Pragmatism,
Feminism,
and
Democracy

Rethinking the Politics of American History

James Livingston
Contents

Acknowledgments ix
Introduction: Attitudes Toward History 1

Part 1. Pragmatism, Feminism, and the Politics of Historiography

1. Modern Subjectivity and Consumer Culture: 17
   The Revenge of the New Woman
   The Terms of Debate
   Primal Scenes in American Historiography
   Epistemology of Excess

2. Fighting the "War of Position": 35
   The Politics of Pragmatism
   Pragmatism as a Comic “Frame of Acceptance”
   Cultural Criticism and Corporate Capitalism
   Corporate Capitalism and Cultural Politics

3. The Strange Career of the "Social Self" 57
   From Royce to Wahl to Kojève
   Jane Addams, Jessie Taft, and the “Social Claim”
   Dewey and the Self's Determination

4. Narrative Politics: 85
   Richard Rorty at the "End of Reform"
   Marxism or Pragmatism?
   Real or Cultural Politics?
   Tragedy or Comedy?
   Appendix: Memo to the Cultural Left,
or, How to Be “Critical of ‘the System’
and Crazy about the Country”
Part 2. Escaping the "Economy of Heaven": William James at the Edges of Our Differences

5. Hamlet, James, and the Woman Question 117
   Reinstating the Vague
   Father and Son
   Difference and Equality
   The Worst Kind of Melancholy

6. Unstiffening Our Theories: 143
   Pragmatism, Feminism, and the End(s) of Capitalism
   The Gender of Modernity
   Nietzsche, Butler, James
   Marxism in Green, Feminism in Red, Populism in Drag
   Corporate Personality, Bureaucratic Rationality,
   and Modern Feminism

Afterword: No Exit 183

Notes 187

Index 225

Acknowledgments

This book got started, more or less inadvertently, as I was finishing the last one. I was then noticing that pragmatists and feminists asked similar questions about the sources of the self, the uses of epistemology, and the embodiments of knowledge. So I designed an undergraduate seminar that examined the historical and theoretical intersections of pragmatism and feminism in the twentieth century. That was back in the amazing winter of 1994. The seminar was great fun, and it taught me a great deal—much more than I bargained for. My originary debts are to its members, and particularly to four students who later wrote honors theses that emerged from their research in the seminar: Robert Genter, Venita Jethwani, Andrew Kessler, and Barbara Schweiger.

As usual, my principal debts are to my friends from the Rutgers English department, John McClure and Bruce Robbins, who are always willing to disagree with me. I’ve learned more from my endless arguments with them than from anything I’ve ever read. Other members of the English department who have given me good advice and valuable comments are Richard Poirier, Marc Mangano, Elin Diamond, Richard Dienst, Kurt Spellmeyer, and Harriet Davidson. In my own department, Mia Bay, Paul Clemens, Belinda Davis, Nancy Hewitt, Jackson Lears, Jan Lewis, Jennifer Morgan, James Reed, and Bonnie Smith have helped me by reading, discussing, and criticizing chapters in draft. So have several graduate students in history at Rutgers. My thanks to Rosanne Curranino, Andrea Volpe, David Nack, J. Allen Douglas, Rob Nelson, Jennifer Pettit, April de Stefano, Christopher Fisher, Brian Connolly, Curt Cardwell, and Sarah Gordon for stimulating conversation or useful comments, and to the "Gang of Four"—Gary Darden, Sara Dubow, Justin Hart,
Reinstating the Vague

When I first started lecturing on pragmatism in undergraduate courses—this was in 1990—I had the good fortune to be flounded by an extremely intelligent and able student named Andrew Schroeder. He was a junior political science major who had been reading Horkheimer and Adorno and Benjamin for three years by the time he landed in my intellectual history class, “American Thought Since 1850.” In fact, we knew each other because he had already taken a European intellectual history course that I ended up teaching for a colleague who had fallen ill. But by the time he enrolled in “American Thought,” each of us was trying to convert the other to his cause. He wanted to show me—and the undergraduates who might, in their ignorance of the Frankfurt School, be seduced by William James—that pragmatism was the most insidious kind of “instrumental reason.” I wanted to show him that he was merely recapitulating the logic of the frontier by repudiating the intellectual tradition that comes of age, for better or worse, in the work of James, Jane Addams, and John Dewey.

Luckily, neither of us quite convinced the other, or converted the ready-made audience of undergraduates
to his way of thinking. But we did unconsciously collaborate on an after-class epiphany that changed us both by illuminating our disagreements. Andrew approached me after a particularly spirited class discussion of radical empiricism, the philosophical edifice James intended to build on the cornerstone of pragmatism. Andrew said, “So, pragmatism is not really a philosophy in its own right, it’s just a way of reading other philosophies. Like it stands between them or something—it has nothing to say unless philosophers have already disagreed.” And without thinking, I said, “Yes, that’s exactly right.” I suppose I was remembering what James said in Lecture 2 of Pragmatism: “It has no dogmas, and no doctrines save its method. As the young Italian pragmatist Papini has well said, it lies in the midst of our theories, like a corridor in a hotel.”

Well, Andrew thought he had finally won the argument, and I thought I had finally gotten through to him. He thought, “Now we can start talking about reification,” and I thought, “Now he’ll stop talking about reification.” We were both right, as it turned out. We found that to treat pragmatism as a protocol of reading and reconciling discordant traditions—to treat it as James did, as a “mediating way of thinking”—was to make it “useful.” For both of us, it became a way of postponing either/or choices, of prolonging debate, of preserving the other’s point of view in reaching our conclusions. Pragmatism, so conceived, was not erudite experience: it was not a cynical compromise between rationalism and empiricism, not a practical program for splitting the difference between Kant and Hume. It was instead the relation between them conveyed by a narrative voice in which rationalism and empiricism could appear as commensurable moments in the same story—the story in which the verifiable experience of temporal discontinuity served as self-evident proof of both the existence and the absence of transcendent or universal truths. Pragmatism was not the product of the relation between these positions, it was the relation itself. I mean that pragmatism now looked like discourse rather than doctrine—it was not so much a new event in the story of Western philosophy as a new way of relating, of narrating, previous events.

