Meaning through Action: William James’s Pragmatism in Novels by Larsen, Musil, and Hemingway

Dissertation

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Abstract

What is the relation between thinking and acting, between our ideas about ourselves and the world, and our actions in that world? This is an analysis of three novels from the early to mid-twentieth century alongside of selected works from James that seeks a variety of distinct yet similar responses to those questions. The novels are *Passing*, by Nella Larsen, *The Man without Qualities*, by Robert Musil, and *The Sun Also Rises*, by Ernest Hemingway. In each of the four there is an effort to develop certainty about possible actions so that choices can be intelligent and deliberate, and move a person forward, whatever forward looks like in any particular case. But they all face a problem of profound uncertainty regarding the limits of knowledge. The lack of certainty engenders questions and hypotheses. James’s Pragmatic Theory of Truth and the ideas he express in “The Will to Believe” and elsewhere are attempts to incorporate action into a theory of truth and meaning, and provide guidance for moving forward in the absence of certainty. Each of the novels enacts and depicts some variation of the pragmatic thesis that thoughts are experiments used to test reality. We will also see in James and these novels a privileging of not-knowing. The novels and James show that there is a benefit to directing ourselves or being thoughtfully directed to a place of deliberate not-knowing or
uncertainty in order to take action or to make some new emergent knowing possible, often through action.
Dedication

This document is dedicated to my friend and advisor, Nina Berman.
Acknowledgments

This was not simply a challenging academic exercise for me, but a set of meaning-of-life questions. I sought responses from the texts, while simultaneously critiquing the texts for their virtues and failings. It became a hermeneutic labyrinth, and I emerged only by following the threads laid down by my friends and allies. Tawni Toth had to listen to far too many anguished phone calls in which I could neither commit myself to this project, nor commit to dropping it. Without her patient ear, I do not know where I would be. Mary Ellen Luikart has also supported me from afar, and never let me doubt that I was capable of this task. My mom, too, was a distant supporter, and told me often how proud she was. I regret that she did not live to see me complete it. My colleagues RaShelle Peck, Rita Trimble, Andrew Culp, and Damon Berry have been faithful supporters, and helped me stay on task when I did not want to stay on task. Finally, my committee members Tom Kasulis and Ethan Knapp never lost patience with my slow and halting progress, and provided innumerable interesting insights, questions, and recommendations. The person most responsible for the completion of this project is Nina Berman. We became good friends through this process, and I have no doubt that her support of me and interest in this project provided the unstoppable force that finally overcame the immovable object that was me.
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Chapter 1: Introduction

I am tiring myself and you, I know, by vainly seeking to describe by concepts and words what I say at the same time exceeds either conceptualization or verbalization. As long as one continues talking, intellectualism remains in undisturbed possession of the field. The return to life can’t come about by talking. It is an act; to make you return to life, I must set an example for your imitation, I must deafen you to talk, or to the importance of talk, by showing you ... that the concepts we talk about are made for purposes of practice and not for purposes of insight. Or I must point, point to the mere that of life, and you by inner sympathy must fill out the what for yourselves.

--William James

What is the relation between thinking and acting, between our ideas about ourselves and the world, and our actions in that world? In the quote above, James suggests that there is some antagonism or at least an incompatibility between “conceptualization or verbalization” and an act that “make[s] you return to life.” He begins to provide an answer to the question when he describes concepts pragmatically, but this seems to raise more questions than it answers. It seems that we cannot get too far without defining what we mean by thought and action, but at this point in the discussion, those definitions would get us too far ahead and assume too much. More exploration is warranted.

1 “The Continuity of Experience” in A Pluralistic Universe (1909) p.297
If James is correct that “concepts are made for the purposes of practice and not for purposes of insight,” then what are the implications for works of fiction? James is credited with having contributed to contemporary Modernist representations of consciousness, in particular the “stream of thought” metaphor, which is also connected to his dynamic theory of truth and meaning. However, James’s pragmatic framing of consciousness and meaning-making, and his unique articulation of the intimate interdependence of thinking and acting has much greater resonance in fiction than has thus far been noted. I will be analyzing three Modernist novels, each one alongside of selected works from James. The novels are *Passing*, by Nella Larsen, *The Man without Qualities*, by Robert Musil, and *The Sun Also Rises*, by Ernest Hemingway. Each exhibits sustained and sophisticated attempts to work out how their own “concepts and words” can foster a “return to life.” And they all exhibit strong, heretofore unrecognized affinities with James’s Pragmatism and Radical Empiricism in how they depict and respond to the apparent binary of thinking and acting. The aim of this study will be to articulate these affinities and their significance for our understanding of James and the novels.

The three novels in this study come from the same time period, but from very different literary traditions and geographies. There will not be a tight convergence of answers about the relationship between thought and action, but we will find an enriched and active set of parallel hypothesis about what thought and action mean in this period of time for the texts that I have selected. The primary goal of this investigation is to discover the points of similarity between each of the three novels and James on the question of the
relationship between thought and action. This investigation is not a test of application. In other words, I will not simply ask whether and how these novels exemplify or enact the various principles and theses we find in James. Nor will James be tested against the novels. Rather, by placing them side-by-side we will discover resonances and also false echoes that will improve our understanding of each. I have two theses regarding this investigation.

First, in each of the four there is an effort to develop certainty about possible actions so that choices can be intelligent and deliberate, and move a person forward, whatever forward looks like in any particular case. But they all face a problem of profound uncertainty regarding the limits of knowledge. There is precious little we can know for certain about ourselves and our realities, but we must act nonetheless. The lack of certainty engenders questions and hypotheses. James’s Pragmatic Theory of Truth and the ideas he express in “The Will to Believe” and elsewhere are attempts to incorporate action into a theory of truth and meaning, and provide guidance for moving forward in the absence of certainty. Each of the novels enacts and depicts central features of James’s pragmatic theories of truth and meaning, and in particular affirms some variation of the pragmatic thesis that thoughts are experiments used to test reality.

Secondly, James regarded uncertainty and vagueness as potentially helpful and productive, and each of the novels also privileges certain kinds of not-knowing. The novels as well as James show that there is a benefit to directing ourselves or being thoughtfully directed to a place of deliberate not-knowing in order to take action or to make some new emergent knowing of another kind possible, often through action. Our
exploration of what knowledge, knowing, understanding, and related terms and concepts will reach beyond the cognitive domain to include feeling, sensation, and aesthetic and moral judgment. At stake is an entire interaction with reality. Thoughts/experiments generated by a deliberate not-knowing or by questioning of what might ordinarily be taken as fact is often deliberately sustained by a person in order to maintain a sense of *liveness* or action in engagement with reality. As in the above quote from James, the “return to life” is not through thinking, or rather, not merely through thinking, but through action and the suspension of talk and certainty. Though James does not have a single, specific term or theory for this productive not-knowing, the threads of uncertainty, indefiniteness, and knowing that is not subject to ordinary assessments of truth, run through a number of his arguments and analytical strategies. It is a significant part of what moves a person through what James calls the Principle of Substitution, and it also features in his call for the “strenuous life.” Again, it will take different forms and be enacted in a variety of ways in each of the novels.

One overall takeaway from these two primary points is this: James and the novels participated in and furthered discourses around the place and meaning of scientific and humanistic modes of comprehending reality. In the early twentieth century, developments in scientific knowledge led to a privileging of rationalistic ways of knowing and making meaning. James and the novels were not so much directly opposing the scientism of their day as they were trying to incorporate aspects of positivism and rationality more generally that would help them understand their own actions, and take deliberate and creative action to move forward in life, however they imagined this moving forward.
Their responses were adaptive and pragmatic. They showed how deliberate, though uncertain action, and even moments of productive not-knowing, could be engendered by the use of thinking. They treated thinking as a tool that they fashioned and employed in order to achieve that “return to life” that James mentions in the epigraph above.

Method

I have selected these novels to provide responses to my basic questions for specific reasons. For they do not merely depict the connection between thinking and acting through plot and characterization. All literature tries to engage the reader in some way, of course. H. Porter Abbott, inspired by the work of Wolfgang Iser, writes that narration, in particular, is the opening and closing of gaps. Narration “at one and the same time fills and creates gaps … As Iser wrote, ‘it is only through the inevitable omissions that a story gains its dynamism.’ He was thinking particularly of critical gaps, but if you look closely at the sentences of any narrative, you will find gaps everywhere” (Abbott 44). There is always a great deal unsaid and unsayable in a story, for it cannot account for all features of a fictional world. As a representation, it is selective, so the reader must fill in gaps. As Iser writes in The Implied Reader, “If the reader were given the whole story, and there were nothing left for him to do, then his imagination would never enter the field, the result would be the boredom which inevitably arises when everything is laid out cut and dried before us” (275). Iser provided more clues about the reader’s creative activity in the description of his phenomenological approach to reading, and it will help us to keep in mind some of these observations. “The phenomenological theory of art lays
full stress on the idea that, in considering a literary work, one must take into account not only the actual text but also, and in equal measure, the actions involved in responding to that text” (Iser 274). The meaning of a text is, for Iser, something the reader and the text co-create in the act of reading. “[L]iterary texts transform reading into a creative process that is far above mere perception of what is written” (279).

This engagement is something that every story requires, but these novels guide the reader to certain kinds of engagement—they open and close gaps in very deliberate ways that will provide important clues in our search for understanding the connections between thought and action. As the reader creates what Iser calls the “virtual dimension the text,” he or she creates, with appropriate textual guidance, an entire world. As readers we are in a sense looking through a tear in the fabric of our own universe at the universe emerging from the story. Abbot writes that “crowded into the space we are looking into are not just events and the characters involved in them, strung along the armature of their plots, but an entire storyword, which may, for that matter, even include an entire metaphysical universe” (Abbott 44). It is this metaphysical universe, this set of psychological or behavioral “laws,” or the relations between thinking and acting, that our interpretation must fill in.

What Iser and Abbott write of the narrative we can also say of philosophical writing, though the opening and closing of gaps is often more explicit. Philosophy critic John E. Smith describes James’s writing this way: “His writing is a continual appeal to the individual to consult his own experience as a means of understanding and testing the
ideas being placed before him. A good deal of analysis and observation on the part of the reader is called for” (Smith 39). Richard M. Gale also sees virtue in James’s style.

For James sought a maximally rich and suggestive philosophy, one in which everyone could see themselves reflected, being like a vast ocean out of which each could haul whatever is wanted … This gives great leeway to interpreters, which is just what James wanted, because it forces them to philosophize on their own. (ix)

This makes James an excellent companion to these Modernist novels, which are themselves inviting the reader to philosophize on their own. Again, Iser’s analysis of novel reading is apt here. “[T]he reader often feels involved in events which, at the time of reading, seem real to him, even though in fact they are very far from his own reality … [C]ompletely different readers can be differently affected by the ‘reality’ of a particular text” (279). We should not expect complete convergence about the story or even the philosophical argument across readers. Just as these novelists were creating new ways of telling a story, James was creating a new kind of philosophy, one without a priori truths and foundational pronouncements. His is a philosophy that demands curiosity and invites continual discovery. He often said what he offers is not a set of fixed principles about reality but a set of methods for investigating reality. Mirroring the historical paradigm shift underway during this period, James’s questions shift from what to how. To meet James and these novels where they are inviting us to meet them, we can think of our reading as experiments in interpretation. That is, our reading is an action with potentially practical outcomes.

A good deal of my interpretive work will consist of close reading of both the novels and James’s philosophical and scientific works. My aim in this study is not to
judge James’s or the novels’ philosophical arguments or positions in terms of their truth. But I am interested in what those philosophical positions or arguments are, and how they emerge from the texts. And by comparing each novel with selected works of James, I will show how they fill in gaps in one another. But that said, we must recognize that, as Abbott points out, some of the gaps will entail philosophical questions. There are questions of human nature, what emotions are and how they work, what agency is and what it looks like or how it is possible, and many other questions. These are not given on the surface of the novels, and sometimes they are not available on the surface of James’s texts, either. So an analysis must focus not just on what is said and how, but on what is meant.

Assembling the meant—the fictional storyworld in the case of the novels, or the underlying logic and commitments of James’s essays—is an interpretive, gap-filling task that is fraught with danger, and must, as I say, be treated provisionally. Reader-response theory, broadly considered, will help here. Any text produces meaning only in interaction with a reader. And these texts in particular are very intentional in what that interaction looks like. I will often speak of the story or the novel “doing” something. This anthropomorphic language is meant to respect the autonomy of the text, while recognizing that it is a site of activity. I ask you to regard each of the following chapters in this study as a set of experiments in ascertaining the meanings and messages in James and the novels.
Historical Period

The span between the earliest publication of William James (1867) and the latest first publication among the three novels, *The Man without Qualities* (1943), is 77 years. James had already been dead for a decade before any of the three novels under investigation had been published. And though James traveled and studied quite a bit in Europe, especially Germany, he was and always thought of himself as an American, particularly an inheritor of a New England philosophical sensibility. Similarly, Larsen, writing in and about Chicago and New York City, Musil, writing in and about Austria and Western Europe, and Hemingway, writing in and about France and Spain, seem to have tenuous connections to James and each other. Yet at the deepest levels, they all occupy a common historical, cultural and, I want to say, philosophical, landscape. For Western Europe and the United States, this was an age of transformation—from human power to machine power, from European global influence to American global empire, from almost unquestioned patriarchy to new roles and powers for women. It was an age of dynamism, but also an age of doubt about human progress, or, more precisely, whether humans could sustain their own progress. Historian and journalist Henry Adams saw New York City as the material and symbolic center of this emerging world. In 1905, two years after the Wright brothers made the first powered flight, and the same year that Einstein published his Special Theory of Relativity, this is how Adams describes the city he sees.

Power seemed to have outgrown its servitude and to have asserted its freedom. The cylinder had exploded, and thrown great masses of stone and steam against the sky. The city had the air and movement of hysteria, and the citizens were crying, in every accent of anger and alarm, that the
new forces must at any cost be brought under control. Prosperity never before imagined, power never yet wielded by man, speed never reached by anything but a meteor, had made the world irritable, nervous, querulous, unreasonable and afraid. All New York was demanding new men, and all the new forces, condensed into corporations, were demanding a new type of man—a man with ten times the endurance, energy, will and mind of the old type—for whom they were ready to pay millions at sight. (499)

This is the power over nature that the Enlightenment had promised, but how was any particular person now to make sense of it? Science and technology, and new forms of social organization seemed capable of doing amazing things and changing the world, but what did this imply for individual people?

For now, rather than delve into the detailed political, social, or material features or events from this 77-year span, I want to acknowledge this period in terms of fundamental currents in the ways people tried to make sense of themselves, their realities, and their actions. Particular social, political, and economic contexts will be discussed in each of the following chapters. Here I will focus on the development of science and scientific ways of comprehending both the exterior reality and subjective experiences that had a part in the development and expression of those material contexts and conditions. This period is marked by a profound scientism, that is, a belief in the superiority of (especially positivistic) scientific principles and methods (as opposed to the methods of the humanities or arts) to arrive at an understanding of and control over reality. I deliberately use the passive, agent-less voice because I do not yet want to identify the origins for and holders of such beliefs. In this I am like the novels in my study, which did not explicitly identify the sources, either, but were sensitive to the effects of scientism. The novels and
James, too, experienced the success and growth of the sciences and of an increasingly rationalized society as both a benefit and a challenge.

It is not uncommon to read the word “crisis” in association with some of the changes and challenges of this period, and the concomitant sense of a loss of control. For example, according to Modernism critic Pericles Lewis, the “crisis of representation” is a literary and artistic crisis in which *mimesis*, the imitation of reality in art is felt to be inadequate or impossible. The “crisis of liberalism” is the sense that capitalism is under attack from collectivist political agendas and therefore the very notion of the autonomous individual is under threat. This leads to an associated “crisis of culture” in many western European democracies that was enhanced during and after the First World War. Finally, the “crisis of reason” labels a philosophical shift from the question, “what is reality?” to “what can I know and how can I know it?” Kant is often credited for initiating this move with his three *Critiques*, which were intended to identify the transcendental conditions of thought, judgment, and taste. This epistemological turn had inspired foundational critiques in all disciplines and seemingly in all areas of intellectual life. Lewis identifies additional crises, including Walter Benjamin’s “crisis of artistic reproduction,” and one of the earliest of the modern crises, Baudelaire’s “crisis of perception itself” (Lewis 2-7). In German literary and language studies there was the contemporary *Sprachkrise* (crisis of language) articulated most clearly in Hugo Hofmannsthal’s *Lord Chandos Letter [Ein Brief]* (1902) in which the narrator’s fragmented written expression reflects his inability to connect with or comprehend himself or reality more generally.
No doubt the period from the end of the nineteenth century through the start of the Second World War brought profound changes to in the domains mentioned. But what makes these into crises? And for whom? One way of characterizing the deeper tensions at work, and those most relevant for my project, is to see this period in relationship to the hopes and principles of the Enlightenment, or the “project of modernity” in Jürgen Habermas’s term.

