

HENRY JAMES' NARRATIVE TECHNIQUE

*Consciousness, Perception,
and Cognition*

KRISTIN BOUDREAU

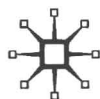


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PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Henry James' Narrative Technique: Consciousness, Perception, and Cognition situates Henry James' famous narrative technique within an emerging modernist tradition with roots in philosophical debates between rationalism and empiricism. The book takes as its point of departure T. S. Eliot's famous (and famously misunderstood) claim that James "had a mind so fine that no idea could violate it." Although most critics responding to Eliot's description have misunderstood it to mean that thought itself could not survive in such a rarefied mind as James', Eliot meant his remark as high praise, and we can begin to understand his words only when we consider them within a philosophical tradition that distinguished "ideas" from "thought and feeling." Eliot had this tradition in mind when he dismissed ideas in favor of superior cognitive activities like thought and feeling—activities that he saw exhibited in James' writings far more consistently than in the works of his contemporaries. James was "the most intelligent man of his generation," Eliot maintained. This book takes seriously Eliot's distinction between thought and ideas and the philosophical tradition that provided these categories and informed his thinking.

The tradition that shaped Eliot's literary criticism also influenced Henry James' depictions of consciousness, which sit at the center of his narrative technique. Although James did not read systematically in philosophy, he was familiar with many of the philosophical debates of his day because his brother William and his father, Henry, took part in them and shared their work with the younger Henry James. To examine some of the philosophical debates that the novelist encountered—in particular, the dispute between his father and Ralph Waldo Emerson and then a generation later his brother William's differences with rationalist philosophy—is to conclude that James would have shared Eliot's suspicion of ideas, whose definition for nineteenth-century philosophers was very close to today's definition of "ideology." James would have recalled his father's maddening dispute with Emerson over the value of empirical and a priori knowledge (Emerson valued the former, James the latter) and would have been

reminded of it in his brother's philosophy, which shared Emerson's esteem for randomly acquired empirical details or what William James called "the passing pulses of our life."

The debate between ideas and thought is played out in both the plots and the narrative form of James' writings. This book explores James' narrative investigations into these various modes of cognition, with the aim of showing that his temperamental preference for thought and feeling rather than ideas had consequences for the kind of narratives he wrote. Narrative possibility is most challenged by thought, feeling, and other forms of cognition that (unlike ideas) don't lend themselves to simple pronouncements. James' famous technique of moving between various centers of consciousness is most fruitful when those consciousnesses are open to a wide range of stimuli; the narrow-minded consciousness does not invite the same kind of narrative experimentation.

Like many projects that consider and explain James' narrative technique, this book consists of close readings of several of his long and short fictional works. My particular approach is to situate these readings within a larger discussion of the philosophical traditions informing James' narrative innovations, a context that gives rise to a compelling story of the novelist's own deep reflections on the ways we apprehend reality. My approach combines biography, literary criticism, and cultural history to account for James' development as a thinker and a writer. I have tried to write a story about James in his cultural moment that will appeal to philosophers and nonphilosophers alike.

Without knowing it until recently, I have been brooding on this book for many years. I trace its inspiration to an episode from my distant graduate school days that might have remained an embarrassment and nothing more but for that remarkable process of ripening and unfolding that Emerson describes in his "Natural History of the Intellect." Like many critics before me, I had blundered into characterizing Eliot's description of James as an "insult"; unlike these earlier critics, I was then in the company of one of the most careful readers of his own generation, James Longenbach. Jim corrected me, assuring me that Eliot had written his remark in admiration. Mortification and the press of other projects kept me from thinking too much about what it might mean to believe that ideas really could "violate" a mind, but in later years, reading and rereading James and Emerson with my students, I returned many times to Eliot's comment, seeing more in James' narratives as I read them in the light of Eliot's distinction between ideas and their superior cognitive modes.

So my first debt of gratitude is to Jim, whose example of attentive and generous reading has served me well as I have returned to James again and again. Having provided the inspiration for this book, of course, he should be held blameless for its faults.