I begin with this scene from the classroom because it demonstrates that pragmatism can help us to postpone either/or choices. By revisiting it, I mean, of course, to praise pragmatism. But the critics of pragmatism have always cited the same spirit of hesitation to prove that it fails as both moral philosophy and critical theory—to prove that it is instrumental or technocratic or scientific in the worst sense because it can specify effective means to almost any imaginable end, but cannot discriminate between ends. By their account, pragmatism conforms and contributes to what the film historian Robert B. Ray has called “the general pattern of American mythology: the denial of the necessity for choice.” Ray is worth quoting at length because when he defines this general pattern of mythology as a species of “frontier ideology,” as a variation on the theme of exceptionalism, he echoes both the early critics of pragmatism—especially Lewis Mumford, who treated James’s pluralism as the “animus of the pioneer, translated into dialectic”—and their intellectual heirs among the critics of mass society, bureaucratic rationality, and consumer culture:

Transposed into the promise of endless economic growth, the frontier theory provided the rationale for postponing internal reforms (via civil rights or welfare legislation). As the Monroe Doctrine or the Open Door Policy, it prompted repeated American interventions abroad. As the doctrine of common sense, it encouraged active, pragmatic, empirical lifestyles at the expense of contemplative, aesthetic, theoretical ones.

I want to show that these critics are wrong—that the postponement of either/or choices in pragmatism is a strength, not a weakness, and that we have something to learn from its characteristically double consciousness, its “mediating way of thinking.” My procedure, in keeping with the pragmatist habit of reinstating the vague, will be rather indirect. I begin by suggesting that the “Hamletism” of late-nineteenth-century intellectuals can be taken almost literally in the case of William James—that Hamlet’s situation is reproduced in James’s breakdown of 1868—72 and that Hamlet’s solution to the epistemological crisis revealed at Elsinore is replicated in James’s repeated efforts to escape, or adjourn, the dualisms of epistemology as such. I go on to suggest that the “ontological window” through which he glimpsed an alternative to his father’s intellectual domination was an answer to the “woman question.” In concluding, I will suggest that if we look over his shoulder, we can see a new relation between pragmatism and feminism in the making; for the method born of James’s brush with madness can accommodate the desublimation of female desire specific to the late nineteenth century, and
so can articulate new models of genuine selfhood, new forms of abstract subjectivity. Let me begin, then, with Hamlet. In characterizing his situation and his solution, I rely on two unlikely allies, Ned Lukacher and Alasdair MacIntyre. In *Primal Scenes*, Lukacher convincingly claims that the motive force of the play is Gertrude’s utterly scandalous behavior in the aftermath of her husband’s death: rather than observe the normal conventions of mourning, she immediately marries the king’s brother. Hamlet’s “psychopathic predisposition” is created by this “spectacle of feminine desire”; for his own experience of mourning, of remembering and incorporating the intangible figure of the father, cannot commence until he comes to terms with the feelings of sexual rivalry and longing triggered by his mother’s impenetrability. Which is to say that he cannot accredit and act on the Ghost’s account of past events—he cannot become his father’s son—until he understands how his mother’s body could have become “sullied flesh.” Lukacher summarizes the argument as follows:

There can be no denial that Hamlet’s initial response to the spectacle of feminine desire is misogyny and an impulse to matricide.... [But] Hamlet’s uniqueness inheres in the fact that he is not simply horrified by the realization that feminine desire is not synonymous with maternal desire. ... What separates Hamlet from Orestes is the fact that the “old mole” of feminine desire burrows beyond the depths of Oedipal revenge and toward a new abstract subjectivity; for Hamlet is the first character in Western literature to be able to reflect upon the nature of his subjectivity, to look at it as if from outside himself and reflect not simply on the content of that subjectivity but on its capacity for self-reflection. Shakespeare goes beyond the Oedipal structure of revenge tragedy to ponder the relationship between feminine desire and abstract subjectivity, for it is precisely in the discursive space that has been opened up by the feminine that Hamlet is able to represent himself to himself in an entirely new way.

For all his homage to deconstruction, Lukacher is a profoundly Hegelian thinker: the chapter in which this passage appears is called “Shakespeare in the Ear of Hegel.” So it is not surprising that he concludes his reading of *Hamlet* by invoking the progress of the Spirit in history: “What *Hamlet* demonstrates above all is that the absolute spirit as will can only define itself in relation to feminine desire. The will appears in the unlikely form of unchecked female passion before passing into and thus creating the space of abstract subjectivity.” I will be borrowing this Hegelian perspective to suggest that the progress of the Spirit in the late nineteenth century is similarly determined, or permitted, by the desublimation of female desire and by the recapitulation of Hamlet’s itinerary in the thought and character of William James.

But before we follow him to the edge of the abyss, we need to let MacIntyre remind us that “an epistemological crisis is always a crisis in human relationships”; for if we cannot make ourselves intelligible to others because we have chosen to represent ourselves in terms that no one else can take for granted, as Hamlet did in pursuit of a narrative that would make sense of what happened before he arrived at Elsinore, we risk the diagnosis and the experience of madness. We risk complete isolation, that is, from the objects and the sources of our desire. According to MacIntyre, “the form of epistemological crisis encountered by ordinary agents”—by people who aren’t trained in philosophy—is the result of realizing that there are rival interpretations of the very same events, utterances, gestures, and behaviors which yield incompatible accounts of what is really going on. MacIntyre specifies *Hamlet* as the “classic study” of this form of epistemological crisis. From his standpoint, the problem the prince faces is a surfeit of plausible yet mutually exclusive narratives, each of which entails deadly consequences:

Hamlet arrives back from Wittenberg with too many schemata available for interpreting the events at Elsinore.... There is the revenge schema of the Norse sagas; there is the Renaissance courtier’s schema; there is a Machiavellian schema about competition for power. But he not only has the problem of which schema to apply; he also has the other ordinary agents’ problem: whom now to believe? His mother? Rosencrantz and Guildenstern? His father’s ghost? Until he has adopted some schema he does not know what to treat as evidence; until he knows what to treat as evidence he cannot tell what schema to adopt.