The project of modernity as it was formulated by the philosophers of the Enlightenment in the eighteenth century consists in the relentless development of the objectifying sciences, of the universalistic foundations of morality and law, and of autonomous art, all in accord with their own immanent logic. (45)

There was faith in the relentless progress of rational understanding of reality and control of nature for the betterment of society and individuals. In “An Answer to the Question: What Is Enlightenment?” Kant writes that the “motto of enlightenment” is “Sapere Aude!—‘Have courage to use your own understanding!’” (41). Individuals emerge from immaturity when they cease relying on the expertise and knowledge of others. And, as the rest of the essay goes on to claim, the state is better governed when individuals and the state’s rulers have the courage to seek after better methods of governance. Those better methods and principles are discovered by way of reason.

The objectification of all knowledge and morality even extends to aesthetic value. “The beautiful constitutes another domain of validity, alongside those of truth and morality … For one ‘speaks of beauty as if it were a property of things’” (Habermas 47, embedded quote from Kant The Critique of Judgment para. 7). In this characterization reality is a mechanism, the parts and functions of which are discoverable through rational
investigation. For Horkheimer and Adorno, Francis Bacon was one of the first to draw together the motifs of scientific understanding and freedom from capricious political authority, from superstition, and from the contingencies of nature.

Enlightenment’s program was the disenchantment of the world. It wanted to dispel myths, to overthrow fantasy with knowledge … Knowledge obtained through [systematic inquiry into nature] would not only be exempt from the influence of wealth and power but would establish man as the master of nature. (Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments, 1)

The questions and explanations that satisfied us in “the childhood of our race,” Auguste Comte writes in A General View of Positivism (1848), will only be set aside when we “limit ourselves to the knowledge of Laws” (746). The natural “philosopher endeavors to co-ordinate the various elements of man’s existence, so that it may be conceived of theoretically as an integral whole. His synthesis can only be valid in so far as it is an exact and complete representation of the relations naturally existing” (732). According to this view, concepts and explanations are true to the degree that they mimetically capture reality. Comte gave the name “Positivism” to his method and principle, and wrote that it had successfully “taken possession of the preliminary sciences of Physics and Biology … [and] all that remained was to complete the range of its influence by including the study of social phenomena” (734). Philosophers had for millennia been studying society and social systems, of course. Comte’s vision was for study of people and social relations to discover universally applicable laws. The goal was prediction and management of social relations through reason. “The importance that we attach to theories which teach the laws of phenomena, and give us the power of prevision, is chiefly due to the fact that they alone can regulate our otherwise blind action upon the external world” (734). This was
both a practical and a humane vision. Ultimately, thought Comte, even the moral, intellectual, and affective domains of human experience would be brought into the totalizing objectification of positivism. Jumping ahead, as an example, the development of sociology by Durkheim and Weber around the turn of the twentieth century helped to complete positivism’s disciplinary reach, but not the way Comte had imagined.

Even in the eighteenth century there were already responses against positivism and the model of the rational man. Charles Taylor identifies Rousseau as a crucial figure in what was to become Romanticism. Rousseau’s appreciation for the moral conflict inherent in the human being was critical. According to Taylor, “what couldn’t be assimilated was the Cartesian confidence in man’s own powers to achieve the good, the sense that the muddle and confusion of embodied thinking … could be overcome just by our own intellectual efforts” (356). Rousseau was partly responsible for the Romanticist return to nature, and in the nineteenth century this sense that “the inner voice” is the “impulse of nature within us” could be found in the literature of Goethe, Wordsworth, Emerson, and many others. “[T]he inner voice is our mode of access, but we can lose contact with it; it can be stifled in us. And what can stifle it is precisely the disengaged stance of calculating reason, the view of nature from the outside, as a merely observed order” (Taylor 369-70). This will evolve and expand over the nineteenth century into a critique of the industrial revolution, urbanization, science, and technology as the effects of instrumental reason made material were becoming ever larger and more destructive of nature and of human relationships. The successes of instrumental reason, however, were seductive.
The growth of statistical sciences in the nineteenth century was welcomed by many scientists, who saw in it the ability to capture the lawful regularities that Hume and Comte had described. Though this forced a change in how causation must be understood, it is quite consistent with a conception of the universe as a place where objects behave according to predictable regularity. Scientific understanding now had another powerful mathematical tool. But statistics also meant the end of hard determinism and the loss of any hope of the kind of certainty that some scientists were after. The statistical likelihood of events was not helpful, some scientists would say, if it did not help to manage particular cases.

[According to] Claude Bernard, the founder of experimental physiology … the physician’s task … is to determine exactly what causes disease, and what cures it. The statistician may report that 80 per cent of the victims treated in a certain way will recover, but the patient wants to know, ‘Will I survive?’ Only a fully deterministic science of medicine can answer. (Hacking 145)

Gaining a more sophisticated mathematical understanding of the human condition overall seemed to come at the expense of an understanding of individual people and situations. It seemed that the application of mathematics and the discovery of more precise predictive tools of human behavior resulted in less understanding, or at least a very specific, and perhaps hollow, understanding of particular human beings. Heidegger describes this as “mathematization.” “New science is axiomatic, foundational, propositional—not about things at all but about mathematical (pre-experiential) laws. Experience is mere contingency, the details, or the playing out of laws” (“Modern Science, Metaphysics, and Mathematics,” 291-2). Heidegger is correct to note that experience was not only described in scientific, objective, mathematical terms, but people seemed to be self-
objectifying their own experience in these same terms in order to make sense of themselves and their own activity.

There were some efforts to cordon off humanistic domains of meaning making and understanding from the reach of positivistic principles. The neo-Kantian philosopher Wilhelm Windelband (1848-1915) distinguished between “the nomothetic knowledge that most natural sciences seek (the discovery of general laws in order to master nature) and the idiographic knowledge that historical sciences pursue (description of individual and unique aspects of reality with the aim of self-affirmation)” (Audi 976). Nomothetic knowledge aims to describe objective phenomena, while idiographic knowledge seeks to understand the unique, contingent, or subjective. These two approaches seemed to be at odds with regard to the best ways to understand human experience and culture. Allen Thiher (2005) identifies Plato as the source of the claim that true knowledge is mathematical in structure. Positivism, Thiher writes, largely embraces this view. Thiher analyzes the arguments of Blaise Pascal, who had opposed this, claiming that reductive, axiomatic thinking cannot solve problems of choice, experience, and action. His term for the intuitive and judgmental functions is “Finesse.” Pascal writes, “Finesse stands opposed to geometrie in a dialectical relation” (Thiher 23). And finesse encompasses any incompatibility between geometrie and itself, because only finesse provides a way of selecting among the various representations that sciences and arts provide in often contradictory ways.

Some theorists sought a kind of middle ground between the nomothetic and the idiographic. Max Weber attempted to provide empirically valid categories and definitions
for individual and (especially) social behavior and action. He was trying to employ positivistic principles in order to mimetically capture reality and the lawful behaviors of empirical phenomena. In the beginning of *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology* (1922), Weber writes, “Sociology is a science concerning itself with the interpretive understanding of social action and thereby with a causal explanation of its course and consequences” (4). One can argue that Weber’s typology had great utility, not the least because it provided a standard vocabulary for describing social phenomena. But the intervening years of sociological study have shown just how challenging it is to identify the causes or meanings of behaviors or predict behaviors in complex social systems.

One larger theme that Weber and others were wrestling with was the apparent challenge to the narrative of human progress. According to Comte, individuals and societies pass through three stages of development, the Theological stage, the Metaphysical stage, and, the stage Western Europe are now in, “the Positive stage, based upon an exact view of the real facts of the case” (Comte 741). As Habermas adds about the larger project of the Enlightenment, there was no doubt that “the arts and sciences would not merely promote the control of the forces of nature but also further the understanding of self and world, the progress of morality, justice in social institutions and even human happiness” (Habermas 45). The world wars would provide striking counterfactuals to this hope, but even before the deaths of millions there emerged doubts about how far positivistic principles and methods could take humanity. In another paradox, science started to create its own narratives that ran counter to that of progress.
Darwin’s *The Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection* (1859) and *The Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex* (1871) challenged the supremacy and majesty of human reason. For at their core, Darwin’s theories showed that human’s vaunted reason was—like the leopard’s claws or the falcon’s sight—simply the best tool for the job of surviving and passing on one’s traits. Furthermore, there is no grand scheme beneath natural selection. It is merely the mechanism by which randomly mutating traits are selected for succession. However, this theory also implies—in a very simplistic way—that every one of us is a generally unaware participant in a grand, natural competition. These theories would ultimately inspire Ernst Mach and James, whose pragmatic orientation to truth and meaning draws on elements of the struggle for survival. Just as traits succeed simply because they work better than other traits, the true and the meaningful theory about reality is what works better than other theories. Mach was concerned mostly with scientific theory, and he built upon and provided important provisions to Comte’s positivism. James was also a scientist, but also appreciated how each individual non-scientist approaches the world as a scientist, creating and deploying theories that help them get through the day or through life’s grander adventures. For these theories, too, truth is what works best.

Also as a result of the Darwinian revolution, European and North American natural and social scientists theorized a variety of individual and social pathologies. In their view, civilization was in decline and this could be explained biologically. Any of the various forms of individual pathological degradation is essentially a widespread condition of an entire society, a society in decline as a result of modern (read: Western, urban,
industrial, rationally organized) life. One pathological condition is neurasthenia, a term coined by physician George M. Beard in 1869. An individual could become neurasthenic through “dissipation” of vital nervous energy through unproductive activities such as “masturbation, gambling, and other forms of illicit sexual or financial activity” (Lutz 3). For Beard there is a clear connection between the moral and the biological, but individuals did not have to indulge in these “degenerate” behaviors to acquire the symptoms. “[I]f patients were sensitive and refined enough to begin with, neurasthenia could be brought on, regardless of their moral probity, by simple exposure to the hectic pace and excessive stimuli of modern life” (Lutz 4). Once afflicted, the “patient” would have to be treated with the (Wier Mitchell) rest cure or the hydrotherapy cure in order to restore the dissipated nervous energy. Untreated, “[d]issipation eventually led to ‘decadence,’ the death and decay of nerve centers in the individual, and the death and decay of civilization at the social level” (Lutz 4).

Variations on this theme included Max Nordau’s theory of degeneration (put forth in his volume *Degeneration*, 1895), which is based on the work of B.A. Morel and Cesare Lombroso. Nordau also locates the source of the trouble in industrialized, fast-paced, urban society and the overstimulation of exhausted nervous systems (Mosse xx-xxi). He also subscribed to a belief in the heritability of acquired characteristics. That is, an individual who acquired degenerate habits would pass the predilections for those habits onto his or her offspring (Nordau 16). In this way the entire society would degenerate. These theories influenced later theorists, such as eugenicist Havelock Ellis
and sex scientists like Richard von Krafft-Ebing, who saw homosexuality and any type of “sexual deviance” as a further “degenerative” influence on society.

Sigmund Freud’s theories also seemed to show that human beings were not in control of their own minds. To take just one example text, in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1929-30), Freud comes to the admittedly strange conclusion that any living thing is in a sense always striving towards its own demise. Additionally, consciousness, the seat of rationality, seems to occupy the smallest part of our psyche, consisting in that small membrane that protects “the self” from forces both external and internal. Self-preservation—one of the two primary directives of the organism—is not mere survival, but rather “an urge inherent in organic life to restore to an earlier state of things which the living entity has been obliged to abandon under the pressure of external disturbing forces” (Freud 43). It is this instinct to return to the inorganic state of things, which is the inertial state when all drive energy has been reduced to zero (67). For Freud self-destruction is not just a contingent fact about some people in some circumstances, but is instead an inherent feature of life that civilization can only temporarily overcome. The First World War seemed to show that all of the advances that the Enlightenment had promised were not to be. Indeed, it resulted in the deaths of so many millions precisely because of the social organization and technological achievements that were supposed to liberate humanity from suffering. Freud’s theory goes one step further, but it was only the climax, we could say, of a trend that had been building since the middle of the nineteenth century. Freud, Darwin, and the scientific and pseudo-scientific theories that they
engendered seemed, in different ways, to remove agency and free will from the individual and locate it in irremediable biological processes.

William James and His Works

In analyzing each of the novels, I will be drawing on selected parts of James’s entire output, and will provide a careful treatment of many of the finer points. It will be helpful at this time to take a brief overview of James and some of the most central projects and questions, and to see James the man in historical context. Along with C.S. Peirce and John Dewey, James is regarded as one of the three “founding” members of American Pragmatism, which is less a set of doctrines than a cluster of methods and approaches. James was also a scientist, professor, public intellectual, father and husband, and all of these aspects of his life found their way into his work.

William James (1842-1910) was the oldest of five children (including brother Henry James, Jr., the novelist and sister Alice James, the diarist) of the wealthy New York City James family. The influence of the father, Henry James, Sr. included a deeply inquisitive religiosity, in line with Swedenborgianism, and a strong sense for the spiritual and mystical in ordinary life. The family traveled a great deal, especially to Europe, where William James gained fluency in German and French. (McDermott xxiv-xxvi) James earned a degree in medicine from Harvard University, but never practiced as a doctor. In medical school he had taken a year to study with biologist and geologist Louis Agassiz in Brazil. He joined the faculty at Harvard in 1872, remaining there until his retirement in 1907. He conducted research in physiology, anatomy, philosophy, and
psychology and was professor of psychology and philosophy (Gale 1). His family life was “a highly congenial intellectual environment, at once cozy and stimulating,” owing to his happy marriage to Alice Howe Gibbens, with four sons and one daughter, and active friendships with intellectual mates both near and abroad (Marty xiv).

In the course of James’s long career he made significant contributions in three general domains: psychology, philosophy, and the study of religion. We can think of these as three clusters of overlapping questions and practices. James’s *The Principles of Psychology* in two volumes was completed in 1890. It helped define the discipline and distinguish it from philosophy on the one hand and other biological sciences and clinical practices on the other. The work immediately engendered significant praise and was read widely (McDermott xxxiii). In the preface to the book, James wrote that he “kept close to the view of natural science throughout the book.” When the thoughts and feelings, which are the data of the psychologist, are finally correlated with the underlying brain states, then psychology “can go no further—can go no further, that is, as a natural science” (*Principles I*, v-vi). James is no reductive materialist, but here he only hints at the pragmatic framing for *The Principles*. For the purposes of scientific study of the mind and its activities or properties, an objective perspective is necessary. “Even when he [the psychologist] introspectively analyses his own mind and tells what he finds there, he talks about it in an objective way” (James, *Principles I* 183). But James could not resist including many non-scientific interludes into the *Principles*. Several of the chapters, including those on Habit, Will, and The Stream of Thought undertake philosophical questions and also make normative or even personal judgments. For example in speaking
of the difficulty of affecting one’s habits, James describes the challenges facing “a youth transferred to the society of his betters … Hardly ever, indeed, no matter how much money there be in his pocket, can he even learn to *dress* like a gentleman-born … [H]e simply *cannot* buy the right things” (*Principles I*, 122). Despite these lapses, *Principles* introduces many concepts that would surface later in the more decidedly philosophical works, and provides many ways of responding to the dilemmas around thought and action that occupied this period of modernity.

The spirit of objective observation, analysis, and even of judgment carried over into *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* (1901-2). James found formalized religion far too confining, but did see the religious spirit as a crucial aspect of the human experience. *The Varieties* is James’s attempt to answer a cluster of appropriately pragmatic questions: how does religion work, and what does it mean to, and do for, us? He was not concerned with individual religious practices, tenets, or people, except for what they could tell him about the religious feeling and spirit in human experiences. He defines religion in the following terms.