Anybody who has held an administrative position knows the value of support staff to attend to details and help a scholar create and defend small fortresses of time. This book would never have been written without the loyal and generous support of Melanie Childers, Mary Helen Menken, Patty Bradberry, Bennie McKinley, and Deana Howard of the University of Georgia English Department; its birth pangs would have been much more acute if not for the warm welcome and gracious efforts of Margaret Brodmerkle, Mary Cotnoir, and Karen Hassett of the Department of Humanities and Arts at Worcester Polytechnic Institute. In addition to these kind and loyal souls, I have been fortunate to work with outstanding librarians and technical support staff. Virginia Feher and her colleagues at the University of Georgia Interlibrary Loan Department have been invaluable resources, embracing all my assignments with alacrity. At Worcester Polytechnic Institute, I've found Ellen Lincourt and David Botelho to be enthusiastic partners in my quests to find and reproduce images. Gregory Houston, Richard Virr, and Ann Marie Holland at McGill University's Rare Books and Special Collections located and reproduced the image of Henry James and his bicycle that appears on the cover here. I am grateful to the McGill University Library for permission to reproduce that photograph, which comes from the Leon Edel Collection in the McGill University Library's Special Collections. I never knew exactly which librarian at the University of Virginia's Special Collections library helped me to locate and reproduce Max Beerbohm's caricature of Henry James, but I thank the staff for their work and gratefully acknowledge the Clifton Waller Barrett Library at the University of Virginia for permission to reproduce the image. I'm grateful to Lisa Reitzes, formerly of Trinity University, and Tracy Baker-White, formerly of the San Antonio Museum of Art, for making it possible for me to view and view again (almost memorizing the details of) John Singer Sargent's splendid painting, *Sortie de l'église, Campo San Canciano, Venice*, which I first encountered in 1996 at an exhibit of American impressionism at the San Antonio Museum of Art. For permission to reproduce that image, and for their generosity in sharing it with the world first in the spectacular SAMA space and then subsequently at larger museums as part of a traveling Sargent exhibit, I thank Marie and Hugh Halff.

I am grateful for two grants that supported more sustained reading in philosophy and to the people who made these experiences so

rich. As my Department Head at the University of Georgia, Nelson Hilton supported my application to these two programs and shared my enthusiasm when I received them, and I thank him for his encouragement. A Study in a Second Discipline Grant from the University of Georgia enabled me to spend a year immersed in philosophy courses. In that year I was treated to rigorous and exciting classes taught by Beth Preston, Elizabeth Brient, and Richard Winfield at the University of Georgia; I was also able to do my own desultory reading and reflecting on the philosophical traditions that informed James' writings. A grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities offered me the rare privilege of studying later that year with the philosopher Russell Goodman at the University of New Mexico; he and my fellow students in the seminar "Reading Emerson's Essays" provided a thrilling intellectual pause in my ordinary work as a college teacher. That episode has enriched my teaching and has remained with me as the high-water mark of my academic life. More specifically, it gave me the opportunity to discover a different Emerson than I had previously known: a philosopher who valued "intellect receptive," a cognitive disposition he described as a "pious reception." This was the Emerson who so thoroughly influenced Henry James, and my sense of James has developed with my growing admiration for Emerson. *Henry James' Narrative Technique* would have been a very different (and inferior) book if not for the influence of my fellow Emersonians, in particular Russell Goodman, Tom Meyer, Todd Richardson, Bonnie Carr, Elizabeth Addison, John Holzwarth, Tom Alexander, Felicia Kruse, and Kelly Jolley.