The resolution of this epistemological crisis is the result of a narrative that treats each schema, every existing account, as an event that can be explained. Hamlet’s “solution” is then to suspend belief in
these inherited schemata so that he can construct a narrative that lets
us understand why he began by believing them, but also how he
came to know that they had led him into error—a narrative that
treats existing accounts as both plausible and inadequate. That sus-
pension of belief is, however, rather difficult. It means, among other
things, that Hamlet cannot depict himself to others in terms they will
expect and understand unless he is willing to become deceitful as
well as ironic almost to the point of madness, where there is no trans-
parent relation between “seems” and “is.” So he has to find a new
way to make himself intelligible—he has to produce a narrative that
contains but also exceeds existing accounts of Denmark’s decay.5

No wonder “Hamletism” pervaded the culture of Victorian
America, when every inversion of received tradition could be called
progress and yet the future could not be named except by the
authors of so-called utopias. According to George Cotkin, the
author of an intriguing and insightful book on James as a public
philosopher, “the figure of Hamlet had come to serve as a cultural
commonplace” by the late nineteenth century, when the prince
became “a trope expressive of the dangers of the divided self, the
individual so consumed by uncertainty that he or she was incapable
of sustained or directed activity.” Cotkin goes even further, to claim
that “Hamlet was the ‘old mole’ who kept resurfacing in James’s
reading and thought” of the late 1860s—just as the sources of the
impending breakdown began to take symptomatic forms—and to
conclude that James “came to construct and interpret his life along
the culturally inscribed lines of Hamlet.”6

To examine this breakdown from the standpoint provided by
Lukacher, MacIntyre, and Cotkin is, I think, to see that James expe-
rienced the crisis in his relationship to his father as an epistemo-
logical crisis that demanded an answer to Hamlet’s question (how
can I tell what is going on here?) but more importantly that we
need to notice its sexual dimensions or connotations if we are to
understand its origins and effects—including its effects on episte-
mology, of all things. There is of course ample precedent for grasp-
ing the psychological problem of becoming William James as an
intellectual and ideological agenda. Stuart Hampshire calls James
the “first truly modern philosopher” precisely because he tried self-
consciously and systematically to “project [his] inner conflicts and
anxieties upon the universe.” And yet Howard Feinstein’s brilliant
biology, which is the most comprehensive and sophisticated psy-
choanalytical treatment of James, makes no mention of sexuality
or sexual anxiety in explaining the pivotal events of his breakdown.
Instead it focuses on the vocational dimensions of an overtly Oedi-
pal struggle between father and son.7

Father and Son

So let us see what happens when we notice the function of female
sexuality or desire in the son’s conflicts with his father, and in his
anxieties about his mother. There are three distinct episodes in
James’s breakdown:8 The first occurred in the winter of 1867–68,
when by his own account, written from Germany, he was con-
tinually on the verge of suicide. The second was the “great dorsal
collapse,” as he called it, of early 1870, when he was back in Cam-
bridge but still trying to evade the life of the laboratory scientist
for which his Harvard education had prepared him. The third was a
moment soon after, which he recounted thirty years later, in
another’s voice, as a case study in The Varieties of Religious Expe-
rience. In each instance, the struggle between James and his father
is conducted obliquely, at a distance, but the point of difference
between them is quite obvious: one is vigorously defending a “philo-
osophy of marriage” in which the body of the wife, the woman,
and the mother disappears, the other is inadvertently inventing a
marriage of philosophies in which no body’s desires can be ignored.

When I say that this difference between William and Henry Sr. is
“quite obvious,” I don’t mean that everyone has noticed it. Two
recent readings of the relevant texts conclude, in fact, by claiming
that William remains faithful to his father’s rendition of the
female.9 Let us turn, then, to these texts, to see where William
stood, and where he was headed as a result.

We can begin to understand the differences between father and
son by recalling what E. L. Godkin, the editor of the Nation, said
about Henry James Sr. in 1870: “He has made the philosophy of
marriage, one might almost say, a special study.” The notoriously
obscure and strenuously metaphysical father had indeed made a
career of pronouncing on the moral significance of marriage, both
in print and on the lecture circuit. In 1848, for example, he trans-
lated a tract inspired by Charles Fourier, the utopian socialist,
called Les Amours au phalanstère, and added a preface in which he
claimed that prevailing “erotic institutions and manners” were
flawed because, as expressed in the marriage contract, they granted each party “an absolute property in the affections” of the other party. By 1852, Henry Sr. had relinquished his utopian credentials, but he was still defending a philosophy of marriage that sanctioned sex as the proper effect of “private affections,” of immaterial bonds, not as the physical subjection of wife to husband which could be enforced by law. Then in the late 1860s, in response to increasing agitation on behalf of female suffrage, several sensational court cases, and significant new publications on the “woman question”—by John Stuart Mill, among others—he tried to clarify his doctrine of holy matrimony. This effort produced three essays for the Atlantic Monthly which were published in January, March, and June of 1870.10

In each of these essays, Henry Sr. insisted that marriage was holy because it established the kind of relation between male and female which let men rise above their bodies, to become something more than unruly, reflexive bearers of desire. Love “is the same in man as in the animal,” he claimed, “so long as it remains unchastened by marriage.” Here he treated the legal rights conferred by marriage contracts as civilizing forces because they routinized sexual intercourse and thus sublimated male desire:

The only thing that degrades the relations of the sexes, or keeps it inhuman and diabolic, is, that its sensuous delights are prized above its inward satisfactions or the furtherance it yields to men’s spiritual culture. And what marriage does for men, accordingly... is that it dulls the edge of these rapacious delights, of these insane cupitudes, by making them no more a flattering concession of privilege, but a mere claim of right or matter of course.11

The Nation noted that James could reach such conclusions only “by ignoring the existence of such a thing as sexual passion, or treating it simply as ‘lust,’” that is, by only assuming that female desire was naturally contained by domestic or maternal functions. Henry Sr. replied in a typically apocalyptic manner: “We must either come to regard marriage as a finality—i.e., as existing solely in its own right—or else expect the hideous carnival of crime in which, so far as the sexual relations are concerned, we are now fester, to prolong itself eternally.”12

The second son, Henry Jr., who had not yet published his first volume of stories, read his father’s essays with excited appreciation, and closely followed the subsequent controversy in the Nation. The eldest son was no less engaged in the controversy, as we shall see, but he was much less impressed by Henry Sr.’s contributions to it. Just about the time of his “great dorsal collapse” in mid-January 1870, William wrote to his brother: “Father has been writing a couple of articles on ‘woman’ and marriage in the Atlantic. I can’t think he shows himself to most advantage in this kind of speculation.” The difference between the sons might be explained by reference to the fact that Henry Sr. began his Atlantic series with a consideration of the same two books William had addressed in the North American Review of October 1869, in his first substantial publication (and his last publication as such until the recovery of 1872)—these were Horace Bushnell’s Women’s Suffrage and Mill’s Subjection of Women. In effect, Henry Sr. was prolonging the metaphysical debate that had animated the correspondence of father and firstborn son in late 1867. But it was now a debate about the nature of the “private affections” that conjoined men and women, and it was being conducted in an unmistakably public forum, in the pages of New England’s two leading literary magazines.