> **Religion, therefore, as I now ask you arbitrarily to take it, shall mean for us the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine. Since the relation may be either moral, physical, or ritual, it is evident that out of religion in the sense in which we take it, theologies, philosophies, and ecclesiastical organizations may secondarily grow.** (31)

The ideas and principles of these “secondary growths” he refers to as “over-beliefs” (*Varieties* 513) and they, he writes, are quite different, but associated with remarkably similar feelings and conduct throughout the world and across religions, no matter the
particular religious affiliation, creed, or practice. James’s study of these individual experiences results in a typology. The “twice-born,” the “sick soul,” the “healthy-minded,” “the divided self,” the “saint,” and the “mystic” populate the landscape of *The Varieties*, each acting out their personalities and temperaments through religious belief and practice. James wants to understand how, despite *scientistic* dismissals of religion as “probably only an anachronism, a case of ‘survival,’ an atavistic relapse into a mode of thought which humanity in its more enlightened examples has outgrown,” the religious *feeling* nonetheless endures almost universally in individuals. James’s response is, as in his philosophical works, to return to individual private experience.

The unsharable feeling which each one of us has of the pinch of his individual destiny as he privately feels it rolling out on fortune’s wheel may be disparaged for its egotism, may be sneered at as unscientific, but it is the one thing that fills up the measure of our concrete actuality.…

If this be true, it is absurd for science to say that the egotistic elements of experience should be suppressed. The axis of reality runs solely through the egotistic places, --they are strung upon it like so many beads. (499-500)

Refusing to recognize this private feeling in favor of the generalizable, scientifically ascertainable features of religion is, James writes, to substitute the bill of fare for the meal. Again James insists on the “return to life,” to lived experience to understand the religious feeling. Ideas, concepts, generalizations—these are all experienced by particular people in particular ways at particular times, and we understand them only when we see their connections to individual’s actions. *The Varieties* was, like all of James’s work, part of a personal search for clarity and guidance.
James had been rather unhealthy his entire life, and suffered a particularly critical bout of what was then called neurasthenia in 1869-70 that had a significant effect on his lifelong philosophical and spiritual quests.

Having rejected suicide in favor of the possibility of a creative life unsupported by certitude, James developed a doctrine to sustain such a belief … and helped to formulate his aggressive view of the ‘self’ in the *Principles of Psychology* … and his lifelong attempt at structuring a personalized cosmology … James was neither an optimist nor a cynic; he was a man of moral courage, who knew, all too well, the ambiguity and precariousness of the human condition. (McDermott xxvii)

For James life is moral battleground, and he was never sure of gaining the upper hand, but he never recoiled from the need to engage in battle. The crisis of 1869-70 was in part prompted by James’s frustration with what he thought was a convincing argument for determinism and against free will. Suicide seemed to him the only “manly form to put [his] daring into,” as he writes in a diary entry from 1870 (quoted in McDermott xxviii). But in the arguments of French philosopher Renouvier he discovered the seed of what would become his “Will to Believe.” In his diary he writes, “Not in maxims, not in accumulated Anschauungen [contemplations], but in accumulated acts of thought lies salvation” (quoted in McDermott xxviii). That living consists in action in the absence of clarity and certainty does not diminish the need for doing one’s utmost to gain as much clarity, certainty, depth, and understanding as possible. But there will never be a formula or set of concepts that can replace the need for courageous and creative willing of the future one imagines. A central term for James is “belief,” and for him, belief is not a state
of mind but an action.² Many times there is no need for action or for making a choice among ideas any one of which may turn out to be true.

Whenever the option between losing truth and gaining it is not momentous, we can throw the chance of gaining truth away, and at any rate save ourselves from any chance of believing falsehood, by not making up our minds at all till objective evidence has come. In scientific questions, this is almost always the case; and even in human affairs in general, the need of acting is seldom so urgent that a false believe to act on is better than no belief at all. (James, “The Will to Believe” 728)

We can, like good empiricists, wait for more evidence on one side or another so as to not rush into a false position. But what of momentous options? A momentous question would be a moral question, which “is a question not of what sensibly exists, but of what is good, or would be good if it did exist. Science can tell us what exists; but to compare the worths, both of what exists and what does not exist, we must consult not science, but what Pascal calls our heart” (James, “The Will to Believe” 729-30). “Belief is measured by action,” (734) James continues in a footnote several pages later, so what is at stake in our beliefs is not a state of mind or a set of ideas about reality. Beliefs are a kind of action that creates reality, at least the part out front of our own experience. Life cannot be conducted simply by understanding what is, but by moral courage to choose what should be. This heroic attitude emerges through all of James’s philosophy, and much of his work in psychology and in the study of religion and religious belief.

² In the chapters on the novels I will provide more nuanced analyses of belief. There are several kinds of belief, for example, belief about something that is not (yet) the case but might be made the case if our belief is necessary to make it the case. There is also implicit belief about something being the case, without an agent explicitly recognizing this belief. Rather, belief is implicit in actions one takes, like the belief that this floor will hold my weight if I walk on it. The willful belief that I refer to above is what James discusses at length in the often-quoted “The Will to Believe” essay from 1896.
Originally trained as a scientist, James’s work in all fields reflects his respect for empirical procedure and the desire to test every hypothesis against reality. Indeed, he calls his overall philosophical approach “Radical Empiricism,” because, he writes, “it is contented to regard its most assured conclusions concerning matters of fact as hypotheses liable to modification in the course of future experience” (James, “Radical Empiricism” 134). Indeed, the testing of the hypothesis is what makes something true or not true. “The truth of an idea is not a stagnant property inherent in it. Truth happens to an idea. It becomes true, is made true by events. Its verity is in fact an event, a process” (James, Pragmatism 97). By itself, this might appear to go against the correspondence theory of truth propounded by nineteenth century positivism, which held truth to be a relationship between our concepts and the natural world. But as James critic Cormier points out, this way of expressing truth puts the focus on the individual and on verification. “For James, truth exists inside ‘truths’ or beliefs as a function or habit of delivering good experienced consequences” (346). James’s various definitions of truth, including this one, must be framed by his larger concern with the abstractionist versions of truth implicit in Hegelianism.

James thought that Hegelian monistic idealism declared genuinely separate individuals and individual experiences unreal, and thus denied the power of individuals to react freely to their unique experiences and actually make the world better …. James wanted to attack this picture of the world by challenging its picture of truth as a rationally knowable relation independent of individual belief and experience, and showing how individuals and their discrete experiences in time were prerequisites of the very existence of truth. (Cormier 346-7)

While there are significant problems with this theory, as I will describe below, it comports with James’s overall epistemology, which treats knowledge as an event that a
knower-agent initiates and completes. In one of the phrases that is crucial to my
interpretation of the novels, James later describes how truth serves as “an instrument of
action” that moves us into new experiences.

From this simple cue pragmatism gets her general notion of truth as
something essentially bound up with the way in which one moment in our
experience may lead us toward other moments which it will be worth
while to have been led to. (*Pragmatism* 98)

For James, all experiences have a kind of internal intention. Their *function* is to lead us
into something beyond themselves. “Whoever feels his experience to be something
substitutional even while he has it, may be said to have an experience that reaches beyond
itself. From inside of its own entity it says ‘more,’ and postulates reality existing
elsewhere” (James, “A World of Pure Experience” 205). Here is where James seems to
slip from a definition of truth to one of meaning or even of simple cognition. Admittedly,
James is not always clear on the distinctions, and what he calls “truth” (critics have
identified several significantly different definitions in James3) might also be termed
verification or social agreement, depending upon how James describes it. James often
seems to be trying to justify the subjectivity of truth, equating it simply with belief. What
I want to draw attention to, however, is James’s attempt to “start with inquiry and extract
an account of stable truth from it. Like Peirce he thinks that any account of truth that
would ignore the role that truth plays in inquiry would be an empty view” (Misak 59).
James wants to put the human investigator—and we are all investigators—at the center of
a practical search for truth. In the hands of the positivists, and the nineteenth and early
twentieth century move toward the general and abstract, James “reaffirms that by ‘the

practical nature of truth’ he means ‘the distinctly concrete, the individual, particular, and effective, as opposed to the abstract, general, and inert’” (Seigfried 129). Truth must serve individual human interests, rather than the reverse.

James used the adjective “radical” to describe his empiricism because it admits as data all experiences, and does not assume a single, objective reality that positivism assumes.

After all that reason can do has been done, there still remains the opacity of the finite facts as merely given, with most of their peculiarities mutually unmediated and unexplained. To the very last, there are the various ‘points of view’ which the philosopher must distinguish when discussing the world; and what is inwardly clear from one point remains a bare externality and datum to the other. (“Radical Empiricism” 135).

In explicit opposition to the mimesis/correspondence theory of truth (i.e., our thoughts ought to imitate reality to accurately comprehend it—see Comte above) and the one-world (monistic) assumption of positivism, James regards reality as irreducibly pluralistic. Reality can only be partially, temporarily apprehended. For the radical empiricist “the crudity of experience remains an eternal element thereof. There is no possible point of view from which the world can appear an absolutely single fact”4 (“Radical Empiricism” 135). This theory not only says that our understanding of reality is at any one time partial, but that the inarticulable or incomprehensible parts are no less reality.

Radical empiricism recognizes a world of pure experience. The “blooming, buzzing confusion” is all that there is, “the immediate flux of life which furnishes the material to our later reflection with its conceptual categories” (“The Thing and Its

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4 This brings to mind the “pluralistic” points of view of the cubist works of Duchamp or Picasso.
Only newborns or people in a semi-coma, says James, can have this pure experience, “the literal sense of a that which is not yet any definite what, tho’ ready to be all sorts of whats” (“The Thing and Its Relations” 215). As capacious as “pure experience” seems to be, it is not everything that has a name or term associated with it.

“To be radical, an empiricism must neither admit into its constructions any element that is not directly experienced, nor exclude from them any element that is directly experienced” (James, “A World of Pure Experience” 195). In The Principles, James had already identified the epistemological and linguistic issues connected with this radical empiricism. We must, he writes, be ever aware of how language and our concepts mislead us in our dealings with the world.

Whenever we have made a word … to denote a certain group of phenomena, we are prone to suppose a substantive entity existing beyond the phenomena, of which the word shall be the name. But the lack of a word quite as often leads to the directly opposite error. We are then prone to suppose that no entity can be there; and so we come to overlook phenomena whose existence would be patent to us all, had we only grown up to hear it familiarly recognized in speech. (Principles I 195)

James elsewhere calls this “vicious abstractionism,” and it will feature centrally in the analysis of each of the novels. The second error—not noticing entities or phenomena because we have no word or concept associated with them (yet)—is yet another echo of a theme we see throughout James’s work. He is sensitive to the limits of language and concepts and so he is always using them as experiments that test reality, or to guide a

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5 Owen Flanagan argues (and I agree) that James mistakenly treats this epistemological (and possibly phenomenological) precept as an ontological fact. Flanagan claims that James has no warrant to make the ontological claim—that there is only one “substance” in existence, and it is “pure experience”—because there is no way to peer behind the veil of pure experience to verify its status, or to compare it with anything (43-6).

6 See the chapter “Abstractionism and ‘Relativismus’” in James’s The Meaning of Truth.
“return to life,” as he says, or to act in the absence of clear and certain ideas about reality. It is action, feeling, and experience more generally, which, though it be partially “made up” of ideas, is not limited to ideas. Reality always exceeds the concepts used to grasp it.

“Experience, as we know, has ways of boiling over, and making us correct our present formulas” (The Meaning of Truth vii).

“Experience” is such a central concept for James that he is often considered a phenomenologist. He shares with Husserl, the “founder of phenomenology,” an appreciation for the (Heraclitean) flux of conscious experience (Moran 60). They each independently articulated the insight that because ideas are always someone’s ideas (they are owned), there is no simple relation between our thoughts and some “external” reality. This is the problem of reference. In “The Stream of Thought” chapter in Principles I, James writes that we never have the same thought or sensation twice, but, “What is got twice is the same OBJECT” (230-31). For Husserl a related issue is, “how does consciousness attain to objective knowledge?...Husserl’s central insight was that consciousness was the condition of all experience, indeed it constituted the world, but in such a way that the role of consciousness itself is obscured and not easy to isolate and describe” (Moran 61). This was the guiding question for Husserl, but only one of a variety of questions for James, and so to refer to James as a phenomenologist is limiting. He found Husserl’s work a helpful tool in his own metaphysical investigations. Both recognized the “intentional” quality of consciousness—that is, we are never thinking just about an object (even an abstract “object”), but are always thinking about it in some way. For James the meaning of any thought is what it leads to or what it tells us to do. This
insight led ultimately to the pragmatic theory of truth. James’s path through
phenomenology differed from Husserl as well in that James was a natural scientist in
addition to being a philosopher, and for the purposes of empirical study, adopted a
provisionally positivistic attitude. Finally, while Husserl gradually oriented his
philosophy to account for the Lebenswelt (life-world) of ordinary experience, he
remained a professional philosopher writing for professional philosophers. James, on the
other hand, was determined to develop a philosophy that reached ordinary people where
they lived their everyday lives. James felt that philosophy ought to provide guidance for
us to feel “at home” in the world. “Since, however, we are active as well as thoughtful
beings, we seek for a world which has room in it for our own will and effort” (Smith 60).
When we turn to the novels, we will discover both this desire to make of the world a
home and for it to welcome our creative activity.

James used the terms Pragmatism and Radical Empiricism to label his entire
philosophical project, and there is no clear demarcation between them. It may be
convenient to think of Pragmatism as largely focused on answering questions of ethics,
volition, belief, and truth (“how we know, and how we determine truth”), while Radical
Empiricism provides the metaphysical underpinning, and is focused on the relation
between ontology and epistemology (“what we know, that is, what the world is like such
that it can be known this way” (Seigfried 240). But, like all thing James, these are only
provisional delineations, and there is significant overlap.

The three aspects said to be definitive of radical empiricism are already
incorporated into James’s pragmatism; namely, the postulate that all
philosophical debate be restricted to experientially derived terms, the
statement of fact that the relations between things are just as much matters
of direct experience as are the things themselves, and the generalized conclusion that experience exhibits a continuous structure and therefore does not require any transcendental connectives. (Seigfried 239)

They are not two distinct projects, but rather two different doors by which we might enter a very large and interesting laboratory.

Two of James’s boldest contributions to philosophy and the study of consciousness are also the ones that generate the most controversy and negative criticism. In this study I am less interested in critiquing the truth of the theories. It is, however, worth noting that both the Pragmatic Theory of Truth and the ideas expressed in “The Will to Believe” are problematic, but not nearly so as criticisms by contemporary British philosophers G.E. Moore and Bertrand Russell would indicate. They each provided withering critiques of James’s theory of truth and Pragmatism more generally, and contributed to the notion, in England, at least, that James was not a first rate philosopher. Moore’s criticism fails to hold up, for he seems to have presented only a caricature of James’s argument, as recent work has shown (Sprigge 126-7). Russell, who was much more respectful toward James and his philosophy, did have a point in that James’s theory of truth “confuses the psychology of the matter with the logic” (Sprigge 130). Yet most readers, from interested students of James to professional philosophers, would agree with Putman, who writes, “[I]t is not easy to say in a few words what James did think about truth, for … James’s view developed in complicated ways as he worked out his metaphysical system” (166). Perhaps it is best to do as Putnam, Siegfried, Sprigge, and others do, which is to identify the various “strains” in James’s work on any particular topic. Putnam, for example, identifies four general ways James thinks about truth: “a
Peircean strain, [social consensus],” an “un-Peircean strain, that truth is partly shaped by our interests” “a realist strain, summed up in the claim that truth involves agreement with reality,” and “an empiricist strain, summed up in the claim that ‘truth happens to an idea’” (167). Sprigge identifies six! (13-14).

One essay which received an unfair amount of criticism is “The Will to Believe,” which James says he wished that he had named “The Right to Believe” in order to avoid confusion. “James argues that it is reasonable to believe a hypothesis before one is presented with evidence for it. In particular, it is reasonable to believe the hypothesis of God’s existence in advance of evidence for or against it” (Misak 60). Critics, including James’s colleague and friend Peirce, emphasize the psychological in James’s thesis. They claim that James argued that something is true simply because we will it to be so, or that truth is what is in our subjective interests to believe. As Misak points out, however, James connects the will to believe to the search for evidence (66). We might will, but only as a way of cutting a path toward future evidence that supports or contradicts the believed-in hypothesis. The believed-in hypothesis leads to “experiments in living” (Misak 67). Further, believing certain things might be required for evidence for or against to be discovered. In other words, the will to believe is very much like a scientific hypothesis, a live question designed to elicit data from our living.