I have had the great good fortune to teach some splendid students over the years, particularly at the University of Georgia. Conversations and classes with Leslie Petty, Leslie McAbee, Jessica Holden, Jennifer Eimers, Rosemary Luttrell, Mollie Barnes, Steph Hyre, and Amber Shaw have enriched my thinking about James, Emerson, and narrative. At Georgia as well I relied on four particular friends and colleagues—Doug Anderson, Hubert McAlexander, Adam Parkes, and Susan Rosenbaum—to challenge and inspire me. I owe a special debt of gratitude to Doug, who has always been for me an ideal reader, colleague, and friend and who lately has compounded my debt with his example as the Perfect Department Head. He has given me much over the years, most recently the impression that he wouldn't rather be reading in solitude than dealing with my various annoyances. I've never believed his act but have been touched by the effort he puts into it.

Linda Simon's attentive reading and generous advice helped me pull this project together in its final stages, and my editors at Palgrave

Macmillan, Brigitte Shull and Lee Norton, have patiently and expertly shepherded it through to press. An appealingly interdisciplinary audience at Worcester Polytechnic Institute sat through a portion of my final chapter here and gave me welcome advice and attention; I am grateful to these new colleagues for their (unexpected) interest in Henry James and his late prose style. And while I do not impose Henry James on them, my family have always been my greatest champions, and I thank them—my father, Gordon; my husband, Kes; my siblings Vin, Toinette, Joe, Pascale, Maura, Pete, Suzy, John, Gordy, Lou, and Margaret—for their constant solidarity through the years.

Finally, this book is for my daughter Grace, who knows (and teaches me daily) the superiority of possibilities over finished facts.

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INTRODUCTION



THINKING OF PHILOSOPHY

Readers of Henry and William James have often observed that while Henry wrote novels like a psychologist, William wrote psychology like a novelist.¹ Numerous critics have studied the influence of William's professional disciplines, psychology and philosophy, on the fictional writings of his brother Henry.² While I am following these critics in attending to Henry James' broad concern with depicting consciousness, I am focusing more narrowly on his specific but no less persistent concern with the distinction between thought and ideas. T. S. Eliot famously described Henry James as a man with "a mind so fine that no idea could violate it," and while this description is occasionally quoted, it has never been adequately explained, let alone tested. None of the scholars who takes up the topic of James' indebtedness to philosophy and psychology has had much to say about Eliot's observation or about his distinction between thought and idea, although it was an important (if unexpressed) concern for Henry James as well as for this most discerning critic. Most critics who respond to Eliot's comment, in fact, have typically misunderstood it as an insult. But the statement was high if eccentric praise from Eliot, whose graduate work was in philosophy and whose distinction between "ideas" and "thought" requires careful attention to elucidate properly. Here is Eliot's comment in context:

James' critical genius comes out most tellingly in his mastery over, his baffling escape from, Ideas; a mastery and an escape which are perhaps the last test of a superior intelligence. He had a mind so fine that no idea could violate it In England, ideas run wild and pasture on the emotions; instead of thinking with our feelings (a very different thing) we corrupt our feelings with ideas; we produce the public, the

political, the emotional idea, evading sensation and thought. . . . Mr. Chesterton's brain swarms with ideas; I see no evidence that it thinks. James in his novels is like the best French critics in maintaining a point of view, a view-point untouched by the parasite idea. He is the most intelligent man of his generation. (*The Little Review* 1918)

For Eliot, the practice of "thinking with our feelings" was altogether too rare; the "parasite idea" was too often allowed to corrupt or occlude "sensation and thought."

What did Eliot mean by this distinction between thought and ideas, and would it be wrongheaded to turn to philosophy to discover the clue not only to Eliot's criticism but also to James' depictions of consciousness? Henry James, unlike T. S. Eliot, never studied philosophy, although he was an avid and eclectic reader who enthusiastically read most of his brother William's writings. He never studied the tradition of "ideas" in Western philosophy—a tradition that begins with Plato's forms and assumes a number of very different incarnations, as diverse as the thing that evolves from "impressions" in empiricist thought³ and the substance of all matter in Hegel's system of world history.⁴ We do know, however, that some of this tradition made its way into his consciousness, not only as an adult when he was reading his brother's published works on philosophy and psychology, but still earlier when he was a young man growing up in Cambridge and hearing the debates about idealism that transpired in that intellectual community.