Let us briefly revisit the scene of the original debate, to see how it broached the question of female desire and led to a public debate that turned on what William called “the animal potency of sex.” In September and October 1867, the eldest son challenged the father’s metaphysical doctrine in a series of letters written from Berlin, where he hoped to repair his “shattered frame.” In the opening salvo, William described himself as “more and more drifting toward a sensationalism closed in by scepticism.” He wondered whether his father had anything to say about the relation between the “natural constitution of things” disclosed by this sensationalism and the “spiritual facts” disclosed by a Swedenborgian theology. Henry Sr. claimed in reply that his son’s “metaphysic wit” had been blighted by the “scientific cast” of his thinking—that is, by its enslavement to Nature, its entrapment within a merely “carnal understanding.” To attain the perspective of the philosopher, the son, the new man of science, would have to free himself from the bondage of the body:
We all instinctively do the same thing, but the difference between the philosopher and the man of science, between the man who reflects and the man who simply observes, is, that the former outgrows his intellectual instincts or disavows the bondage of sense, and attains to the exercise of free thought. And the first postulate of free thought is that Nature ... is void of absoluteness, or has no being in se but only in the exigencies of our carnal understanding.

In the “puerile” stage of thinking William still indulged, Nature seemed a universal principle because it represented the intersection of subjective and objective, the creation of female and male, the issue of mother and father. “You believe in some universal quantity called Nature,” Henry Sr. told his son, “[that is] able not merely to mother all the specific objects of sense, or give them the subjective identity they crave to our understanding, but also to father them or give them the objective individuality or character they claim in themselves.” So the “inward movement” of return to the creator permitted by free thought was blocked by any concession to the “lower, natural, passive, subjective side” of our “natural consciousness”—by any concession to what already carried the dual connotation of embodiment and femininity. Nature was “utterly devoid of life,” the father insisted, except as the setting in which “spiritual manhood” was realized; it signified not the trail of the serpent but the “descent of the creator” Himself. To leave science behind, to become a philosopher, was then to leave females behind, to assume that women could not play a role in creation as such, not even as mothers. 14

William, who never wanted a career in science, wrote a long, thoughtful reply in which he noted the discrepancy between the imperative form and the propositional content of his father’s metaphysical perorations. He was “led astray,” he noted, by the “positiveness and absoluteness of expression” which animated Henry Sr.’s published essays and private letters alike: “You say that such and such must be the way of creation, as if there is some a priori logical necessity binding on the mind. This I cannot see at all in the way you seem to.” William went on to ask why something could not be substantive, or real, and created, that is, “real as created,” rather than “only phenomenal,” merely artificial, as his father insisted it must be. He answered himself by claiming that the body was ingredient in the working of the mind, and vice versa, that natural or spontaneous consciousness did not preclude “spiritual manhood” or individuality: “Sensation, perception, and reason apparently have their roots in the life of the nervous system, yet their form is entirely new and original.”15

William was still apologetic in this letter of late October, although less so than in his previous letters. He was still willing to disagree with but not disavow his father’s arguments, no matter how inefable or indefensible they seemed. Ralph Barton Perry, the author of the first scholarly biography of William James, claimed long ago that the eldest son was able to steer this “middle course” with the help of Goethe. It is a convenient claim for my purposes because Wilhelm Meister’s Apprenticeship, the classical bildungsroman organized around the figure of Hamlet, is the text to which William turned as he moved, in 1868, from Berlin to Teplicz and then on to Dresden in search of cures for what ailed him. From Dresden, where he attended a stirring production of Hamlet, he reported to a close friend that getting a glimpse of Goethe’s enthusiasm was “one of the most important experiences of my own mind.” To Henry Jr., he wrote that he was no longer bothered by the “incessant cataloguing of individual details,” or the “pitiless manner of taking seriously everything that came along” which characterized Goethe’s way into the world. “I smile now to think of my unhealthiness and weakness,” William told his brother, as if his “shattered frame” had been miraculously restored by reliving Wilhelm Meister’s apprenticeship, by rereading Wilhelm Meister’s Apprenticeship; he could now profit from what had offended him in his “raw youth”—that is, from the “objectivity or literalness” with which Goethe had somehow positioned himself in the world, so that “everything painted itself on his sensorium.” Here is how William summarized what he had learned: “Apart from that general and undefined refreshment and encouragement which accrue to us from the sight of great resources and possibilities in human nature of any kind, I have drawn from Goethe a special lesson lately which is not easy for me to define in black and white, but which might be called a lesson of theoretical patience and respect towards the objective.”16

Now, what distinguishes Goethe’s reading of Hamlet via Wilhelm Meister is an attention to the supporting cast, and to events outside the frame of the play, as plausible sources of dramatic movement. But the role of Hamlet is not diminished by that
reading: it is instead magnified because it begins to appear as a kind of register in which rival accounts of the same events intersect. Questions about the prince can accordingly be framed in terms of his narrative function, rather than his “character.” This narrative function is what Jacques Lacan had in mind, I think, when he claimed that “Hamlet accepts everything,” that he “is constantly suspended in the time of the Other.” We might say the same thing about Wilhelm Meister; for, as Friedrich Schiller noted in a letter of 1796, he is the most necessary but not the most important character in Goethe’s novel: “Everything takes place around him but not because of him: precisely because the things which surround him represent and express energies, and he instead pliability, his relationship with the other characters had to be different from those of the heroes of other novels.”

Certainly there is no lack of sexual energies in the female characters Goethe assembles to illustrate his protagonist’s “pliability” and, with the very same strokes, to interpret Hamlet’s deferral of his desire; indeed the “time of the Other” in which both leading men are suspended is the narrative time created, or required, by the words and deeds of the female characters. For example, when Wilhelm Meister explains Ophelia’s motivation to Aurelie, the sister of the company’s director, by reference to “ripe, sweet sensuality”—“her heart abandoned itself so completely to her desire that her father and her brother [had to] warn her openly”—the poor girl practically swoons. Aurelie prolongs the original encounter, first with stories of her childhood in a brothel, then with hints of seduction and abandonment, then again with questions about the “suggestive and indecent nonsense.” Ophelia sings in her madness. Wilhelm’s answer reminds us of the source of that madness: “We know from the very beginning of the play what her mind is full of. The dear child lives quietly for herself, but she is hardly able to conceal her desires and wishes. Lustful tones resound throughout her mind and, ... when she has lost all control over herself and when her heart is on her tongue, this tongue betrays her.” This is the same Wilhelm who hears his own father in the voice of the Ghost, and who claims that the marriage of Hamlet’s mother “is even more humbling and wounding” than the death of his father: “now he loses his mother as well, and in a fashion worse than if she had been snatched from him by death.”