It would be impossible to provide a short list of all of James’s influences. He was no one’s apprentice, and was ever forging his own path. In his pragmatic, multidisciplinary approach he was able to learn from almost everything he read and everyone he talked to. What Marty writes about The Varieties could be said of many of
James’s works in Philosophy and Psychology as well: “In the book, high and low cultures blend maddeningly. One is never quite sure whether this is a book for and about elitists or a world of lay psychology with populist intentions” (xi). He did not assume that the reader was a professional philosopher, and such an “academic” pursuit would not have been interesting to him, anyway. He was on a quest for answers about how to live, and was self-consciously recreating “an immediately relevant philosophy,” in the words of Smith (39), relevant for his own questions and for the reader. This relevance demanded the engagement of the reader, for James did not try to persuade through authority or with strings of abstruse syllogisms. “His writing is a continual appeal to the individual to consult his own experience as a means of understanding and testing the ideas being placed before him. A good deal of analysis and observation on the part of the reader is called for” (Smith 39).

Perhaps it is not surprising, then, that one of the earliest and most abiding influences on James was Ralph Waldo Emerson, the author of *Self Reliance* (1841). In the opening paragraph, Emerson writes, “A man should learn to detect and watch that gleam of light which flashes across his mind from within, more than the lustre of the firmament of bards and sages” (145). He was a good friend of William’s father and a frequent visitor to the house. From Emerson James learned much, in particular the importance of creating a philosophical approach with a personal stamp. “In *Pragmatism* … James argues that making a report of the ‘impression’ that one’s ‘own intellect has received from the universe’ is just what the great philosophers manage to do” (Goodman 27). The individual is, after all, a test subject, and his philosophy—indeed, his entire
orientation to life—derives from the traces these personal experiments make on him. In Emerson “the essentially spiritual structure of the universe,” characteristic of the American Transcendentalists (Goodman 26), is an ontological principle. In James it is psychological and sometimes epistemological, the sense of a “something more,” as he writes in *The Varieties*. Emerson’s appreciation for the sacred in the ordinary and for heroic “self-reliance” to live a life worth living is for James a call to the “strenuous life” to fashion brute nature in heroic service of civilization (Smith 68). Every individual has reservoirs of strength, intelligence, and creativity that are smothered by modernity and all that it entails, but that waits only for sufficient pressure and challenge to draw it forth.

One of the philosophers closest to James in thinking was C.S. Peirce, but only up to a point. Both were scientists, and both tried to reconcile their empirical practices and general approval of positivism with the strains of Berkeleyan idealism that they abided (Siegfried 55). “Both argued that we perceive much more than atomistic entities and events; we also perceive relations in a variety of forms” (Anderson 56). It was Peirce who invented the name “pragmatism,” and Peirce provided one of the definitions of the pragmatic theory of truth that James uses: “[O]ur beliefs are really rules for action …

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7 This is quite similar to Freud’s description of the “sensation of ‘eternity,” or the “oceanic” feeling in the first chapter of *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1929-30). “It is a feeling which he would like to call a feeling of ‘eternity’, a feeling as of something limitless, unbounded—as it were, ‘oceanic’. This feeling he adds, is a purely subjective fact, not an article of faith; it brings with it no assurance of personal immortality, but it is the source of the religious energy which is seized upon by the various Churches and religious systems, directed by them into particular channel, and doubtless also exhausted by them. One may, he thinks, rightly call oneself religious on the ground of this oceanic feeling alone, even if one rejects every belief and every illusion” (11). Compare this with James: “Let me then propose, as an hypothesis, that whatever it may be on its farther side, the ‘more’ with which in religious experience we feel ourselves connected is on its hither side the subconscious continuation of our conscious life…[F]or it is one of the peculiarities of invasions from the subconscious region to take on objective appearances, and to suggest to the Subject an external control. In the religious life the control is felt as ‘higher’; but since on our hypothesis it is primarily the higher faculties of our own hidden mind which are controlling, the sense of union with the power beyond us is a sense of something, not merely apparently, but literally true” (512-13).
To develop a thought’s meaning, we need only determine what conduct it is fitted to produce: that conduct is for us its sole significance” (James, *Pragmatism* 28-9). Peirce was more conservative and precise in his use of the theory, and felt that James was trying to relativize truth (Anderson 56). But both agreed that “the purpose of thought is to produce belief and that of belief is to produce habits of action” (James, *Pragmatism* 258, quoted in Seigfried 41), but James would develop a theory of belief (in “The Will to Believe”) that Peirce thought was too much a psychological explanation.

It is worth noting that while James and Nietzsche were contemporaries, expressed a similar skepticism about the value of the rationalization of life, shared a suspicion of language and abstractions, and criticized scientism, they seemed not to have read one another at all.

The Novels

Earlier I talked about placing James and the novels alongside one another to discover their affinities and see how they fill in gaps in one another. I think of this now like gears meshing. The teeth of one fit the spaces of the other in order to make something happen. As we examine the three pairs, we should look for not only how James’s philosophical claims ask us to think about the novels. We should also be alert to how the novels ask us to think about philosophical claims. All stories make implicit commitments to epistemological and ontological principles, and our task is to make them explicit. James would, I think, be comfortable with the multiple moving parts of this investigation. His “reconstruction of philosophy was inaugurated … by questioning the
questioner, that is, by placing the philosophical tradition itself within a more encompassing human dimension of experience” (Seigfried 242). Not only will each of these texts come to a new life through their interaction, but I invite the reader, too, to be aware of his or her own personal investment in the philosophical stakes here.

Turning toward the novels, one of the threads that runs through my analysis of Nella Larsen’s novel *Passing* (1925) is W.E.B. DuBois’s ventriloquized question, a question he says that whites implicitly ask Blacks in early twentieth-century America: “How does it feel to be a problem?” In his essay, “The Souls of Black Folk” (1901), he is concerned with the particularity of Black identity and the connection to societal power in the Jim Crow era. Larsen’s *Passing*, however, shows how the question becomes one potentially facing anyone in the West in late modernity. The protagonist of the novel, Irene Redfield, sees her own racial, gender, and sexual orientation categories as “a problem” not because of the particularities of those identities, but because of a fundamental incongruity between categorial, formulaic, scientific explanation and human experience. Ways of understanding oneself “from the outside” conflict with ways of experiencing oneself intuitively, or “from the inside.” Irene attempts to internalize those “outside” modes of understanding—scientific, categorial, social, and political. This not only contradicts her sense of herself, but also interferes with her ways of experiencing herself.

The phenomenon of passing and the novel *Passing* show how self is fluid and not reducible to fixed categories. Like other Modernist experiments, *Passing* shows how, reality is a construction, and our attempts to comprehend it must resist fixed formulas.
DuBois was a student of William James at Harvard, and his question is part of a larger move toward a pragmatic reconceptualization of human experiences, knowledge, and action. James’s antifoundational, skeptical philosophical approach helps us see how Larsen’s novel critiques supposed scientific objectivity and instead forces the reader to engage with the social and political consequences of putatively objective descriptions and identities.

Modernists were discovering that reality is very much a construction, but Irene discovers that that does not mean that one can construct reality in any way one wishes. One of the questions the novel will pose is about the connection between constructed reality and action: Is certainty about one’s categorial, scientific identity (what someone is) connected to one’s experience and sense of self as the protagonist of an evolving story (who someone is) and therefore to what one does? In order to reconstruct reality in accordance with her experiential life (to pass as a white person, for example), what does Irene need to know about herself? As we discover, perhaps what is more important is what she needs to not know.

In an effort to create new spaces for her experiences of self to engender a new social identity, Irene discovers that she needs to de-identify from the categories that ordinarily make her legible to herself and others. Newness evades simplistic categorization and explanation. But this is psychologically so difficult, that in her attempt to create a new sense of her self she only becomes alienated from her own thoughts and actions. She becomes an incoherent to herself and to the reader. I speculate that this means that James’s philosophical recommendation to eschew categorialization and the
scientific understanding of self for the benefit of freedom and self-making has a cost that is too high to pay. Perhaps “vicious abstractionism” is more vicious, and in a different way, than James had foreseen.

Robert Musil’s *The Man without Qualities* [*Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften*] (1930/32, 1943) is similarly anti-foundational and suspicious of abstract concepts, fixed categories, and totalizing absolutes. Musil treats the novel as a kind of laboratory in which to conduct experiments. Though this is the kind of attitude that, inspired by James, I try to use for each of the novels, Musil and *MwQ* are much more explicit about the experiments the novel conducts. One of the innovations *MwQ* is *Essayismus*, a practice of describing or analyzing any “single” concept or event in multiple ways, but without committing to any one version. We will see how this strongly parallels James’s Principle of Substitution, and how both are more than intellectual exercises, but potentially guide one’s engagement with “irreducibly pluralistic reality,” in James’s terms. Each practice is meant to stimulate a living, perpetual engagement with fluid reality, in order to revivify a person’s relationships with themselves, one another, and world. These practices are also expressions of a fundamental paradigm shift. According to James and *MwQ*, a positivistic framing for human experience was treating “What is reality?”—an ontological question—as the fundamental philosophical question. James and *MwQ* want to shift to what they think is the more important epistemological and also personal question, “What can I know and how can I know it?”

Paradoxically, science has a significant part to play in responding to that question for James and *MwQ*. An important connection between the novel and James is
philosopher and scientist Ernst Mach, who was personally known to both. Musil wrote his dissertation on elements of Mach’s philosophy of science and James and Mach corresponded and met frequently, and noted the similarity of their philosophical theories. Mach is a crucial figure in this historical period because he helped define the limits and possibilities of science and rational analysis more generally. Science, argues Mach, provides tools to show us how reality works, but science must be silent about what reality is an sich. Ulrich, the protagonist, states early on that his scientific way of thinking and learning provides the kind of discipline and method for his attempts to learn new ways to live, and can be used to study feeling, intuition, faith, belief, and even mystical experiences. Such investigations are, according to Musil, necessary for modern man to develop beyond its current state. Scientific knowledge evolves because reality is not singular, and the practices of scientific investigation can help develop the flexibility of mind necessary to engage with pluralistic reality. Like James, Musil thinks that what is needed is not a better mimetic representation of reality, but new ways of thinking, feeling, and acting.

Science also relies on productive doubt or tactical skepticism, which is quite similar to how irony works. The practices of Essayismus and PoS can be thought of as ironic rhetorical practices, and we will see how they generate the possibility for action through productive doubt. The irony in MwQ and scientific investigation rely on virtually the same double move: the affirmation of a thesis in order to call that thesis into question, which is in order to more fully comprehend the thesis, its alignment with reality, and the investigator’s relationship to the thesis. Rather than disparaging the possibility of
knowledge, irony creates the possibility for an enriched response to the questions, “What can I know and how can I know it?” Scientific theories are in a sense productive fictions that enhance our engagement with reality that cannot be captured mimetically. \( MwQ \) does not expect that the reader is or will become a scientist, but the novel does draw the reader into the thought, feeling, and value experiments. \textit{Essayismus} is ultimately pragmatic; it is based on the principle that there are multiple ways to experience, understand, and represent reality, and each explanation serves particular purposes.

The novel does not solve the problems that it articulates, but neither does it escape into a utopic fantasy or descend into nihilistic self-defeat. In a way, it presents the search for definitive solutions as part of the problem itself. Instead, Ulrich’s quest and the reader’s quest is not for a place to rest but for radical engagement with reality. In the final book of the novel, Ulrich and his estranged sister experiment with moral, criminal, and social transgressions, partly in order to reanimate their engagement with “big questions,” an engagement that is often mechanical and formulaic. This, too, is no solution, but \( MwQ \) invites the reader to participate in the quest for enhanced engagement. Early in the novel Ulrich reflects, “People simply don’t realize it, they have no idea how much thinking can be done already; if they could be taught to think a new way, they would change their lives” (\( MwQ \) 37). Ulrich’s thinking and the thinking of the reader can lead the way into experiences that then affect us, potentially change us, or stimulate us to action.

In Ernest Hemingway’s \textit{The Sun Also Rises} (1926) we see a strong departure from the ruminative, explicitly self-analytical protagonist and narrator. Jake Barnes’s quiet dignity regarding the war injury that renders him physically impotent, the “unreasonable
wound,” by one critic, suggests a rift between thinking and acting. Regarded as a model quest of the “lost generation,” the characters struggle to find moral bearings and purpose. Like the Fisher King and his lands in the grail quests and fertility myths popularized in late-medieval courtly romances, Jake symbolizes the dying of civilization, which is in need of spiritual renewal. Jake and a small collection of friends, including his erstwhile lover, Brett Ashley, take the reader through a rambling quest/tour of Paris, the countryside of France, and Spain, highlighting the Pamplona bullfights and fishing in the quiet rivers. Though the hero Jake is not an exemplary character, the novel does perhaps have guidance for the reader, both contemporary and current. The focus on overt action rather than ruminative analysis and self-investigation connects with James’s pragmatism, particularly the suspicion of abstract concepts. “The return to life can’t come about by talking. It is an act; to make you return to life, I must set an example for your imitation” (James, “The Continuity of Experience” 297). With few exceptions, the narrator Jake focuses on overt action in order to stimulate in the reader the “return to life.” He provides only the sparsest reports of what people do and say, leaving the reader to infer interior psychological states, and the causal connections among the various sensations, experiences, and events reported. This is the famous “iceberg principle.” Regarding the iceberg as a metaphor for his narrative style, Hemingway said, “There is seven eighths of it under water for every part that shows. Anything you know you can eliminate and it

8 Frederick Hoffman characterizes the wound as “unreasonable” because “the victim cannot understand why it has ‘happened to him’” (69). While I share his interest in capturing the “unreasonableness” of being wounded, I propose that the entire task of this novel is to bring to the surface the reasonableness of contingency and suffering. I will use the term “unreasonable wound,” but emphasize that it might only be unreasonable for Jake and not for the reader.
only strengthens your iceberg” (Plimpton 29). My analysis will shed light on what it means that the strength derives from what is not said or written.

In comparing SAR with the legend of the Grail Quest in Medieval romances such as Parzival/Perceval we see a similar productive reticence. In both cases a central character (Jake in SAR, the Fisher King in the legend) suffers a genital wound from which he cannot heal but which does not kill him. In the legend, this “fertility wound” also renders the king’s lands barren. The questing knight Parzival/Perceval will heal the king and restore the lands to fertility if and when he asks the compassionate question, “Uncle, what is the trouble?” I propose that in SAR, the reader is cast in the role of the questing knight who must ask Jake a similar question. What is critical for my study is that in the legend, as in SAR, little or no explicit help is given the one who must ask the healing question. In the legend, the king and court provide no guidance to Parzival, even though they desperately want him to ask the question. I suggest that a similar aesthetic and pragmatic principle is at work in SAR through the “iceberg principle.” The Fisher King episode provides the inspiration for T.S. Eliot’s The Waste Land, a 1922 poem that likely inspired Hemingway in turn, and which became identified with a sense of loss and crisis.

The generation between the wars might have been “lost,” but this is just a reflection of a supposedly degenerative trend identified by James and others as far back as the middle of the nineteenth century. It was civilization itself—the excessive ease of the consumerist-leisure lifestyle, or the frenetic demands of an increasingly technological and bureaucratic urban lifestyle—that caused a kind of nervous exhaustion. The more “civilized” a person, the more that person suffered from these nervous disorders. Though
*SAR* does not use the same terms, it is still run through with a sense of pathology and the need for healing. For both James and in *SAR*, dangerous, demanding action is the “cure.” The “strenuous life” for James and “manly adventures” for Hemingway, particularly bull-fighting in *SAR*, provides the needed remedy. When Jake says, “Nobody ever lives their life all the way up except bull-fighters,” we get a clue about the paradoxical vitality of life-threatening experiences. For James, war is the model for salutary and formative life-threatening experience, and might be for Jake, too, were it not for the fact that he did not escape the war intact. These adventures, which, according to James, “cast [life] upon a higher plane of power” are only opportunities for moral or spiritual healing if the physical damage is not too deep. James also recoils from the unsavory “need of crushing weaker peoples” in his imperial characterization of war, and seeks instead a “moral equivalent of war” in voluntary poverty or demanding, nation-building physical labor. In a similar way Jake views physicality and danger—boxing and bull-fighting—as healing, and some characters even romantically long for the certitude and vitality that war provided them. Ultimately, the reasons that war, boxing, bull-fighting, poverty, or demanding physical labor are putative cures for the degradation of civilization is that they subject a person to contingency and threats to life and body.
Chapter 2: *Passing* by Nella Larsen: Identity as a Condition of Action

*The mystery of life is not a problem to be solved; it is a reality to be experienced.*

--Jacobus Johannes van der Leeuw

Larsen’s *Passing* captures America’s obsession with identity, especially in this time of eugenics programs, miscegenation laws, the Jim Crow South, and the changing roles of women. The novel is focalized through Irene, and focuses on her and her friend Clare’s attempts to navigate race, class, sex, and sexual orientation identities in 1920s New York and Chicago. The promise held out by such social categorizations is that identification with a group or normative role at first promises not only to tell her who she is, but also what she ought to do. The 1920s was still echoing with W.E.B. DuBois’ call for the Negro “talented tenth” to lead the race in “racial uplift,” a social program implicitly based on the familiar Enlightenment assumption that categorization brings certain knowledge to, and certain obligations upon, the individual. Both James Weldon Johnson’s and Alain Locke’s prescriptive definitions of the New Negro helped further refine normative modes of being, acting, working, loving, and politicking.