Henry James' brother William came to hate the idealism that both boys learned at their father's knee. For William James, writing later in *Pragmatism*, abstract ideas were scarcely distinguishable from ideology, the use of an abstract principle that tends to override all contradictory empirical evidence. William derided such abstractions—what he called "rationalism"—in his groundbreaking philosophical study. Rationalism, he claimed, "lose[s] contact with the concrete parts of life" (13), forcing all experience into a single model of truth. To be sure, the philosopher recognized the allure of this model. Writing in *A Pluralistic Universe*, he observed that philosophers "have substituted economical and orderly conceptions for the first sensible tangle [of experience]; and whether these were morally elevated or only intellectually neat, they were at any rate always aesthetically pure and definite, and aimed at ascribing to the world something clean and intellectual in the way of inner structure" (45). In contrast, the "pluralistic empiricism" that James preferred, he admitted, "offers but a sorry appearance. It is a turbid,

muddled, gothic sort of an affair, without a sweeping outline and with little pictorial nobility" (45).

But, James insisted, not only does the rationalist's model of the world falsely depict our muddled world, it also discourages us human subjects from drawing on the full resources of our perceptions to experience that world. In her recent discussion of James' hostility to rationalism, Linda Simon paints a vivid picture of the attractions this muddled world held for James and his reasons for preferring his "sorry" alternative of empiricism to the "orderly" scheme advanced by rationalists. If rationalism proposes an "intellectually neat" form of reality, that is because it omits many of the messy but real details of experience that interfere with its neatness. As Simon argues, "James believed that systems, paradigms, and intellectualized orderliness—whether from philosophy, science, or religion—preclude our apprehending reality" ("Bewitched" 41). The model is false, but its gravest danger is the threat it poses to our perceptions: ideas and systems "threatened to obscure awareness, forcing people to believe they knew what they saw or felt before an experience had even taken place" (43).

James objected so vehemently to systems because he valued perception (including what Eliot identified as thought and feeling) above any idea that might seek to generalize or tidy up these elements of experience. As Simon observes, these perceptual and emotional elements, resisting an orderly design, delightfully and at times mad-deningly complex, inviting observation, analysis, and enjoyment, constituted a promise of pleasure predicated on the unexpected. This promise was menaced by rationalist schemes and ideas, which offered a priori explanations of the world. "A world without the possibility of the new," Simon writes, "a world that is consistent and predictable: such a world would be nothing less than catastrophic. For James, novelty is implicit in a 'cosmological theory of *promise*,' a theory that posits an unstable, inconstant universe containing not merely the tangible, but the miraculous and astonishing" (39).

William James, we can see, held ideas (or what he also called "concepts") in contempt even as he understood their nearly irresistible appeal. If his novelist-brother never so explicitly proclaimed hostility to ideas, we can see why T. S. Eliot saw in Henry James' writings an opposition to ideas that might have rivaled William's more direct attacks. Henry's preferred medium was the novel, a form that invited explorations into individual subjective states. If his fictions stopped short of seeking the answers to the riddles of existence that motivated his brother's philosophy and psychology, still the forms of fiction invite a minute attentiveness that can be found as well in

William's chosen disciplines. Linda Simon describes here William's esteem for empiricism in terms that might just as easily be applied to Henry's theory of fiction: "James' rejection of scientific and philosophical systems was motivated, in part, by his desire to account for the importance of the complexity of feelings, perceptions, and states of being that comprised the protean self. One path to self-knowledge, he believed, involved close attention to one's responses to the intricacy and contingency of experiences. 'The deeper features of reality are found only in perceptual experience,' he wrote" (43-44).

What was Henry James' epistemology? If, as Eliot contends, the novelist shared his brother's resistance to ideology—and if, as I am contending, he also understood the attraction to ideological thought—it will be helpful to consider the intellectual climate of Cambridge that gave rise to his own responses to ideas, his sense of the relative superiority of thought and feeling to ideas, though tempered, as always, by his sense that ideas could be impossibly seductive. His experiments in fiction, I will be arguing, dramatize the ebb and flow of these two powerful poles of epistemology, as the mind alternates between the grasp of an idea and the condition of abandonment to other moods, other sources of meaning, that we can best identify as anti-ideological.