Worse than death? Wilhelm’s interpretation sounds plausible only if we suppose that the spectacle of female desire is more threatening to the integrity of Hamlet’s character than the murder of his father the king. To rethink and remake his integrity—not to retrieve it from the moment before his losses—is, however, to treat this spectacle, this threat, as a novel fact that must be confronted and incorporated in a new subject position; it appears then as an opportunity to be exploited in the hope of a more inclusive and complex integrity, rather than an obstacle to be avoided in the hope of staying the same, of remaining intact. But it is only by suspending belief in received traditions or inherited narratives, only by deferring any definitive conclusion on the ultimate meaning of his existence, only by postponing either/or choices, that Hamlet can begin to rethink and perhaps remake himself. He is not indecisive; he is instead refusing to choose between previous truth and novel fact. He is constantly revising his own story in light of new evidence.

I think that William James understood Hamlet in just this way, and not simply because he was still revising the story of his life long after most of his peers had settled into careers and marriages. “The endless fulness of the play never struck me so before,” he told his brother in a letter of April 1868, “it bursts and cracks at every seam.” He believed that it somehow contained and criticized the standards of antiquity—what he called “the Classical conception of life & art”—and that in doing so it represented, or summarized, a distinct stage of human development which, like his own age, required explanation in historical terms. Here is how he put it in the letter to Henry Jr.:

The question what is the difference between the Classical conception of life & art & that of wh. Hamlet is an example besets me more & more, and I think by a long enough soaking in presence of examples of each, some light might dawn—and then the still bigger question is: what is the warrant for each? Is our present only a half way stage to another Classical era with a more complete conception of the Universe than the Greek?

So the distance between the harmonies of classical antiquity and the discontinuities of “romantic” modernity was first measured by
Hamlet, the figure who stood at the heart of the changes that eventually enlarged the scale of our cognitive map, the figure who tried—and finally failed—to bridge the gaps these changes created:

here comes to my “realizing sense” of the chasm between them [between ancient and modern poets] this awful Hamlet, which groans & aches so with the mystery of things, with the ineffable, that the attempt to express it [the difference] is abandoned, one form of words [of narrative] seeming as irrelevant as another, and crazy conceits & counter senses slip and whirl around the vastness of the subject, as if the tongue were mocking itself.

This “awful” Hamlet echoes Wilhelm's Ophelia, who was betrayed by her tongue. From his standpoint, James suggested, “action seems idle, and to have nothing to do with the point.” He did not doubt what he had to do, only how to do it. For the point was to change the world, but to change it was to reinterpret it.

William James was fortified by his encounter with Shakespeare and Goethe; soon he would return home to “get well.” So it is perhaps not accidental that in the same letters from Dresden praising the “sturdy realism” of Goethe and remarking on the genius of Shakespeare's Hamlet, he also represents his recovery from depression in terms of two novel facts. One was a tendency toward “an empiristic view of life,” the other was a strong attraction to a “young female from New York” who moved into his boarding house and “stirred chords,” as he put it, “in [his] desiccated heart.” This woman, a “Miss Havens” was in a “hysterical, hypochondriac state,” according to James, but she nevertheless made him feel the “hideous waste” of his own life—and not because he could easily differentiate himself from a hysterical woman. “Her mind is perfectly free from sentimentality and disorder of any sort,” he reported. “What is beautiful and so to speak absolute and finished about her has struck into me so deeply as quite to rejuvenate my feeling.”

The empiricism by which James proposed to pilot his thinking made him uneasy; for it promised to embroil him in more debates with his father—“Already I see an ontological cloud of absolute idealism waiting for me far off on the horizon”—and it threatened to resurrect but not redeem the body. If we assume that the human species is just an agenda of appetites, he wondered, do we have to admit that the “rich and delicate overgrowth of ideas, moral, artistic, religious and social [was] a mere mask, a tissue spun in happy hours by creative individuals and adopted by other men in the interests of their sensations”? If so, how would anyone claim either that bodily urges were irrelevant to the pursuit of happiness or that they required containment in the name of a higher good? James knew these were questions the Utilitarians had raised but could not answer. That is why he went on to ask, “How long are we to wear that uncomfortable ‘air of suppression’ which has been complained of in Mr. Mill?” Can we continue to ignore or repress the very sensations on which we have founded our doctrine and, for that matter, our identities? It was a question James would soon be able to address in a public forum.

Difference and Equality

He returned to Cambridge in November of 1868 and completed his medical degree the following June, at about the same time that Mr. Mill's Subjection of Women was published simultaneously in London and Philadelphia. James read it immediately, and began writing what proved to be a review essay rather than a “notice” for the North American Review. Horace Bushnell's new book, Women's Suffrage: The Reform against Nature, became his foil in articulating a position that criticized Mill's premises but endorsed his purposes. In mapping this middle ground, James drew on the reading and thinking he had done in Europe—in March 1869, for example, he announced to a close friend that he was still “swamped in an empirical philosophy” according to which “all is nature and all is reason too”—and on a long review of Mill's book in the Nation which stressed that “the source of whatever weakness there may be in Mr. Mill's whole argument” was his refusal to acknowledge the “social force” of “sexual attraction” in determining the relations between men and women.