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9 *The Conquest of Illusion* (1928), p.12. The following chapter takes issue with this statement. It is not meant to be a statement of fact, but an inducement to develop a new orientation toward life. Nonetheless it may be more shibboleth—that is, an expression that serves as a marker of belonging—than a slogan helpful to all people at all times.
Like many novels by African American writers then and since, *Passing* provided a set of responses to the “unasked” question of W.E.B. DuBois’ *The Souls of Black Folk*: “How does it feel to be a problem?” It is the silent question, he writes, that whites implicitly ask blacks in the early part of the 20th century. But it will take almost a century for critics to discover that this question could stand as an epigraph for many of the canonical Modernist experiments in fiction—from both African American and white writers—experiments that recognized and responded in unique ways to the Western individual’s “transcendental homelessness,” in Lukács’s apt phrase. Numerous critics have been right to note that both Irene’s and Clare’s inability to fully articulate or realize their positions within the racial and gender categories of 1920s America demonstrates the absurdity of those very categorizations. But we will see that this failure is just one version of a more general, Modernist thematization of the incongruity between categorial, formulaic, scientific explanation and human experience. By reading *Passing* alongside James and other philosophers of the early 20th century, we recognize that Larsen’s artistic contributions were critiques of late modernity, and not just arising from the particularity of black economic, material, and social contexts. She is engaged with deep questions of knowledge, meaning, and even the status of “objective” existence. *Passing* does not merely depict these questions, but insists on the reader’s engagement with the text in order to construct Irene and Clare’s experiences and reality, yet also question those constructions. As in James, the reader can never settle on a single interpretation of these characters or their actions.
The comparison with James shows that these are not simply psychologically meaningful issues, but are rooted in deeper philosophical questions that were much debated at the time and continue to be contested. Positivistic science had claimed dominion over all human experience, asserting a monological and singular reality. Naïvely scientific assumptions about the order of reality in turn supported the categories that legitimized Jim Crow laws and social convention. James’s pluralism and Pragmatic Theory of Truth challenges these conventions and the deeper scientific claims on philosophical grounds. *Passing* similarly challenges such definitive categorization, but shows how the cognitive error is linked to social and political forces, and individual human failings. James valorizes certain kinds of not-knowing, and in *Passing* we see the value of not-knowing for defying racial (and other) categories which the dominant, white society tries to ascribe to Irene and Clare. A person’s category determined what a he or she was allowed to do, but, in line with a *scientistic* perspective, even determined what a person was capable of doing, or inclined to do. This analysis focuses on the rift between thinking and acting that we see in the characters of Irene and Clare. The false dichotomy of thinking-acting serves as a lens through which to view the shared philosophical discourses of James and *Passing*, and focuses on a question fundamental to the human quest: What is the connection between what I know and what I do?

In *Passing* we see that the very same knowledge can either hinder or enable action. As we follow Irene, we see that her modes of self-classification are at odds with something deeper. “[Irene] was caught between two allegiances, different, yet the same. Herself. Her race. Race! The thing that bound and suffocated her” (Larsen 225). This
frustration goes beyond Irene in *Passing*. Both of Larsen’s novels challenge various modes of racial categorization—those inscribed on her from a racist society, or those arising from “the” black community itself. And as later critics will point out, Larsen’s characters also show how gender, sexual orientation, and class categories become traps. It is this categorial mode of self-knowing that, when internalized, creates a dislocated, anxious, and ultimately unknowable self. But those psychological crises go even further than this—they are emblematic of epistemic crises in this particular period of modernity. Ultimately Clare cannot live, and Irene cannot fully live, but not merely because these particular social categories in this historical time and place are too restrictive. Nor is it because these two individuals happen to be too idiosyncratic or rebellious. Rather, *Passing*’s deeper claim is that the attempt to render one’s identity and action legible (or have it rendered legible for one by ideological structures) through the internalization of categories of any kind must fail because of a fundamental incompatibility between rigid category and fluid self.

This is not to deny the uniqueness of Irene and Clare’s (and by extension, black women’s) particular challenges in this society at this time. No matter the depth of alienation that whites of any class experienced at the time, by and large they did not need to fear lynch mobs, nor did they need to be hyper-vigilant regarding their behavior in social spaces, as blacks did. And no white person is haunted by the deep, historical trauma of slavery. So critics are right to see Larsen’s work in light of these and many other profound material, social, legal, economic, and psychological differences between black and white worlds of experience. But in their urgency to preserve such a space,
critics have failed to note the depth of Larsen’s engagement with very deep questions of meaning, knowledge, and being, questions that connect her to a much wider circle of like-minded (if not like-experienced) thinkers. I will begin my review of the literature with the criticism that overtly or implicitly treats categorial difference (race, gender, sexual orientation) as the primary focus of the novel. But we will see that later criticism provides a much more nuanced approach toward the meaning of these categories, and is sensitive to Larsen’s unique, literary treatment of racialized and gendered experiences.

As we ask our questions around the connections between thought and action, James helps us articulate one central implicit question of the novel: do certain ways of knowing prevent certain kinds of action, and do other ways of knowing enable or even make almost inevitable other kinds of action?

Review of Literature

Larsen published only two novels, both near the end of the Harlem Renaissance, and each was generally well received by contemporary reviewers. According to Karla Kaplan, Larsen’s work capitalized on the vogue which black writers enjoyed simply for “show[ing] themselves” (Kaplan x). Most critics read her novels through the lens of the “tragic mulatto,” an unstable and melodramic “position” thematized in works of fiction at the end of the nineteenth century. Her works also arose out of the traditional passing motif created by writers such as Jessie Fauset (Plum Bun (1928)) and James Weldon Johnson (Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man (1912, anonymously, and re-released 1927)). But Larsen used her mixed-race characters and a superior narrative technique to
challenge the very categories of race upon which both the “tragic mulatto” and the
transgressive act of passing are based. “Passing questions the very idea of race, exposing
it as one of our most powerful—and dangerous—fictions … The novel reminds us of the
(sometimes tragic) gap between what we think we believe in and what in fact we want.
Race, Passing intimates, always lives in that gap” (Kaplan xi).

But if her novels were read as strident critiques of racial and class categories, they
paradoxically inspired stronger racial identification among many blacks. “[D]uring the
1920s, Larsen’s novels enjoyed some popularity as “uplift novels” that presented proof
that blacks were intelligent, refined, and morally equal to whites” (Washington 351).
Passing and Passing are challenges to racial categorization, but only by temporarily
buying into those very categories. In 1926 Carl Van Vechten published Nigger Heaven, a
sensationalized depiction of Harlem nightlife emphasizing the erotic, the “barbaric,” the
drunken, sensuous, and poor of the black experiences. Immediately the “black
community” was polarized over it (Kaplan xii-xiii), indicating at once that no author or
artistic work could be treated as a singular artist or event, but must be treated as “for” or
“against” some version of blackness and racial politics. Passing partially supports this
emphasis on “exaggerated” or “essential” blackness in the distinctions between
controlled, middle-class, white-immitating Irene, and the transgressive Clare, who is
unable to rein in her own desire—what Irene refers to as her “having way.”

While Irene represents the unfortunate outcome of someone who buys into
categories, Clare is able to more easily move across borders. But neither character enjoys
a satisfying resolution to the problem of the color line. Early criticism focused on the
ways in which individual characters challenged the mechanisms of border patrol, and highlighted the human costs of transgressing boundaries. Aubrey Bowser, for example, in 1929 writes, “Race is a matter of mind rather than body, of background rather than foreground” (94). Larsen “succumbs to the grudge that most Negroes have against a Negro who goes over the race line and cannot stay there. The grudge is justifiable, for a person should be either one thing or the other” (Bowser 95). Here, the fact of the color line as social construct is not questioned—only one’s ability to navigate the territory. In the same year, Esther Hyman describes this as a story of an “individual out of harmony with his surroundings, set apart from the ordinary run of human beings,” and therefore “pregnant with pathos” (Hyman 93). W.E.B. DuBois also focuses on Larsen’s ability to balance the political implications of passing with the human costs. He appreciates Larsen’s interest in what it is like to pass, as an experience. And he praises *Passing* quite profusely, primarily its careful and sustained attention to complex interiority. “She explains just what ‘passing’ is: the psychology of the thing; the reaction of it on friend and enemy … The great problem is under what circumstances would a person take a step like this and how would they feel about it?” (DuBois 98) This focus on the psychological is clearly warranted. As Kaplan again notes, “Larsen’s writing, and *Passing* especially, is now hailed for helping create Modernist psychological interiority” (ix). But Larsen’s work disappeared from view, just as she did, after 1930. So much of the appreciation of Larsen’s sophisticated portrayals of “well-rounded, in-depth individuals [who are] not representatives of personal stands … [or] stereotypes” (354, Encyclopedia of African American Women Writers) is the result of biographical and revisionist criticism.
undertaken in the wake of the Black Arts movement of the 1960s and ’70s (Joyce Russell-Robinson in Multiethnic American Literature).

Later critics noted Larsen’s critique of the very class-based security that racial and economic “passing” initially seemed to promise. For blacks as for whites, middle class security comes at the cost of a living, vital engagement with life’s contingencies. Mary Mabel Youman (1974) sees the novel as a clear condemnation of the appropriated American middle-class values of “security, middle-class morality, and middle-class standing” for the sake of a sterile, artificial, passionless “racial uplift.” Loyalty to the Black heritage embodied by Clare (and not Irene) necessarily rejects such security in favor of the life and spiritual renewal offered by Clare’s “danger.” Youman sees racial categories as the primary thematic concern of the novel, and identifies Irene as the protagonist who—in contradistinction to the more “authentic” Clare—is actually engaged in “passing” (Youman 337-42). Yet Clare’s “authenticity” ultimately proves fatal. In a similar vein, Cheryl A. Wall (1986) provides an ideological reading that also highlights the impossible position of black women in the 1920s, which is even greater for those of mixed race origins. “The tragedy for these mulattoes is the impossibility of self-definition. Larsen’s protagonists assume false identities that ensure social survival but result in psychological suicide” (Wall 357). Her reading takes no account of the narrative and formal qualities of this novel as fabrication, as story, and she (like Washington) finds the ending melodramatic. Jennifer Devere Brody (1992) provides another ideological reading of *Passing*. She sees both Irene and Clare in racial and class terms. “I read Irene Redfield and Clare Kendry as representatives of different ideologies locked in a struggle
for dominance” (Brody 394). Readings that identify the ways in which power works in Irene and Clare’s world clearly show ideologies of race and gender categories on personal and intimate levels. What is at stake in this struggle is the possibility of the creation of authentic black female subjectivities. Typically these subjectivities are rendered only in race-class-gender, but this does not exhaust the possibilities for ideological readings of *Passing*.

Deborah McDowell broke new ground in 1986 with her claim for the primacy of a homoerotic reading. She draws on those portions of the text that use fire imagery in describing Clare, or in which Irene’s gaze lingers languorously on Clare’s features, or where Irene explicitly notes how attractive Clare is. This “awakening of Irene’s erotic feelings for Clare” are hidden by a the relatively “safe” plot of racial passing, but Irene (and perhaps Clare, too) are tempted to pass in terms of sexual categories as well (McDowell xxvi). McDowell suggests that this sub-plot is indeed the more transgressive and therefore more significant of the plots in the story, cleverly hidden by Larsen’s masterly narrative strategies and tactics (xxx). Later critics like Ann Ducille agree with much of McDowell’s work, but don’t prioritize the homoerotic over the other themes. Like others, she finds great value in McDowell’s careful attention to imagery, narrative voice, and in her effort to puzzle out more precisely the uses and implications of ambiguity as both a social and narrative strategy (Ducille 436-7). Indeed, according to Kate Baldwin, the novel *Passing*, like all narratives of social action, is itself partially constitutive of the act of passing. “*Passing*, which supplies its own theories about race and representation, puts this discussion into the context of narrative structure by
foregrounding the parallel strategies of “passing” as a social act and *Passing* as a narrative one” (Baldwin 465).

Both Helena Michie (1992) and Judith Butler (1993) offer sophisticated social constructivist readings of Larsen’s characters. They appreciate the ways in which her characters help to create (rather than merely reveal) the binaries inherent in categories of race, class, gender, and sexual orientation. Butler’s quasi-psychoanalytic reading does not necessarily privilege sexual difference, but asks “how might we understand homosexuality and miscegenation to converge at and as the constitutive outside of a normative heterosexuality that is at once the regulation of a racially pure reproduction?” (Butler 417). Butler’s reading is sensitive to the formal structures and devices that Larsen employs. For example, the unreliable narration of Irene demonstrates the dangers of exposure, as Irene hides even from herself the very transgressive identifications and words that are formative of her gender-, sex-, and race-identifications (Butler 419). Passing is the very act of non-disclosure, and that which cannot be spoken or shown is (consonant with psychoanalysis) the most important, and perhaps holds the most influence over ourselves and others.

Catherine Rottenberg (2003) also foregrounds the iterative constructedness of passing. Rather than reading passing as a subversive strategy, Larsen encourages the reading of passing as performative reiteration of gender and race norms. Drawing on Miron and Inda, “race performativity is the power of discourse to bring about what it names through the citing or repetition of racial norms” (Rottenberg 492). Race is a kind of language game, they claim. There is always the possibility of transgression, for if race
is only emergent in the act of performing according to prior norms, those performances can be reinterpreted or misfire.

Many critics attempt to understand the themes and concerns of the novels through Larsen’s biography. Identifying Clare as the central character, Mary Helen Washington (1980) sees the tension in *Passing* as that between autonomy and identity. She writes that Larsen’s novels do not provide us with solutions to the problems that confront the characters because Larsen herself could not imagine solutions (Washington 353). Charles Larson’s (1993), Thadious Davis’s (1994), and George Hutchinson’s (2006) biographies follow in this vein. Davis brings to light Larsen’s determination to create an identity that would be as marketable and “seen” as her writing. Davis’ biography is, according to one reviewer, a postmodern affirmation of “social constructions of identity and self-fashioning” (Byerman 63-4). Davis preserves Larsen’s mystique even as she reveals many of the details of this often hidden life. In contrast to earlier biographies, Hutchinson’s sees Larsen as frustrated not by her own inability to fabricate an identity, but by society’s inability to accept a woman who refused simple racial categorization. Hutchinson claims that biographies like Davis’ only reinforce the impossibility of biraciality or ambiguous racial identification, and fail to appreciate the extent to which Larsen’s life and fiction was a rejection of the simple binary. So much of Larsen’s plotting and characterization in her novels is modeled after her life, especially her family life, and these biographies enable comparative readings of the these many fabrications, including the self-fabrication of Larsen herself. “Like her most captivating characters, she grew to prefer a certain invisibility and mysteriousness as a form of self-protection”
Such erasure was, Hutchinson points out, supported and even mandated by “a diverse, transatlantic ideological investment in the color line that formally depends upon the invisibility and silence of persons such as Larsen—that attempted to make the existence of people such as Nella Larsen literally impossible” (10). As we will later see, telling the truth about a life or a person’s experience depends upon fictions.