These two alternating positions were a topic of much discussion in the novelist's adulthood, particularly among his brother's friends at Harvard. These intellectuals were deeply influenced by the work of the empiricists, particularly David Hume, whose empiricism, though James thought it overly hardheaded and materialistic, nevertheless correctly identified the problem of dogmatism that had plagued Western philosophy.⁵ "The rationalist finally," James noted in his lectures on Pragmatism, "will be of dogmatic temper in his affirmations, while the empiricist may be more sceptical and open to discussion" (*Pragmatism* 10). Elsewhere he defined "the dogmatic ideal" as "the postulate, uncriticised, undoubted, and unchallenged, of all rationalizers in philosophy" (*Pluralistic Universe* 100-101). While William James, as we have seen, railed against rationalist thought in *Pragmatism* (where he called rationalism a "serpent," 13), his friend Charles Sanders Peirce had identified the problem of dogmatic thought as early as 1877 in "The Fixation of Belief," an essay he published in *Popular Science Monthly*. There he demonstrated that dogmatism was a problem plaguing ordinary people as well as philosophers. Peirce distinguished between the scientific method, which relies on the "laws of perception," and three dogmatic alternatives. The "method of tenacity," motivated by a "vague dread of doubt,"

prompts people to “cling spasmodically to the views they already take” rather than submit those views to new and perhaps challenging facts, thereby fixing beliefs in individuals. The “method of authority” fixes belief within an entire community by regulating opinions with force, thereby making “intellectual slaves” of individuals. The “a priori method” generates not only obedience but even the “impulse to believe,” and though it leaves the believer “outwardly quite free to choose” what to believe, it nudges him toward particular beliefs by means of “accidental causes” rather than facts. All three of these forms of belief are versions of what we might call ideology, as distinct from an inductive method that refrains from judging in favor of a less conclusive, more empirical mode of confronting the world—what T. S. Eliot referred to as “thought” and “feeling,” Peirce attributed to the “laws of perception,” and William James fondly and playfully described as “the immediately given world of sense and all its squalid particulars” (*Pluralistic Universe* 93). Their colleague John Dewey, too, distinguished between what I have been calling “ideology”—he called it a “system” or “authority”⁶—and a mode of thinking that he identified with democracy or open-mindedness. The “democratic faith,” he maintained, could be stated

in the formal terms of a philosophic position. So stated, democracy is belief in the ability of human experience to generate the aims and methods by which further experience will grow in ordered richness. Every other form of moral and social faith rests upon the idea that experience must be subjected at some point or other to some form of external control; to some “authority” alleged to exist outside the processes of experience. Democracy is the faith that the process of experience is more important than any special result attained. . . . (“Creative Democracy” 229)

The point here is not that these philosophers all shared the same philosophy: although they have all been identified with Pragmatism, they in fact disagreed about what that meant. Rather, I mean to argue that they shared a deep suspicion of a priori thought and philosophical systems that did not grant the greatest possible authority to what the novelist Henry James would later call “experience liberated.”⁷ For Dewey, Peirce, and William James, immediate experience, insofar as it could be freed from prejudice, must be the beginning of any true belief, rather than being subordinated to some preconceived idea about the world (alternately called “rationalist” or “dogmatic”) that would distort or suppress experience. As James insisted, “the only material we have at our disposal for making a picture of the whole world is supplied

by the various portions of that world of which we have already had experience. We can invent no new forms of conception . . . not suggested originally by the parts" (*Pluralistic Universe* 8).

