a joke! Oh, what a trick! . . . The folly of life! . . . Ah, ha! ha! ha!” As Vatabeel leaves the hospital his face “retains a look of deep amazed abstraction.”

If Vatabeel has experienced a revelation it has transformed him forever. The cosmic joke is also an affirmation; Vatabeel survives because he proclaims his own humanity in the face of annihilation, accepting a life force analogous to Dreiser’s gigantic “It.” Body and soul are irrevocably linked in the vast machine, and Vatabeel, like James, is forced to renounce all systems. “There is no conclusion,” James insisted. “What has concluded that we might conclude in regard to it?”²⁶ There remains, it would seem, only the everlasting “Om” of a mystical pluriverse.

In summary, it appears that while James and Dreiser are in most instances at opposite ends of an immense ideologic gulf, their mutual realization of an impulse that can only be described accurately as religious offers insight into an important aspect of the American creative consciousness. Writing to Xenos Clark from Cambridge in 1880, James claimed that the mystical experience was an ineffable occurrence best defined by poetic language.

I don't much expect that you will get any farther in your attempts at formulating "ø" than you have got already. . . . The attempt to state even its ineffability in your hands as well as in those of Blood only leads to metaphors and epigrams. . . . Isn't it probable that the hypnotic trance of Indian fakirs . . . induced by the syllable *om* produced your "ø" in their minds?²⁷

James's question, like Vatabeel's, was answered at the end of his life with a rejection of all that is "known" or proven in favor of the "unknown."

While all of this might seem archly romantic, the origins of such an impulse can be perceived in statements such as Emerson's that "man is man by virtue of willing, not by virtue of knowing and understanding. As he is, so he sees"²⁸; or even in Whitman's Vedantic belief that he is his own creator through his Adamic re-naming of the world from a position of assumed innocence. This Edenic movement in the philosophy and literature of nineteenth-century America emphasizes the urge felt by writers to recapture innocence through negation of institutions, systems and science. But the impulse can be understood also as typifying that element in American culture which has always emphasized the inner life. As our society becomes more and more mechanized, more and more scientific, a countermovement inevitably emerges that seeks spiritual affirmation either through a return to primitivism or through an attempt to incorporate mechanism and science in the philosophy and literature of the age—to reinterpret the machine or transform it to the uses of the humanist. James's inherited belief that a man's inner world of vision is as real as the external world of fact was his synthesis of apparently incongruent forces. "To the psychologist," James insisted, "the religious propensities of man must be at least as interesting as any other of the facts pertaining to his mental constitution."²⁹ In his experimentation with mind-altering drugs, James most clearly reveals the deep seriousness of his attachment to vision. He never lost faith, even when denied the "mystical" euphoria described by others.

The continuation of this stream in American thinking is illustrated by Eckard Toy's recent study of the use of psychedelic drugs by the conservative strata of American society. Toy cites the movement of The Wayfarers as an example of this phenomenon. Growing out of conservative theological and political roots, the group flourished during the late fifties, sanctioning even experimentation "with drugs and psychic phenomena" in an effort to be "as scientific about religion as we are about science."³⁰ One of its principal members was William Mullendore,

chairman of the board of Southern California Edison Company. As Toy points out,

Although he was a conservative Republican, a moderately devout United Presbyterian, and sixty-six years old when he first tried LSD, Mullendore did not consider his actions either rebellious or deviant. He sought primarily to improve his creative intelligence and, secondarily, to enhance his spiritual awareness. Mullendore found in his experiment with LSD a partial corrective for his deepening pessimism about the future of the United States (70).

Toy's article is particularly valuable for the light it throws back on people like James and Dreiser, who also attempted to mitigate their despair by searching for new forms of spiritual expansion. Shaping "the original psychotherapy experiments with psychedelic drugs into a quasi-religious form," men like Mullendore can be seen in Toy's estimation as individualists "who longed for an elitist utopia" and who in the midst of their pessimism yet maintained a "faith that somehow man's mind would transcend and survive mankind" (75, 76).

The implications of this phenomenon for American writers, particularly those with a high degree of social awareness, are rather far reaching. In the case of William's brother Henry James, personal vision constituted a religion, and in the words of A. D. Van Nostrand, it ultimately led to "the search for a language" through which "to express it":

In the act of expression the religion and the language to convey it are mutually dependent. . . . In these cosmologies a philosophy of God and a philosophy of composition are inseparable. If truth could be absolutely named they would never have been written.³¹