Claudia Tate (1980) combines psychological analysis with close reading. Passing, race, and class are themselves not the centers of attention, but rather mere devices to support a story of “psychological intrigue” (Tate 344). “The real impetus for the story is Irene’s emotional turbulence, which is entirely responsible for the course that the story takes and ultimately accountable for the narrative ambiguity” (Tate 344). Tate’s analysis recovers much of the traditional Modernist aesthetic that intervening criticism had ignored. She attends to the narrative ambiguity and Larsen’s attempts to draw a wedge between visual signifiers and the underlying signifieds. The particular stylistic innovations from which “[m]eaning in Passing … must be pieced together like a complicated puzzle from allusion and suggestions” (Tate 347) align Larsen with many of the concerns of Modernism in general, according to more traditional conceptions of the movement. Adrienne Johnson Gosselin (1996) points out that “American literary history views Modernism as largely a European movement contemporaneous with, but separate from, the Harlem Renaissance. And while American Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance both share such primary Modernist aesthetic concerns as alienation, primitivism, and experimental form, the canon of American literature continues to record black writers of the period as “Harlem Renaissance” writers rather than black Modernist
or simply American Modernist writers” (Gosselin 37). There is much greater consonance between the American and European “lost generation” and the “black Modernist search for the spiritual self” (Gosselin 39) than had been recognized. She works from Charles Taylor’s sensitivity to the ways in which theoretical approaches always construct and are constructed by the very “objects” they study. “Using Taylor, we can see that existing theories follow the fixed cause-and-effect logic of the natural science model (an erroneous but prevalent view that the natural sciences provide appropriate models for the methods and procedures for theories of social science) (Gosselin 91). According to the logic of traditional literary history, the Modernist movement was influenced by a Euro-American Zeitgeist shaping an aesthetic characterized by constitutive qualities identified specifically as ‘modern’” (Gosselin 38). Gosselin recommends reading practices that attend to subject positions of the reader in order to both appreciate similarities (rather than universal themes) and differences across culturally constructed and enforced racial boundaries.¹⁰

While Gosselin insisted on a much more self-conscious approach to the study of black Modernist literature and culture, Sieglinde Lemke (1998) focuses on the interdependence of black and white writers. Heretofore, critics have tended to see the Harlem Renaissance as distinct from, and even derivative of, the more canonical Modernist experiments. But Lemke notes that “several key expressions of Modernism assumed their shape only through the incorporation of black forms. ‘The other’—to use

¹⁰ This argument recalls Gadamer’s attention to the “horizons of understanding”—historically and culturally situated epistemological domains. Interestingly, Ricoeur develops this “horizons” theory of the hermeneutic circle to describe how the reader’s horizon is iteratively called into question and enriched in discourse with the text. That is, the reader’s “horizon” is in part constituted by the interpretive process. See the Appendix to The Rule of Metaphor (1975), particularly p. 319 ff for more.
the fashionable term—has been an integral part of Modernism from its origins” (Lemke 4). Lempke’s approach made possible a wholesale reconsideration of black Modernisms as transatlantic phenomena, and demanded a disciplinary reevaluation of the Modernist canon. Formerly, the “black Modernist experience” restricted to a number of city blocks in New York City, rather than standing for all black, American artistic production. With a revised historical approach, the concerns of all so-called “black Modernist” writers could now more easily be read in connection with more traditional Modernist experiments (Lemke 4).

At the same time, critics bear in mind Andreas Huyssen’s (1986) observation that the distinction between high art and low culture describes only one set of Modernist concerns, and the experiments of only a small set of “exemplary” Modernist writers. Huyssen distinguishes Modernism from the “historical avantgard,” which he says “aimed at developing an alternative relationship between high art and mass culture and thus should be distinguished from Modernism, which for the most part insisted on the inherent hostility between high and low” (Huyssen viii). He goes on to note that the high art/mass culture binary has typically been gendered as masculine/feminine through most critical theorizing (Huyssen x). Later critics will note that such gendering is essential to the entire Enlightenment/imperial projects of Western Europe, and is not merely a category of aesthetic experience (see Doyle and Winkiel, below). Rather than seeing categorical oppositions—high/low, black/white, male/female, free/bound, mind/body, etc.—twenty-first century critics are much more attentive to the ways in which writers on the margins of the canon deliberately challenge these categories in their works. As Morag Shiach will
go on to note in 2007, “the idea of an abstract category of ‘modernism’ understood as a definable literary style, or as a grouping of texts that share central thematic and stylistic features, was essentially a critical creation of the second half of the twentieth century. There is no ‘modernism’ without institutionalized literary criticism and without a pedagogy of English that constitutes and disseminates its canon” (Shiach 3). She reminds us that “Modernism” is an invention of particular academics and that it arose out of particular desires to elevate some writers, experiences, forms, geographic locations, and political perspectives over others. Contemporary critics are noting the provisionality and porousness of those selected domains (Shiach 3).

In a survey of emerging Modernist scholarship, Douglas Mao and Rebecca Walkowitz (2008) identify many dimensions of the transnational turn: attention to alternative or marginal aesthetic traditions within “national” literatures; international circulation of texts and discourses that challenge the very borders of “national” traditions, especially the colonized/colonizer binary; and “the interrelation of cultural, political, and economic transactions” (Mao and Walkowitz 739). The authors also note the interest in extending the temporal origins and legacies of Modernist discourses, some critics (see Doyle, below) going back as far as the Renaissance to discern the threads of aesthetic forms that emerged in relation to specific political and social conditions. (Mao and Walkowitz 739).

For example, critical work in 2005-6 on the “otherness” of black Modernism began to deconstruct the primacy of white Modernism—or what had formerly simply been called “Modernism.” Peter Brooker and Andrew Thacker (2005), and Laura Doyle
and Laura Winkiel’s (2005) each treat multiple Modernisms in the plural. Their spatialization of the territory of Modernisms attends to the ways in which international flows of capital, material, people, and culture affect aesthetic production and consumption. Doyle and Winkiel’s project goes further in questioning the organization of Modernism around the traditional urban, white questions and cities. In the latter anthology European experience is consumed and reimagined by aesthetic experiments in China, Brazil, Haiti, India, and other places. Their attention to the constructedness of race and its importance for the imperial projects of North Atlantic nations—projects crucial to the antagonisms identified by many Modernist writers—draws attention to the ways in which the category “Modernism” is undergoing evolution even today. “[T]he term serves not as a center around which other projects get organized, but as a contested and historical referent that suffers pressure from the affiliations, indifference, or antagonism of diverse twentieth-century writers and artists” (Doyle and Winkiel 5). In the same volume, Doyle describes how the “freedom myths” crucial to Atlantic Modernism’s discourses are born in the racialized English Revolution of the 1640s. “The key English-language vocabularies of Atlantic modernity are coined here…, especially the merged rhetorics of race and freedom; and we miss their full resonance if we ignore this English Civil War moment” (Doyle and Winkiel 51). The incoherence Larsen identifies, according to Doyle, is present in modernity’s impossible configuration of freedom as freedom-from, but it is heightened through the racialization of freedom in Larsen’s works. In Larsen’s first novel, *Quicksand*, Helga suffers the impossible tension between individual and group identity because, according to Doyle, “everyone must be an
independent individual in order to be a member of the group; and conversely, one can only be a group member by assenting to the laws of laissez-faire economy and individual self-support. This orthodoxy is the essence of racial Saxonism parading as social contract, and it creates the incoherence of Helga’s desires for race and for escape from race” (Doyle and Winkiel 65).

Anthony Dawahare (2006) notes another implicit contradiction in black modernity, one to which black Modernist writers attended. “Writers claimed that the New Negro was shaped by modernity yet retained in some way a racial essence or character that preceded modernity. The New Negro was as old as Africa but as contemporary as a jazz club in urban Harlem” (Dawahare 23). Like Doyle, he notes that “the notion of a racial self is itself inseparable from the specific capitalist institutions and ideologies of modernity” (Dawahare 25). Again, the aesthetic cannot be adequately understood without a fairly sophisticated comprehension of the material and ideological social, historical, and economic situation of blacks in the 1920s, as well as their ambitions to imagine something beyond their situation. He analyses Larsen’s painterly surfaces—Clare’s radiant whiteness, for example—as fetish objects which circulate like money. Money, like Clare, passes; it crosses borders when it pretends to be unmarked, when it escapes from the “sooty” blackness of industrial production, working class semi-barbarism (Dawahare 33).

H. Jordan Landry (2006) also notes how Larsen subverts both the ideological categories and explicit masculine (and white) policing of the borders of those categories. Drawing on Butler and Basu’s work, Landry attends to the ways in which gender identity
is enacted, but Landry adds to this a very astute critique of the way in which the Harlem Renaissance discourse of racial uplift depended upon women’s containment and self-policing. “In Larsen’s work, women of mixed identity fear being defined by other African-Americans as race traitors if they resist sexual and gender norms. Yet, their attempts to live up to a fictionalized ideal of femininity increases their sense of failure and self-blame as they find it impossible to conform themselves continually to such an image” (Landry 26). Their lesbian desire for one another affirms blackness as erotically and aesthetically desirable, and at the same time destabilizes their ability to identify with the black “race” because, as bell hooks has noted, “the idea of black women having lesbian desire for other black women, specifically due to their embodiment of blackness and femaleness, is virtually incomprehensible in a society that repeatedly marks African-American women as victimized and blameworthy” (Landry 27-8). Ultimately, Larsen’s subversion is successful, not because the plot supports the success of Irene and Clare’s mutual desire (it obviously does not), but because of the story’s effect on the reader. The reader is encouraged to linger, to dwell in desire in identifying with Irene, “to desire knowledge about [Clare], and to revel in the pleasure of not knowing” (Landry 46). Landry draws a too-tidy conclusion from the unstable ending of the novel, but her attention to Larsen’s “will to style” and superior use of devices demand serious consideration.

Two quite interesting articles appeared in 2011, each one offering a philosophical reading that is very attentive to the epistemic dimensions of Larsen’s novels. The first is by Caresse A. John, who reads through feminist standpoint theory. This is “a movement
against positivist notions … that an objective reality exists independent from one’s own perspective … Standpoint theory also argues against the idea of a value-neutral researcher, calling for recognition of the social and political circumstances that influence not just the researched, but also the researcher” (John 95). Furthermore, standpoint theory accepts that all standpoints are informed by their relationship to power with many standpoints outside of the cultural-political dominant offering the possibility of an epistemologically oriented interrogation of a society’s hierarchical structures. Standpoint theory “investigates what we believe and why we believe it” (John 95). A standpoint differs from an anthropological, political, or other positivist-objective theorizations of a subject position in that the standpoint is conscious, constantly negotiated in reference to other subject positions, and “both individual and collective, in definition and achievement” (John 96). John suggests that Larsen may be privy to an epistemology and even metaphysical truth that is only available to “insiders.” Her attentive reading of narrative omissions and Larsen’s careful linguistic maneuverings to articulate Irene’s and Clare’s frustrated attempts to achieve a standpoint draw attention to the relation between power and self-identification/self-legibility. John’s investigation may provide a model for applying philosophical frames and questions to Larsen’s novel, but it is not clear that standpoint theory offers enough sophistication to match the complexity of Larsen’s characters or her prose. Furthermore, it is not clear how much standpoint theory offers beyond the kind of phenomenological readings available through Ricoeur, Gadamer, or even, as I will attempt, James. One striking limit of standpoint theory is the definition of the standpoint as conscious. Certainly aspects of any particular standpoint would be
conscious, but much that is implicated in a particular position within a relationship is hidden from all stakeholders, and even from outsiders. Vigilance, imagination, and action over time are all necessary to bring to consciousness the many dimensions of any position. This is an infinitely recursive process, where discoveries then inform the subsequent “version” of the standpoint. And there may always be aspects of that position that remain beyond conscious awareness. However, the insights and motives behind standpoint theory have much to offer the hermeneutical-pragmatic approach that I am developing.

Ewa Plonowska Ziarek (2011) also shows how a hermeneutic analysis should draw its own methods and assumptions into the analysis of a given work, and question the relationship of art to life outside art, if indeed, there is such a domain. Ziarek sees *Passing* as an impressive entry into “the canon of philosophical aesthetics … Larsen’s novel interrogates the crucial philosophical question of art’s relationship to racial and gender politics, or ‘art and propaganda’, as it was phrased in the mid and late 1920s by the Harlem Renaissance’s most important critics and artists” (Ziarek 135). Drawing upon the twice-mentioned Biblical verse of Ham’s curse, Ziarek constructs a critique of *Passing* that appreciates the historical reality of the deep, inarticulable trauma of slavery and fear of lynching that gained cultural legitimacy in white power structures through the story of Ham’s indiscretion and subsequent condemnation. According to David Goldenberg (as quoted by Ziarek), for more than 300 years, “[T]he racist interpretation of Genesis 9 stresses the dual aspect of the curse [of Ham], which supposedly ‘generated both slavery and blackness’ despite the absence of any references to the colour of skin or
race of the cursed son in the Bible” (Ziarek 139). “The curse fuses into the same utterance the linguistic act of violence and the religious/juridical justification of that violence” (Ziarek 139). This reading draws on the common origins of religious, juridical, and aesthetic hermeneutics that are also critical to the ways phenomenologists “read” experience. *Passing* is potentially liberatory as it names the relationships among these terms that give cultural support to racism, even if it cannot bring to consciousness fully imagined and successful alternative terms.

To summarize, much early and even more recent criticism of *Passing* reads it, appropriately, as a critique of racial categories, but this criticism failed Larsen in a number of ways. First, though it might praise Larsen’s narrative skill and technique, many unsophisticated readings did not appreciate the subtleties of narrative voice or the philosophical consequences of the so-called unreliable narrator. Larsen’s deepest observations of the crisis of self depends upon this rift between what is reported and what the reader infers about what happens—which is often never conclusively determined. What does ultimately happen at the end? Is Clare pushed or does she fall or jump? The essential indeterminacy of the events that Irene participates in is fatal even before Clare dies. This rift between thought and action is more than a psychological challenge for the characters; it is a profound indictment of ways of knowing self, other, and world, ways that cut across categories and borders. What aligns *Passing* with other Modernist critiques is not her observation that racial category renders self- and other-understanding impossible, but that all categorization, and other ways of imposing rational structures onto human experience, is limited and limiting.
Criticism that reads *Passing* as a mimetic representation of experiences, as if the various characters in the novel were distillations or symbols of subject positions one might find in Harlem in the 1920s, fails Larsen in another way. They do not take account of *Passing* as a kind of intervention into pre-existing discourses and material conditions. Ideological readings do this. So do readings that attempt to align Larsen’s biography with her creations. They are ready to analyze passing as social action, but do not see *Passing* as social action. We must follow Landry, who reminds us that *Passing* itself became part of an evolving set of fictionalized presentations, a set of possible experiences that could be in some sense inhabited or enacted by black women in the 1920s and 30s. Similarly, John points out that *Passing* articulates new standpoints, even if all of the aspects and implications of those standpoints cannot (contra standpoint theory) themselves be made conscious and articulable. One striking virtue of John’s reading of *Passing* through standpoint theory, however, is the focus on positions and relationships of power as fluid, evolving, and subject to constant negotiation. Clare and Irene’s attempts to articulate and act from particular standpoints are not epistemic struggles but ontological ones. They change their real and lived relationships to power in part by interpreting their own positions differently. The novel *Passing* enters the cultural lexicon and becomes available as a set of evolving images for real-life Irenes and Clares in 1920s and 30s America to develop their own standpoints. In Lukács’s apt phrasing, “Art always says ‘And yet!’ to life. The creation of forms is the most profound confirmation of the existence of a dissonance” (Lukács 72). The novel bears the marks of an attempt to create meaning out of that dissonance, and not merely record it. No critic that ignores this ontological status
of the novel—as both mimetic representation, and as intervention into reality as social action—can satisfactorily treat the deeper philosophical discourses with which Larsen engages. “Make it new” is typically read as an aesthetic call, but what these recent critics show us is that there is no aesthetic newness without social and political newness. One crucial task of a pragmatic-hermeneutic investigation will be to articulate the relationships among thoughts as represented in language, and action—action writ large as social movement and writ small as mundane, individual activity.

Representations Have Philosophical Political Stakes

As I make clear in the Introduction, William James will feature centrally in the interpretation of *Passing* and other novels in part because of his historical-biographical influence on Modernist literature. More importantly, however, there is an extraordinary affinity between *Passing* and many of James’ central philosophical methods and questions. Even as he appears to present true and universal claims about how thinking works, or how action helps determine the truth and meaning of a proposition, he undermines such universality by situating those claims in particular context and experience. There is no thought, writ large, but only specific thoughts of particular thinkers in particular situations, attempting to accomplish particular things. Just as Modernist writers were inventing new relationships of character and narrative perspective to their experience, James had set about to invent a new relationship between philosopher and philosophy. The domain of philosophical investigation, for James, was whatever
would enable the individual human being to make a home of the wild, confusing world.