It is no accident that Dewey identified Ralph Waldo Emerson with the philosophical position of open-mindedness—he called Emerson the “philosopher of democracy”—because Emerson often found himself defending the empirical method against his friend Henry James, Sr.’s, more dogmatic idealism. Emerson was dismissive of intellectual systems—at his most mild he “confess[ed] to a little distrust of that completeness of system which metaphysicians are apt to affect,”⁸ though he tended to use more vehement expressions of this distrust. He was much more tolerant of methods, which specified a procedure but did not impose a comprehensive body of doctrines or overdetermine an outcome. Emerson believed that nature has a method, not often discerned by humans,⁹ and that humans were patterned after nature: “Each mind,” he wrote in “Intellect,” “has its own method.”¹⁰ Temperamentally, Emerson was drawn toward an empirical outlook on the world that must have irritated the elder James, who exercised a much different philosophical attitude.

As we will see in a brief exploration of the vexed friendship between Emerson and James, the hostility between ideas and thought, rationalism and empiricism, or dogmatism and open-mindedness, was not something that T. S. Eliot invented or even that William James’ generation of philosophers introduced. The novelist first encountered the competition between these two philosophical outlooks in his childhood, and if we want to recover traces of the controversy from the New England of Henry James’ youth, we can do no better than examine the different intellectual dispositions of his father, the famously ideological Swedenborgian, and his father’s sometime friend and antagonist, Ralph Waldo Emerson. Although I want to resist the temptation of identifying either man with any one consistent position, it is roughly accurate to say that James, Sr., was the more unfailingly dogmatic in his beliefs while Emerson was more inclined to let his experiences determine his beliefs. Though both men were idealists of a sort, they were idealists of very different sorts, and we can speculate that their differences provided the young Henry James with much food for later thought.

Andrew Taylor calls attention to the “small but significant detail” of Isabel Archer’s reading matter in an early chapter of *Portrait of a Lady*, when Lydia Touchett discovers her young niece in the Archer family house in Albany. Isabel is reading a history of German philosophy, which, Taylor notes, recalls the tension between James,

Sr., and Emerson. While Emerson was deeply and favorably influenced by Kant—as distilled for American readers by the Unitarian minister Frederic Henry Hedge—the senior James reacted with hostility to the idea that, as Hedge put it, “the world without depends on the nature of our intuitions” rather than the other way around. Taylor notes that James’ “1863 volume *Substance and Shadow* contains an attack on Kant’s ideas, suggesting that the German thinker had erroneously . . . plac[ed] man at the centre of the philosophical universe” (Taylor 127). We shall see how central this difference was to the tension between Emerson, who counted self-reliance among the most important virtues, and his friend James, who believed that society could do no better than redeem the wicked individual by purging him of his very selfhood. As many critics have observed, Isabel’s immature ideas resemble Emerson’s, but we should also bear in mind that her young unstructured life, her grandmother’s Albany house, and her extended family of cousins evoke the novelist’s own youth. James’ choice to place this book of German philosophy in her hands—a book, Taylor reminds us, that “contains ideas which James Senior would consider to be pernicious” (128)—suggests that even as James was venturing on his first fictional masterpiece, his mind was turned toward the intellectual debates of his earlier years.

EMERSON, JAMES, SR., AND EUROPEAN PHILOSOPHY

Although Emerson mentioned Kant approvingly on occasion—most notably in “The Transcendentalist” (1842) and *Essays: First Series* (1841)—it is doubtful that either he or James ever read Kant directly. If Kant was a polarizing figure for James and Emerson, then, we might expect even more dramatic differences over the philosophers that both men did read directly, though it should come as no surprise that these differences, like others, coalesced around the importance of the individual. The German idealist G. W. F. Hegel was one such figure whose powerful presence in American intellectual circles drew the attention of both James and Emerson. Hegelianism reigned supreme among particular groups of American philosophers centered in St. Louis and Cincinnati from the 1850s until nearly the end of the century, and both Emerson and James, Sr., were auxiliary members of the St. Louis Hegelians¹¹—though, as we shall see, that fact may mean less than it seems.

Emerson did not discover the German idealist until late in life, but the American’s writings, early and late, reflect a belief in some