The essay begins by examining Bushnell's rhetorical procedures. James suggests that the author’s ornate style, which confounds the reader by its excess of “self-listening,” is not accidental or unrelated to the argument; instead it is the form best suited to the book's deeply dogmatic content. Bushnell proposed that women should be afforded opportunities in education and occupation commensurable with their unfolding capacities, but insisted that they should
not be allowed to vote or to hold political office; for the exercise of suffrage rights or political power by women would violate the "subject nature" of woman. "This weighty conclusion is derived from a conception of the essential nature of woman," James notes, and remains plausible, or at least consistent with public opinion (the "universal sense of mankind") insofar as its defenders justify it as "a matter of inexplicable sentiment." But of course Bushnell was not willing to leave it at that. He tried instead to illustrate the doctrine of woman's "subordinate nature" by appeal to arguments from what James calls "different orders of consideration"—different, that is, from "inexplicable sentiment." These arguments were themselves sentimental or irrational or "unsound," however, because according to James they ignored the ethical principles or possibilities enabled by "modern civilization"; so they merely emphasized the dogmatic quality of a doctrine that treated the "subject nature" of woman as both premise and conclusion.24

The familiar arguments to which Bushnell appealed were that the subjection of women made them morally superior to men, and that if granted the rights of suffrage and political office, they would inevitably forfeit this superiority by their implication in the corruptions of power. James shows that the first argument—he translates it as "suffering is a higher vocation than action"—is incompatible with the principle of justice specific to modern civilization, while the second argument is incompatible with the doctrine of woman's essential difference, that is, the doctrine of her natural and ineradicable subjection to man. In both cases, the time is out of joint: historical circumstances have clearly invalidated the principles Bushnell invokes either as self-evident truths, as matters of "inexplicable sentiment," or as conclusions drawn from empirical investigation. On the one hand, these circumstances have made once acceptable hierarchies look arbitrary, and on the other hand they have already projected—or will soon project—women into situations where their supposedly fixed "nature" will inevitably undergo fundamental change.

James quite clearly enjoys poking fun at the reverend Dr. Bushnell, especially when he is able to demonstrate the author's prurient premises: "Terrible hints are given, of the naughtiness to which women will resort in order to procure votes, and the demoralization which will take place in country districts, where the voters, male and female, 'will be piled in huge wagons to be carried to the polls, and will sometimes on their return encounter a storm that drives them into wayside taverns and other like places for the night; where"—but enough; the curious reader may find the rest of the passage on page 149." It seems that men educated "in the school to which Dr. Bushnell belongs" can believe in the moral superiority of woman only so long as they can confine her to places and pursuits that do not permit the expression of female desires, and thus do not require that women make choices between rival goods. James suggests as much in criticizing Bushnell's "two-stool line of argument":

"first, a vociferous proclamation of the utter and radical peculiarity of the womanly nature; then a nervous terror of its being altered from its foundations by a few outward changes. Mr. Mill's belief in the power of education is timid in comparison with this."

When James turns to The Subjection of Women, the mocking bemused tone disappears. No careful reader of this essay can conclude that the reviewer favors Bushnell's dogmatism over Mill's radicalism. And yet James does not simply recount and accredit Mr. Mill's beliefs. Instead he tries to show that because they grow from a "sentimental kernel," they are no less susceptible to criticism than Bushnell's "unsound" arguments about the "subject nature" of woman. That kernel, according to James, is the belief that all differences between men and women are unnatural, or artificial, and can—indeed must—be eradicated by education; the "best kind of equality" between men and women, or man and wife, thus appears as an "identity of opinions and purposes," not an equal relation of individuals with different opinions and purposes. "This leaves altogether out of sight the mere animal potency of sex," James declares, and creates a "somewhat nervous anxiety to efface even the present distinction[s]" between men and women. Notice that James is not insisting on the validity of separate spheres—that is, on an innate and unyielding difference between the sexes, or on an essential nature of woman. In fact, he has already rejected that position in his remarks on the reverend Dr. Bushnell. He is instead resisting the reduction of female to male which Mill's logic seems to promote. It is a strikingly modern location because it does not treat "man" as the standard of subjectivity as such, and because it postpones the either/or choice between difference and equality which Mill offers his readers.

To be sure, James invokes the "representative American," a man, in asking if Mill's "personal ideal" could be made real. If this
typical man expected “security and repose” from the marriage relation, his question would be, “Are they easily attainable without some feeling of dependence on the woman’s side, without her relying on him to be her mediator with the external world?” The answers James gets from his imagined interlocutors graduate from the “dogmatic”—here Dr. Bushnell is quoted—to the “half-sentimental” to the “skeptical.” But he does not align himself with any of the answers except to suggest, in a skeptical spirit, that Mill’s logic leads to the disturbing conclusion that “the most important requisite in an astronomer’s wife is, that she should have a passion for astronomy”—that the purpose of marriage is to efface the differences between man and wife.

I have belabored this ten-page book review by the young William James for two reasons. First, recent feminist readers have mistakenly used it to assert that he was a backward Victorian male whose mature philosophy shows certain traces of residual misogyny; their mistakes need to be noticed and corrected. For example, Charlene Haddock-Seligfried, the author of a valuable new book called Pragmatism and Feminism, claims that “it is particularly important to explore just how his sexism affects his appropriation of the feminine,” and discovers, in her own exploration, that James “supported Horace Bushnell’s more reactionary book, Women’s Suffrage, against John Stuart Mill’s more revolutionary book, The Subjection of Women.” Alfred Habegger similarly claims that “William proved himself a loyal son after all”—that he corroborated his father’s “philosophy of marriage”—and “clearly sided with Bushnell” against Mill. I do not want to suggest that there is no warrant for criticism of James on feminist principles; but I do want to suggest that this review essay will not serve as such a warrant.25

Second, I think that the essay opens up a discursive space for the figure of the female—or rather for female desire as the source of the narrative time in which James wants hereafter to remain suspended. In the short term, this opening leads to his breakdown; but in the long term, I would suggest, it allows for (it does not require) his mature philosophy, pragmatism, which he presented in lectures as the woman who “unstiffens all our theories” and which he dedicated, on publication, to John Stuart Mill, the man who objected to the subjection of women.