“Philosophers are after all like poets,” he writes in “Philosophical Conceptions” (1898)

They are pathfinders … [B]oth alike have the same function. They are, if I may use a simile, so many spots, or blazes, - blazes made by the axe of the human intellect on the trees of the otherwise trackless forest of human experience … We can now use the forest, wend across it with companions, and enjoy its quality. It is no longer a place merely to get lost in and never return. (347)

This is no philosophy of ontological foundations, or of logical proofs of metaphysical theses. This is a philosophy of living engagement with the ordinary and mundane.11

Indeed, he shared with many of his contemporaries the urgency of rescuing the individual, who he regarded as an underdog, and individual experiences and perspectives from the totalitarianism of abstract, universal ideas and grand narratives developed by philosophical systems that treat the particular as mere confirmation of the universal truth.

Hegelianism was a favorite target. In referring to these reversals of perspective as “philosophic protestantism” (James, *Pragmatism* 62) James called for a renewed appreciation of interpretation. Every individual must make his or her own reading of the text of the world, and find there its sacred meaning. “[P]ragmatism shifts the emphasis and looks forward into facts themselves. The really vital question for us all is, What is this world going to be? What is life eventually to make of itself?” (James, *Pragmatism*

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11 Many philosophers were focusing more on “ordinariness.” From Husserl’s *Lebenswelt*, to James’ interest in philosophy suited to daily life and mundane spiritual crises, the phenomenologists’ more general interest in intuition and experience stripped of the interference from theory and science, and Wittgenstein’s focus on “ordinary language,” the age seems determined to rescue the soul of the individual from the crush of science, technology, industry, urbanization, system, and bureaucracy. (Paradoxically, this interest in the ordinary owes a lot to the German Idealist, Hegel, for whom the grand movement of history toward self-knowing/self-becoming speaks through every word and gesture of every (northern European) human being.)
62) Every individual’s attempt to interpret his or her own life, actions, thoughts, and feelings enters in some way into this question.

Heretofore, the dominant (though not the only) philosophical approaches had assumed interpretation and analysis of an objective world through a disembodied, objective mind. But, like Nietzsche, James recognizes that all interpretation is active and creative. As Frank Lentricchia points out in “The Return of William James,” “James in effect out-Marxes Marx by saying that all the interpretive efforts of philosophy are always simultaneously efforts to work upon and work over things as they are.” Since “interpretation is always a form of intervention” (Lentricchia 6), James presented even his own theories as active engagements that make things happen. Such intervention happens on multiple levels. The grand theories that august intellectuals publish direct public discourse. And at the level of the quotidian, the conceptual-perceptual frames by which each one of us makes sense of the world actually create that world in the moment of reception, and after, in quiet hours of rumination.

James’ philosophical investigations were particularly appealing to Modernist writers. As Pericles Lewis makes clear, “the task of the artist was not to discover a preexistent meaning, but to create a new meaning out of the chaos and anarchy of actual

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12 John Dewey (1929) calls this a “spectator theory”; “The theory of knowing is modeled after what was supposed to take place in the act of vision. The object refracts light and is seen; it makes a difference to the eye and to the person having an optical apparatus, but none to the thing seen. The real object is the object so fixed in its regal aloofness that it is a king to any beholding mind that may gaze upon it. A spectator theory of knowledge is the inevitable outcome…[This entails] the belief that the object of knowledge is a reality fixed and complete in itself, in isolation from an act of inquiry which has in it any element of production of change” (The Quest for Certainty, 23). In Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature (1979), Richard Rorty provides a historical account of this spectatorial or “mirroring” theory of mind and knowledge, and identifies Plato’s doctrine of the Forms as the genesis of this view.

13 “James’s characterization of the history of philosophy…as the clash of human temperaments was and is as unwelcome to professional philosophers as are Nietzsche’s arguments that the disinterested search for truth is really an expression of the will to power, of the will to dominate” (Siegfried 242).
modern life” (Lewis 8). Scholars have often read this “new meaning” in strictly aesthetic terms, but in the last twenty years they have come to appreciate the political and social experiments that Modernists were at least implicitly, and often consciously conducting. Reality, these artists and writers were discovering, is very much a construction. James is a crucial source for this “newness,” as he was deeply suspicious about categorical essentialism of people, things, and even thoughts and feelings. He sees clearly the link between his philosophical theorizing and possibilities for social and political intervention.

In 1899 James denounced [Theodore Roosevelt] as an “arch abstractionist” and accused him of in effect practicing, in his nativist demand of one hundred percent Americanism, an Hegelian politics of identity that “swamps everything together in one flood of abstract bellicose emotion” (Possnock 332).

It is only at this time, according to Lentricchia, that James discovers the link between empire and traditional philosophy (12), and begins to see his own philosophy as offering the potential not only for personal, but also for social and political transformation. And it is this link that made his Radical Empiricism so potent a force for change in the hands of his student, W.E.B. DuBois, and another Harvard Ph.D. inspired by James’ pragmatism, Alain Locke. In 1925, Locke’s “The New Negro” “entered into what is radical in James’s pluralism—skepticism toward identity and the exclusionary bias of concepts” (Possnock 337). A generation earlier DuBois had already developed a pluralistic model of African American identity in his famous thesis of “double consciousness.” This valorized the particularity of the African American experience; it gave a view from the ground, so to speak. Inspired by James, DuBois reconceived philosophy away from speculative
objectivity and toward activist engagement on behalf of the suffering, striving individual, and in the service of racial uplift.

Great social, spiritual, and scientific questions are always human-sized, for James. We make sense of our place in the cosmos by making sense of our place in the lives of others, or simply in terms of the stories we tell ourselves and others about ourselves. “For James it is precisely the ability of man to enter into the relational fabric of the world, in a participative and liberating way, which enables him to become human.” (McDermott xxxi-xxxii) One’s most quotidian and banal thoughts, as well as one’s grander spiritual and intellectual searches are always for the sake of some concrete doing. “[M]y thinking is first and last and always for the sake of my doing, and I can only do one thing at a time.” (Principles II, 333). This maxim can provide a heuristic point of access into the troubled connections between thought and action that we encounter in Passing. If her aesthetic experiments and contributions are read only within the context of Modernist artistic discourses, or, even more restrictively, if they are seen as resulting from the unique subject positions enabled or enforced by the Harlem Renaissance, then we tend to gloss over the questions that motivate all of us: who am I, and what am I to do? Too often Irene is read as a victim of a particular and localized identity crisis, as an exemplary, tragic response to DuBois’ call for the “talented tenth” to elevate the race. And critics claim that they no longer read Clare as the “tragic mulatto,” but there is still a tendency to ask how she, too, is an exemplary case of what is essentially a problem with race. Strangely, the novel does not mention race until we are already eight pages in. This is not withholding on the narrator’s part. Rather, in the moment in which Irene’s race is
revealed, Larsen asks us as readers to contemplate a shared problem. We identify with Irene as she hears another echo from DuBois: “How does it feel to be a problem?”

*Passing* gives too many answers. The novel takes a deeply skeptical attitude about what passes for knowledge and even about the process of understanding in the early twentieth century. Larsen’s depiction of Irene brings life to a radical skepticism about how one can or ought to interpret her own actions. James rejects abstract universals and grand narratives, while Irene struggles with the consequences of rejecting the simple narratives about herself, often losing a sense of self-comprehensibility in the bargain. Irene comes to recognize that interpretation is also mode of creation, and that the stakes of that hermeneutic are literally life and death. Meanwhile, Clare rebels against the consequences of abiding the particular terms in which the world is made sense of. While leaving intact the racial categories of black and white with their rigid borders, she simply passes from one to the other. It is not clear, however, whether her recklessness and need for danger should be read as a recognition of the futility of creative action amidst deep uncertainty, or a courageous attempt at belief in the midst of chaos. Is her transgression a way of asserting the power of the individual, a Nietzschean determination to assign value? Irene and Clare’s attempts to understand race and sexual orientation and remake their own relationships to these categories are exaggerated and painful engagements with categories and ways of making knowledge that, as James writes, *all* individuals must negotiate in an ongoing way. Certainly the consequences of defying societal pre- and proscriptions that depend upon these categories are quite high, and higher still for black women in the 1920s. But both *Passing* and James offer deeper critiques of the
epistemological and ontological questions implicit in this struggle. For James, deliberate, 
purposive action is still possible, even in the absence of clear and distinct explanations. In 
Larsen’s novel, however, the costs for a lack of clarity about one’s own identity and the 
lack of stable, certifiable knowledge are life-threatening. The actions that emerge from 
such instability can have lethal consequences. In the throes of the questions “What am I?” 
and “Who am I?” Clare acts “dangerously,” and Irene fails to act, or is quite alienated 
from her own action, even as those actions have profound effects.

How Categories Are Experienced

Early in the second chapter of Part One we follow Irene shopping “for the small 
things which she had promised to take home from Chicago to her two small sons, Brian 
junior and Theodore.” A stranger topples over from the heat, and Irene also feels faint 
from the oppressive weather. The cab driver, which the narrator—focalizing through 
Irene—calls a “Samaritan,” drives her to the rooftop bar he suggests for her relief from 
the heat, and en route she “made small attempts to repair the damage that the heat and 
crowds had done to her appearance.” After thanking the cab driver “for his kind 
helpfulness and understanding,” she took the “magic carpet” of an elevator “to another 
world, pleasant, quiet, and strangely remote from the sizzling one she had left below.” 
(Larsen 146-7) In these few paragraphs we witness the most mundane, personal thoughts 
and actions of a woman seemingly “at home” in her actions and feelings having 
uninteresting but friendly encounters in the city. It is crucial that as yet there is no explicit 
mention of race.
Irene’s racial identity is not specifically marked, but there is at least one hint—beyond the title of the novel, of course—that racial transgression might already be underway, and it is the narrator’s description of the helpful cab driver as a Samaritan. The word “Samaritan” invokes, of course, the parable of “the good Samaritan” from the Gospel of Luke. Samaritans were putatively hostile to Jews in this time. What makes the Samaritan such an exemplary “neighbor” in Christ’s sense of the word is that he crossed religious boundaries to render aid to a Jew who had been beaten and robbed. Perhaps such a detailed reading of the word “Samaritan” would not be justified if it were merely one instance of biblical reference. But as Ziarek points out, *Passing* invokes the story of Ham, Noah’s condemned son, at least twice in order to bring to the surface the deep connections between the social and material history of slavery and influential, though errant, biblical hermeneutics. *Passing*’s use of the Good Samaritan parable suggests more than that people are strangers because they have not yet met one another, or because strangeness is the naturalized condition of urban modernity. The “lesson” of the parable in the context of *Passing* is that boundaries and categories operate upon individuals to separate them, creating strangers in the midst of ordinary human interactions, like the kind Irene was having. But this, as I show below, will only be apparent in hindsight, once the racial dimension of the interaction between Irene and the cab driver are reflected upon. As yet in the novel, however, there is no overt reflection upon race or categorization in general, but only the quotidian.

It is important that at this point the reader see Irene engaged in these mundane, interpersonal exchanges and ordinary activities such as shopping—mundane, at least for
the middle-class status she enacts. The ordinariness is, for James, a way of identifying experience prior to or in the *relative* absence of conceptual activity.

Experience in its immediacy seems perfectly fluent. The active sense of living which we all enjoy, before reflection shatters our instinctive world for us, is luminous and suggests no paradoxes. Its difficulties are disappointments and uncertainties. They are not intellectual contradictions.” (James, “The Thing and Its Relations” 214)

It is the activity of the “reflective intellect” which distinguishes “its elements and parts [and] … gives them separate names, and what it thus disjoins it cannot easily put together” (James, “The Thing and Its Relations” 214-15). The paradoxes and disjunctions arise, for both James and *Passing*, in the pure, cool rationality above the “blooming, buzzing confusion” of the street below. Categorical and formulaic intellection deconstructs itself in the contemplative world of the Drayton’s rooftop restaurant, or any space where unremarked activity depends upon the enforcement of epistemic and ontological categories.

Irene’s unremarked ordinariness may be read as white (because unmarked), middle-class ordinariness by white and non-white readers, but because of the novel’s title, any reader is likely already searching for the character who is passing, the one who is transgressing borders, the one who resists detection due to her ordinariness. As the reader follows Irene at ground level, in the heat and bustle of the sidewalk, presumptive categories are not challenged. It is only in the rarified, white-only, ethereal atmosphere of the rooftop bar that a wedge will be driven between self and attributes.

Throughout the novel, Larsen forces consideration of precisely how categories—particularly race and sexual orientation categories—can be experienced. Here, for the
first time, the thoughts and actions of the characters “overflow” categories, or formulas, in James’ terms. Indeed, the act of passing is a corporeal overflowing of the containers and boundaries that serve to delineate human beings according to racial formulas. According to James, experience, as a stream, constantly eludes the very concepts that attempt to capture and stabilize it. In his 1909 essay, “The Continuity of Experience,” James writes

Every smallest state of consciousness, concretely taken, overflows its own definition. Only concepts are self-identical; only ‘reason’ deals with closed equations; nature is but a name for excess; every point in her opens out and runs into the more; and the only question, with reference to any point we may be considering, is how far into the rest of nature we may have to go to get entirely beyond its overflow. (293)

As he goes on to say, our knowing is constantly moving into this “subconscious more” or “fringe” in an attempt to capture or concretize the living experience. There are necessarily absences, bits of experience left over that can never be fully cognized by formulas, images, and narratives. As he writes in the preface to The Meaning of Truth (1909), “Experience, as we know, has ways of boiling over, and making us correct our present formulas” (vii). From the very first encounter between the two protagonists, each experiences the gap between self and category, and implicates the reader in this moment where personal identity and experience “boils over” the categories that ordinarily render it legible.14

At first Irene doesn’t recognize Clare; she sees only the intrusive, searching gaze of an attractive, ivory-skinned woman a few tables away. She asks herself, “Did that

14 Perhaps DuBois had something similar in mind when he penned the famous question, “How does it feel to be a problem?” It is the unasked question, because, like the Black person to whom it is directed, it cannot be made legible like any other question, cannot abide the boundaries of the concepts used for ordinary questions. A different, oblique question is asked instead.
woman, could that woman, somehow know that here before her very eyes on the roof of the Drayton sat a Negro?” (Larsen 150). This is the first time that the reader definitively learns that Irene, the protagonist, is, in Irene’s words, a “Negro.” Irene’s race irrupts in the midst of this putative ordinariness; her experience “overflows” normative, naturalized social, historical, geographical, and biological categories. Irene self-describes as “Negro” as if it’s an end of the matter. And the reader is tempted to say, along with her, “now we know what she really is; she is a black woman who is merely passing as white.” Irene only seemed to change; what she really is was already there all along. Indeed, quite a number of critics have bought into this peremptory racial classification despite also claiming that Passing deconstructs or makes absurd the very notion of racial categorization. Aubrey Bowser’s 1929 critique, for example, fully accepts the rigid racial identifications of her time. She reads Passing and passing as politically subversive without being challenges to the logically prior epistemological foundations. Washington’s historical analysis of Passing’s production and reception also notes that the very notion of the novel as a hopeful promise of racial “uplift” only further ossifies racial identity, even if it offers, again, new political possibilities. These readings unfortunately lose faith with the novel, which never settles upon a final racial identity or, secondarily, an absolute sexual orientation for the two main characters. Indeed, in both the plot and character development, as well as in the interpretation of the novel, there can be no final resting point at which we can say, “now we know what they are.” But rather than seeing this as indefinite deferral, as a postmodern critique might, we can see this as part of the hermeneutic process that Passing insists upon: narrative engagement. I will pick up on
this point below. For now we should entertain the possibility that Irene is black, and also that she is white, rather than making an exclusive choice between them.

Irene’s pale skin and the presumption by both cab driver and Drayton employees mean that she is, in some important sense, white. And Irene’s enactment of whiteness—temporary though it is—enforces this imputed racial identity. Yet Irene self-identifies as “Negro” precisely at the moment when she deconstructs the essentialist “evidence” for assigning race based upon biology. Irene goes on to respond to her own question about whether the woman staring at her can discern her race:

Absurd! Impossible! White people were so stupid about such things for all that they usually asserted that they were able to tell; and by the most ridiculous means, finger-nails, palms of hands, shapes of ears, teeth, and other equally silly rot. (Larsen 150)

Irene dismisses these pseudo-scientific notions, and simultaneously fails to reflect upon her self-description as “Negro” and her certainty that the woman in front of her is white.