In Henry James's later work he frequently makes use of the mystical experience as a dramatic metaphor for self-understanding. As Martha Banta points out in her study of James's use of the supernatural: "the occult, the psychical and the transcendent do not refer to outside influences such as demons, nature spirits, gods, the stars or the planets. They apply solely to hidden powers of the human mind that go sufficiently beyond the 'ordinary' to grant it that metaphoric stature of the 'exceptional' that Henry James often sought for his privileged characters."³² Perhaps the most recent culmination of this impulse in American literature can be seen in the science fiction writer, Ursula LeGuin. In her novel, *The Left Hand of Darkness*, she describes the ultimate religious experience as one of "ignorance." The high priest insists that his "business is unlearning, not learning. . . . The unknown, the unfortold, the unproven, that is what life is based on."³³ And, as if in confirmation of Huck's "lighting out" at the end of his adventures, LeGuin's priest asserts that "if it were proven that there is no God there would be no religion. . . . The only thing that makes life possible is permanent, intolerable uncertainty: not knowing what comes next" (71).

The "intolerable uncertainty" of existence might well be translated into William James's vision of a random "pluriverse" or Dreiser's sense of

the vast machine. Despair with fact, with science, with progress only throws man back upon himself and ultimately produces the paradoxical amphibian of American culture: the religious pragmatist, the realist writer turned spiritualist, the materialistic mystic. When Herman Melville shocked his literary contemporaries by producing a monster of a work that dared to mix "metaphysics with chowder," he was writing out of a very old and continuing tradition. The voice of darkest pessimism often reveals a desperate need for religious affirmation in American life and letters, and writers such as Dreiser offer us much in the way of social analysis. If a "true believer" lurks beneath the mask of Theodore Dreiser while William James embraces the void with ecstasy, why shouldn't "the Chairman of the Board" take LSD?

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notes

1. July 26, 1910. See Gay Wilson Allen, *William James, A Biography* (New York, 1967), 496.
2. "A Pluralistic Mystic," *The Hibbert Journal*, 8 (July, 1910), 759.
3. *The Anaesthetic Revelation and the Gist of Philosophy* (Amsterdam, New York, 1874), 34.
4. "Some Hegelisms," *The Will to Believe* (New York, 1897), 294-95.
5. "A Pluralistic Mystic," 741-42.
6. *Ibid.*, 746.
7. *Ibid.*, 740-41.
8. Boston, 1920, 81.
9. November 18, 1889, in Anna Robeson Burr, *Alice James: Her Brothers, Her Journal* (New York, 1934), 112.
10. "Monistic Idealism" in *A Pluralistic Universe* (1909; Cambridge, 1975), 28.
11. *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Sculley Bradley et al., ed. (New York, 1977), 43-44.
12. "Pragmatism and Religion," *Pragmatism: A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking* (1907; Cambridge, 1975), 143-44.
13. *William James, A Biography*, 164.
14. See Julius Bixler's *Religion in the Philosophy of William James* (Boston, 1926), 1.
15. See *Plays of the Natural and the Supernatural* (1916; New York, 1926), appended gathering, 1-4.
16. While Dreiser did not correspond with Loeb until after 1919, both Ellen Moers and Donald Pizer indicate that Dreiser was undoubtedly reading Loeb much earlier, possibly as early as 1912. Dreiser himself is slightly unreliable in his recollection of when he first read Loeb, his dates ranging from 1912 to 1919. Ellen Moers believed that his knowledge of Loeb's ideas dates from 1915, a supposition confirmed in part by the frequent appearance of Loeb's names and ideas in Dreiser's unpublished essays from that point. In a letter to Loeb on May 29, 1919 (in the Library of Congress), Dreiser noted that he had read Loeb's "The Mechanistic Conception of Life" (1912) "several years ago." See Pizer's *The Novels of Theodore Dreiser* (Minnesota, 1976), 360, n. 12.
17. See *Two Dreisers* (New York, 1969).
18. *Sister Carrie*, edited by Donald Pizer (New York, 1970), 214, 256.
19. See Robert Elias' *Theodore Dreiser: Apostle of Nature* (Ithaca, 1949), 3.
20. *Ibid.*, 4.
21. Minneapolis, 14.
22. See John Cowper Powys' introduction to Theodore Dreiser's *Notes on Life*, edited by Marguerite Tjader and John J. McAleer (University, Alabama, 1974), xi.
23. July 29, 1914, in *Letters of Theodore Dreiser*, Robert Elias, ed. (Philadelphia, 1959), 171.
24. *Theodore Dreiser: A Selection of Uncollected Prose*, Donald Pizer, ed. (Detroit, 1977), 221-23.
25. See *Selected Poems*, with introduction and notes by Robert Saalbach (New York, 1969), 192-93.
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27. December 12, 1880, in Ralph Barton Perry's *The Thought and Character of William James*, I (Boston, 1935), 727.
28. In "Swedenborg; or, the Mystic" from *The Complete Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson* (New York, 1929), 365.
29. *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* (New York, 1902), 2.
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33. New York, 1969, 69-71.