The short term was shaped by Henry Sr.’s response to his son’s review of Bushnell and Mill in another public forum, and by

William’s new identification with his consumptive cousin Minny Temple. We have already visited the scene of the father’s reiteration, where the “insignificance of sex” is again emphasized as the problematic premise of Mill’s argument. But we should note in passing that Henry Sr.’s emphasis served a purpose very different from William’s. The latter worried that to leave the “animal potency of sex” out of the picture was to permit, perhaps even to require, the erasure of all differences between men and women. The former, the father, suggested that to believe in the “insignificance of sex” was to rob marriage of its great civilizing function, which was precisely the erasure of the key sexual differences between men and women. As Henry Sr. put it, “the sole dignity of marriage, practically viewed, lies in its abasing the male sway in our nature, and exalting the feminine in its place.” Mr. Mill and Mr. James agreed, in this sense, that the “best kind of equality” was an identity or unity secured by marriage in which any distinction—or even relation—between male and female, or man and wife, was, quite literally, repressed.26

William James disagreed with both, and he paid a high price for doing so. Like E. L. Godkin, he believed that sexual desire or attraction was a “social force” that could be neither ignored nor forgotten, in part at least because it was not monopolized by men. Bodies as such were the source and the site of desire, in his view, but they were also the condition—the incentive and the limit—of reason. As he put it in March of 1869, “not a wiggle of our will happens save as the result of physical laws, and yet notwithstanding we are en rapport with reason.” A few months later, James was less confident about the continuity of body and mind; for he now worried that his own inclinations were blocked by the impending medical career he never wanted, and that his physical condition was declining because he was again “abridging” his own desires. By the end of the year, he could report to his brother that he had “been a prey to such disgust for life during the past three months as to make letter writing almost an impossibility.”27

The “great dorsal collapse” came early the next year, at the same moment Henry Sr. published his opinions on the woman question according to Bushnell and Mill. The deepening discord between father and son was now on record. Where Henry Sr. saw evil in the selfishness of man’s “sway power,” and looked to woman’s moral superiority for deliverance, William saw it in the
form of female desire as well, and tried to make room for it in his “empirical philosophy.” The question he kept asking was, if desire and reason are neither antithetical nor identical, but are rather indissoluble—if the wish must be father to the thought—how is the “moral interest” to be preserved? In a set of propositions written while he was reading The Subjection of Women, James equates Man with “a bundle of desires, more or less numerous,” which “exist by mere self-affirmation.” How then was any “philanthropic action,” any attempt at moral improvement in the face of a real choice between good and evil, possible? “To accept the universe,” to protest against it, [are] voluntary alternatives,” James answers, “So that in a given case of evil the mind seesaws between the effort to improve it away, and resignation.” If the moral problem is that our desires divide us up in time, the solution lies “in taking neither [side] absolutely, but in making the resignation only provisional [that is, voluntary, conditional].” In other words: “Resignation should not say, ‘It is good,’ ‘a mild yoke,’ and so forth, but I’m willing to stand it for the present.” This provisional resignation amounted to Goethe’s “theoretical patience” and corresponded to Hamlet’s hard-earned “readiness”; it created the discursive space in which moral progress or improvement became conceivable. As James puts it, “resignation affords ground and leisure to advance to new philanthropic action.” But these were not metaphysical propositions. William was hoping to explain how the deferment of his own desires, in accordance with his father’s wishes, would not disfigure his future.²⁸

The Worst Kind of Melancholy

He returned to the fray in February 1870. By that time his body had betrayed him again. But emotional reinforcement in the struggle against his father had meanwhile appeared in the form of cousin Minny Temple, the orphaned daughter of Henry Sr.’s sister. She had fought openly with her uncle during her visit to Cambridge in November 1869, and this seems to have brought her friendship with cousin Willy to a new level of intimacy; in any event, William revised his opinion of her, and praised “the courage with which she kept ‘true to her own instincts’ in a letter describing her tumultuous visit. Alfred Habegger goes so far as to suggest that perhaps cousin Willy was driven toward breakdown by the perceived con-

tradiction between the “conservative [sic] view of womanhood” on display in his North American Review essay and his admiration of Minny’s “stubborn integrity” in disputing uncle Henry’s ideas of spiritual regeneration. I think it is much more likely that the cousins’ new intimacy derived from their shared resistance to Henry Sr.’s metaphysics. Minny was a kindred spirit; as she noted in a letter to William dated January 15, 1870, “there is an attitude of mind, (not a strength of intellect by any means) in which we are much alike.”²⁹

But she did give up the fight momentarily, at this very moment in fact—she decided that maybe uncle Henry was right after all. And then she reverted to her “pagan” views. William, who had identified so strongly with his cousin in her disputes with Henry Sr., reached his lowest point after learning of Minny’s defection. “Today I about touched bottom,” he wrote in his diary on February 1, 1870. For now there was no one to turn to for help in answering the question of how desire, reason, and morality were related. “I must face the choice with open eyes,” he told himself, and then posed it: “shall I frankly throw the moral business overboard?” Or could he imagine a “militant existence, in which the ego is posited as a monad, with the good as its end, and the final consolation only that of irreconcilable hatred”? He wanted to give this militant alternative a “fair trial.” But that meant believing that “though evil slay me, she can’t subdue me, or make me worship her. The brute force is all at her command, but the final protest of my soul as she squeezes me out of existence gives me still in a certain sense the superiority.” It meant believing that the devil could take the shape of a woman.³⁰

Desire as such now began to look more deeply problematic if not dangerous. It could, for example, implicate its bearer in consanguinous relations that threatened to produce “unhealthy offspring,” as William reminded his brother Robertson, who wanted, in November 1869, to marry a cousin. He almost certainly reminded himself as well over the next three months. To believe that he must have done so is not to accredit Habegger’s speculation regarding the intimacy or intimacy of the new relation between William and Minny Temple, although I am willing to do so; it is instead to assume that the simple, innocent embodiment of his increased affection for the female cousin who stood up (but then succumbed) to his father would cause him to think about the “social force” and moral valence of desires expressed as sexual attraction.³¹

So I am suggesting that Minny Temple’s visit to Cambridge and
subsequent correspondence with William is just as important to his impending breakdown as Habegger would have it, but not because Minny demonstrated how backward her cousin’s views on women were; those views were not backward, and his breakdown was not a result of embarrassment. I am suggesting that she elicited the sexual anxieties and represented the sexual implications of William’s overtly Oedipal struggle with his father—that her ambiguous or intermediate position within and without the James family cast her as an unstable isotope of sister, mother, and wife, as a complex figure that somehow stood between the son and the father by resisting each and attracting both. To mourn for Minny after her death in early March of 1870, as William did, was to incorporate, without thinking, this ambiguity or intermediacy into a personality already riven by debilitating conflict with his father. It was also to realize, again without thinking, that the moral valence of sexual desire was perhaps as “insane” as his father had recently portrayed it.\(^{32}\)

At any rate, William did break down soon after, and did represent his “panic fear” in terms of the dangers of desire. That representation did not appear until 1902, with the publication of the Gifford lectures as *The Varieties of Religious Experience*; and the people who heard James deliver these lectures did not know they were listening to autobiography when he recited his own case as an instance of “the worst kind of melancholy.” Howard Feinstein and John Owen King quite rightly see this recitation as a rewriting of the father’s “vastation,” which occurred in 1844; both therefore juxtapose the texts through which the two sufferers recorded their suffering. Feinstein is so insistent on the parallels—for example, Mary James, who was Henry Sr.’s wife and William’s mother, “figures prominently in both crisis tales”—that he places the related accounts of father and son side by side in his own text. But he notes that while both father and son originally resisted the impulse to run to Mary James for help, “only William kept to himself to the end.”\(^{33}\)

Let us listen to the son’s account, and then ask *why* he kept to himself.

Whilst in this state of philosophic pessimism and general depression of spirits about my prospects, I went one evening into a dressing-room in the twilight to procure some article that was there; when suddenly there fell upon me without any warning, just as if it came out of the darkness, a horrible fear of my own existence. Simultaneously there arose in my mind the image of an epileptic patient whom I had seen in the asylum, a black-haired youth with greenish skin, entirely idiotic, who used to sit all day on one of the benches, or rather shelves against the wall, with his knees drawn up against his chin, and the coarse gray undershirt, which was his only garment, drawn over them inclosing his entire figure. He sat there like a sort of sculptured Egyptian cat or Peruvian mummy, moving nothing but his black eyes and looking absolutely non-human. This image and my fear entered into a species of combination with each other. That shape am I, I felt, potentially. Nothing that I possess can defend me against that fate, if the hour for it should strike for me as it struck for him. There was such a horror of him, and such a perception of my own merely momentary discrepancy from him, that it was as if something hitherto solid within my breast gave way entirely, and I became a mass of quivering fear. After this the universe was changed for me altogether. I awoke morning after morning with a horrible dread at the pit of my stomach, and with a sense of the insecurity of life that I never knew before, and that I have never felt since. It was like a revelation; and although the immediate feelings passed away, the experience has made me sympathetic with the morbid feelings of others ever since. It gradually faded, but for months I was unable to go out in the dark alone. In general I dreaded to be left alone. I remember wondering how other people could live, how I myself had ever lived, so unconscious of that pit of insecurity beneath the surface of life. My mother in particular, a very cheerful person, seemed to me a perfect paradox in her unconsciousness of danger, which you may well believe I was very careful not to disturb by revelations of my own state of mind. I have always felt that this experience of melancholia of mine had a religious bearing.\(^{34}\)

To my ears, it is quite clear that William kept to himself because he knew that he was the source of danger to his mother. But what was the danger of which she would have become conscious had he revealed his state of mind to her? That there was a “merely momentary discrepancy,” not a significant difference, between William and the black-haired, idiotic youth about whom one could not claim, here “all is nature and all is reason too”? “That shape am I, I felt, potentially,” he says, not that patient, that person, that youth. This
shape appeared “absolutely non-human” because it did not inhabit a body, it just was its body; its apparent inertia was qualified by the connotation of convulsion in the early reference to epilepsy, but its objectivity (it sat on shelves rather than benches) was confirmed by the same reference. And yet it was human after all—the distance between observer and observed was “merely momentary” because it was an image that arose in the observer’s mind as the expression of a “horrible fear of [his] own existence,” a horrible fear, that is, of himself. The danger to Mary James was then the possibility that her son could become “that shape” at any time. But what danger would he represent to anyone, let alone his mother, in the seemingly passive condition of an idiotic youth? Again, why would the revelation of the son’s “state of mind”—the reproduction of the image produced by his fear of himself—alert her to this danger? Did he know his state of mind was dangerous to her because it contained both desire for and resentment of the figure of the mother, because it now contained matricidal as well as patricidal impulses?

I think so. The danger William James perceived in his mourning and melancholia—in the difficult work of abandoning the dead body but reincorporating the courageous spirit of Minny Temple in a new ego ideal, a new structure of identity—was that the female figure who stood between him and his father could be both the object of his desires and the subject of her own. The issue of female desire that appeared as an intellectual possibility in his writing and thinking of 1869–70, in a more or less public debate with his father on the woman question, reappeared as an emotional reality in the presence and the example of the outspoken Minny Temple, but then again as a psychological problem in the isolation occasioned by her defection to the father and the private torments of mourning that followed her death. James could not solve that problem on his own, with the resources at his command in 1870; to stay suspended in the time of the Other, in the narrative time created or required by the female figures in his life, was now too confusing, too painful, too frightening. Of course he refused the original, matricidal impulse, just as he had refused to repudiate his father’s philosophy of marriage; but the “provisional resignation,” the “theoretical patience” that allowed him to accept everything except his own desires and his own failings, divided him too deeply in 1870. He disintegrated soon after.

Hamlet, James, and the Woman Question

But this brush with madness did show James that he had to find a way to make himself intelligible, within his own family and in the broader world as well. The point, as he saw it, was not to reinstate his “abridged” desires by going back to what he was, or wanted, before his father thwarted his career choices, before Minny Temple died, before his breakdown. He tried instead to understand that our quite real losses of innocence, integrity, and loved ones are also opportunities precisely because they divide us up in time—precisely because they let us see our worlds in new ways and create the conditions for the construction of new identities. “Since tragedy is at the heart of us, go to meet it,” he wrote in his diary two weeks after Minny’s death, “work it in to our ends, instead of dodging it all our days, and being run down by it at last.”35 If nothing will come of ignoring or evading the divisions of time we usually experience as tragedies, there is no reason to abstain from them in the hope of somehow remaining intact, as we were before they intervened to obliterate the “always already” in which we still believe. But neither is there any reason to treat these tragedies as external obstacles or events that are impervious to our interpretations—impervious, that is, to our prospective purposes and our retrospective revisions. If we want to, James suggests, we can make them parts of a usable past.

To do so is, however, to defer any definitive conclusion on the ultimate meaning of our existence, to postpone either/or choices, to remain open to novel facts: “the readiness is all,” as Hamlet finally put it. But this readiness, this pliability, should not be mistaken for mere uncertainty; for it requires the kind of “theoretical patience” or “provisional resignation” that lets us keep revising the narratives we take most seriously. In the case at hand, William James was able to reopen his mind to the novel fact of female desire. And so it became the “old mole” that borrowed beneath the separate spheres of male and female, beyond the notion of an essential womanly nature, toward a new abstract subjectivity convened in *and as* the changing relation between men and women. In this sense, the intellectual agenda James constructed in the aftermath of his breakdown presupposed the desublimation of female desire; which is to say that the pragmatism he gives us is improbable if not inconceivable in the absence of feminism.