So she is able to reject the pseudo-scientific foundations for the category, but not the social and political authority (embodied by Jack Bellew, for example, as we will see below) that reifies the category and writes its terms and formula upon her body and invades her interiority. This paired move will be a central theme in our analysis of Irene. “It wasn’t that she was ashamed of being a Negro, or even having it declared. It was the idea of being ejected from any place, even in the polite and tactful way in which the Drayton would probably do it, that disturbed her” (Larsen 150). Here is another crucial link between thoughts and action: Categories have consequences, and an individual may have little to say over which categories are taken to be most relevant or “real.” To go
further, the truth of any category is its consequences. This is the heart of James’ Pragmatism, as he writes in the second lecture of *Pragmatism* (1907), “What Pragmatism Means.” “The pragmatic method in such cases is to try to interpret each notion by tracing its respective practical consequences. What difference would it practically make to anyone if this notion rather than that notion were true?” (28) The only meaning that her racial identity has for Irene in that moment is what action will be taken toward her. As in James’ pragmatic method, the “essential” meaning of race—if there is such a thing—is of no account to her, only the consequences of abiding this notion or that at a particular time, in a specific context. James invokes C.S. Peirce when he writes, “[O]ur beliefs are really rules for action … [T]o develop a thought’s meaning, we need only determine what conduct it is fitted to produce: that conduct is for us its sole significance” (James, *Pragmatism* 28-9). So can we say that since Irene is, in fact, not being asked to leave, she is therefore white? The authority of the social situation does bear on the truth of that proposition. As James writes in *Pragmatism*:

> Truth lives for the most part on a credit system. Our thoughts and beliefs ‘pass,’ so long as nothing challenges them, just as bank-notes pass so long as nobody refuses them. But this all points to direct face-to-face verifications somewhere, without which the fabric of truth collapses like a financial system with no cash basis whatsoever.” (*Pragmatism* 100)

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15 We might analyze Irene’s interest in how she is identified by looking at Wittgenstein’s language game metaphor. Wittgenstein claims that to name something is not to make a move in a language game. (Wittgenstein 28) Here he is arguing against a tradition of “truth as correspondence,” but which goes back as far as Augustine. Is the racial categorization/identification of Irene the same as naming? Wittgenstein goes on to amend his initial claim, and states that by naming something “we have given that object a role in our language game; it is now a means of representation.” (Wittgenstein 29) And it brings to mind certain rules about how that object can and should be deployed in the language game. If we accept that Irene’s self-identification is a naming, we can see how she suddenly is implicated in a game with its attendant rules. Further analysis would be required, however, to see if what Irene is doing is “naming” in Wittgenstein’s sense of the term.
This suggests, though, that counterfeit notes, once passed successfully, count as authentic money. This is actually how things work, until at some point the bill is detected, which may never happen. The difference between paper currency and people is that in the case of the currency, scientific analyses of the material itself can detect the forgery. As we are discovering, people have no such clearly assessable “marks” because the racial (and other) categories themselves are fluid constructions. As Irene makes clear, despite more than a century’s worth of pseudo-science, no such marks can be identified in human beings. So does the fact that Irene passes for white mean that she is white? Irene herself does not think so, and her view from the “inside,” so to speak, is important. One afternoon at the Drayton does not remake an entire life’s orientation to any particular set of concepts, because one is always embedded in a social space that hosts competing versions of truth. Irene recognizes this, and the novel forces us to ask whether she gives the social authority of whites (and blacks, too, who accept the categories) too much credit. Individuals like Clare can disrupt the putative categories and introduce new versions of truth, and these liberatory possibilities always set up conflicts with authority, precisely what Irene is trying to avoid.

**Clare as Provocation**

In *Passing*, Clare embodies and enacts threats to stable, ossified rationality. Irene’s “present formulas” are overwhelmed by Clare’s veto of intellectualism, and refusal to program her life according to rational category. Her “having way,” her being “not safe,” is—appropriately—the material overflowing of the prior concepts and
representations. Her transgressions contrast with the programmatic rationality of Irene, threatening the latter’s stable, formulaic arrangement of her family and social constituency. Clare obeyed nothing but a “wild desire” to again be with Irene after twelve years (Larsen 145). It is precisely because Clare’s intrusion comes with a cost that she has not “reckoned,” has not calculated, that her very presence is beneath rational, formulaic representation.

The consequences of associating with Clare seem great. Clare is a “danger” to herself and Irene, aptly and sufficiently demonstrated by Clare’s passing marriage to the racist white man, Jack Bellew, and later, by her exposing both Irene and Gertrude to Bellew’s hostile racism without warning them. In Part I, Chapter 3, Clare invites Irene and their friend Gertrude to meet Clare’s husband, Jack Bellew. He is an international banking agent who married Clare having never enquired about her origins, and so does not know that she is mixed race. He greets Clare with “Hello, Nig.” These are the first words he speaks, and Irene and Gertrude soon discover that he is an arrogant, bombastic racist whose self-assurance and ignorance are almost as offensive as his racism. In marriage to Jack, Clare gains financial security with little effort, and strangely, she never seems to suffer from Bellew’s hatred of black people. She tacitly accepts Bellew’s pseudo-scientific claims about black people, and implicitly buys into the dominant, white “present formulas.” When asked whether he has ever actually known black people, Bellew replies that he has not. “But I know people who’ve known them, better than they know their black selves. And I read in the papers about them. Always robbing and killing people” (Larsen 172). The absurdity of this statement is stunning, given his marriage to
Clare and the tea party he is having with three black women. Yet despite being so clearly wrong, his authority is not directly challenged. The conflict between the “formulas” of Irene and those of Bellew is not simply a conflict over facts or even perspectives. The narrator describes him as possessing “latent physical power,” and the uncompromising finality of his pronouncements about race and Clare’s identity combine to convince Irene that the only way to keep Clare from physical danger is to keep quiet. Again, the risks of passing are not merely to be reckoned in semantic terms. Ideas have consequences which play out according to lines of social power and influence.

James also recognizes that there is a connection between ideas and the consequences that they entail. In developing his pragmatic theory of truth, James refers again to his correspondence with Peirce. “‘All realities influence our practice,’ he wrote me, ‘and that influence is their meaning for us.’ … In what respects would the world be different if this alternative or that were true?” (James, Pragmatism 29). Note that in this phrasing, we are subject to “realities,” or various alternative truths. Again, the individual has a limited impact on any ultimate outcome; one’s own thoughts contribute only partially to how things will ultimately play out. All of us suffer from the beliefs of others, as Irene, Clare, and Gertrude suffer the implied threat of violence conveyed by Bellew. James continues in his own voice.

There can be no difference anywhere that doesn’t make a difference elsewhere—no difference in abstract thought that doesn’t express itself in a difference in concrete fact and in conduct consequent upon that fact, imposed on somebody, somehow, somewhere, and somewhen. The whole function of philosophy ought to be to find out what definite difference it will make to you and me, at definite instants of our life, if this world-formula or that world-formula be true.” (James, Pragmatism 30)
In explicating the ways in which concepts and actions interdependently interact to create meaning, James is here treating abstract concepts as if they are disembodied and external, for that is how they often seem to us, the “bearers” of such abstractions. We do talk of thoughts as things that express external content, and also as that external content itself. But this is only a way of referring to our experiences second-hand, or in hindsight. Not only is every thought “owned” (Principles I, 225), but, “No thought even comes into direct sight of a thought in another personal consciousness than its own” (Principles I, 226). Abstractions only have meaning when they are expressed as someone’s particular thought and through action by or upon someone.

For James, the moment an individual discovers his or her relationship to ideas, formulas, and categories is liberatory. By noting how we identify ourselves with certain beliefs and their attendant consequences, we in effect separate ourselves from those beliefs. And this separation makes room for something new to emerge at the limit of rationality. “In principle … intellectualism’s edge is broken; it can only approximate to reality, and its logic is inapplicable to our inner life, which spurns its vetoes and mocks it impossibilities.” (James, “Continuity” 296-7) It is living experience, he says, which rebels against the chains of a too-tidy, too-restrictive formula. But who is capable of such Promethean action? Clare seems to embody and enact the broken edge of rationality, and brings genuine, wild newness into Irene’s life. But Irene experiences this only as a threat. Is Irene failing to seize the moment of liberation?

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16 See “The Methods and Snares of Psychology” chapter in James’s The Principles of Psychology, Vol I, for more.
Irene understands herself and others according to some broader scheme, some way of dividing up society into categories that in a sense pre-exist particular human beings: race, class, and gender norms. For example, even though she passes for convenience, she never does so “socially.” Speaking to her friend Felise just after the two had run into Jack Bellew on the street, she says, “I don’t believe I’ve ever gone native in my life except for the sake of convenience, restaurants, theater tickets, and things like that. Never socially I mean, except once. You’ve just passed the only person that I’ve ever met disguised as a white woman” (Larsen 227). So for Irene, even her own passing is not enough to deconstruct the category of race itself. Certainly she recognizes that the social and material consequences of race are quite unjust, psychologically damaging, and deeply troubling. But these are not sufficient for her to question her own identification as a black woman. Even in a moment of great spiritual crisis, when she is torn by “two allegiances, different, yet the same,” she does not question the pre-existent categories. “Herself. Her race. Race! That thing that bound and suffocated her … Irene Redfield wished, for the first time in her life, that she had not been born a Negro” (Larsen 225). Even here Irene is questioning only how well her particularity fits into or fails to fit into the pre-existent scheme for dividing up humanity. Despite her many claims about the absurdity of racial categories and the attendant consequences to herself and others, her articulation of the solution is in terms that preserves the category as is, and simply removes herself from it. She represents the standpoint, expressed several years later by Heidegger, that our formulaic and systematic ways of knowing self and world—science,
basically—are at odds with our being in the world.\textsuperscript{17} And when they conflict, we, as moderns, almost certainly sacrifice our selves and our living experience in order to preserve the scientific modes of so-called knowledge. Heidegger is here consonant with James’ critique of the scientific thinking and its misapplication onto questions of meaning and value. But we will see that their “solutions” to this problem are quite different.

It was only seven years after Larsen wrote \textit{Passing} that Heidegger similarly described and analyzed the programmatic rationality that Irene represents and embraces, and which James calls in a number of places the “intellectualist” orientation toward experience. According to Heidegger in “Modern Science, Metaphysics, and Mathematics” (1936), ways of knowing have become scientific, and science itself has been mathematicized. Disciplinary ways of thinking that once promised a greater comprehension of the natural world and human experience had become focused on their own epistemologies. New science is axiomatic, foundational, and propositional—not about things at all, but about mathematical (pre-experiential) laws. Experience is mere contingency, the details, or the playing out of laws. (Heidegger, “Modern Science, Metaphysics, and Mathematics” 291-2) For moderns, understanding nature and self had

\textsuperscript{17} Irene here seems to be an example of the “Divided Self,” one of the types of spiritual sufferers in James’ typology in \textit{The Varieties of Religious Experience}. “In the religion of the twice-born…the world is a double-storied mystery. Peace cannot be reached by the simple addition of pluses and elimination of minuses from life. Natural good is not simply insufficient in amount and transient, there lurks a falsity in its very being…There are two lives, the natural and the spiritual, and we must lose the one before we can participate in the other.” (\textit{Varieties} 166-7)

James treats these types as universals, as he often draws his exemplary souls from other cultures and historical periods. But there is a modern flavor to his characterizations. Speaking of the divided soul Tolstoy, for example, he writes, “Little by little, Tolstoi came to the settled conviction…that his trouble had not been with life in general, not with the common life of common men, but with the life of the upper, intellectual, artistic classes, the life which he had personally always led, the cerebral life, the life of conventionality, artificiality, and personal ambition” (\textit{Varieties} 184-5). Note that the last three evils are quite resonant with Irene, and particularly important frustrations for Modernists attempting a spiritual conversion. It is worth pursuing this “divided self” framework to see Irene as on a spiritual quest.
become a matter for the calculating intellect, which, according to Heidegger, is the latest
episode in a long history of suppressing or ignoring intuitive ways of knowing that goes
back as far as Plato.

Heidegger could well have been diagnosing Irene. Even in Irene’s greatest crisis,
she clings to the security of the rational calculations she has used in her bargain with life.
There is an ideal life, Irene thinks, and her task is to keep herself and Brian moving along
in the program. Even as she suspects that the ideal may be hollow at its center, she is
unable to imagine living another way.

Security. Was it just a word?...And did too much striving, too much faith
in safety and permanence, unfit one for [happiness, love, or some wild
ecstasy...]? 

....
Brian, too, belonged here. His duty was to her and to his boys.
Strange, that she couldn’t now be sure that she had ever truly known love.
Not even for Brian. He was the husband and father of her sons. But was he
anything more? (Larsen 235)

Despite this intuitive knowing that something is terribly misaligned, or that her
programmatic, rationally calculated life excludes deeper connections with people, she
refuses to own the message and make any changes. Even her observation of her own
emotional and spiritual stunting is a feeble half-outrage.

Irene’s moment of crisis here is what Heidegger might call a “clearing” that
makes way for Dasein, or the “this-ness” of experience. Dasein is a term of art for
Heidegger by which he means a bringing to awareness the Being in our own questioning,
our own being. We are, he says, already in relation with Being, but can bring it to
awareness only in its this-ness or what-ness, not as concept or idea, or, for Plato, static,
enduring Form. The clearing happens in time, but not as part of narrative. Being is its
own thing, beneath attributes and concepts, and we can experience it, but not apprehend it
with grasping intellection (Heidegger, “Being and Time: Introduction” 46-7). What Irene
is struggling to bring to awareness is some kind of knowing that is prior to representation.
James articulates this concept as an “overflowing,” or a “boiling over;” experience
overwhelms concepts, which prove to be inadequate to lived reality. Because this
experience is prior to articulation in formulaic terms, Irene refuses its potent message.
Clare is an embodiment of this “overflowing” of rational concepts.

Completely susceptible to her own desires, Clare is uninterested in following
through on any calculations she might entertain about her own security, or in securing a
programmatic life. She married Bellew in part out of a desire for financial security, but
she is quite willing to throw that away, were it not for her daughter. Clare obeyed nothing
but a “wild desire” to again be with Irene after twelve years (Larsen 145). Loneliness
(Larsen 196) and a yearning to be back among “[her] own people” (Larsen 182) resulted
in a physical ache (Larsen 177), as she wrote in a letter to Irene two years after their
chance meeting at the Drayton. And Clare is dangerous not only because she will upset
Irene’s program for the family, but because she instigates feelings in Irene that cannot be
categorized. As McDowell and Ducille make clear, the sub-plot of the lesbian attraction
between Irene and Clare never emerges from narrative ambiguity. By hinting at lesbian
desire rather than making it explicit, the homoerotic transgression, a kind of passing, they
write, parallels the race-category transgression. I suggest instead that what is hidden from
Irene, and made ambiguous in the novel, is not homoerotic desire in particular, but desire
of any kind. Irene has calculated wants, but never true desires. So her alienation from any
lesbian attraction is just one aspect of a more general alienation from love or sexual attraction. So, to Irene’s question, “[D]id too much striving, too much faith in safety and permanence, unfit one for [happiness, love, or some wild ecstasy?” the novel clearly responds “yes.”

Precisely why she does so is something I will address below. For now it is important to note, however, that Passing takes account of felt experiences in felt ways and not simply in propositional ways, as we see in Heidegger’s essay. What I mean by this is that in Passing we have encounters with mathematization that are more than epistemically overpowering. They—in the body and hateful attitude of Jack Bellew—are socially, politically, and physically authoritative. Such power is not so easily dispensed with in one’s ruminative hours, though such philosophical defiance in the face of evil is all that Heidegger was able to manage. Heidegger’s moment that offers the possibility of transgression against “mathematization,” Dasein, is anemic and deracinated in comparison to the living and suffering we see enacted in Passing.

Reading Irene’s crisis through Heidegger’s concepts of mathematization and Dasein, we see that Irene is brought to the precipice of Dasein in the moment in which she sees Being as a question. She sees the incompatibility between the category that she fits herself into—“Her race”—and a sense of self that is in some sense beneath or prior to such category—“Herself.” But the narrator still describes the conflict as one of loyalties, suggesting that even her sense of self, though distinct from racial attribute, is a kind of concept or container that pre-exists Irene, and to which she must orient herself. For Irene,
there appears to be no escape from category, certainly not the kind of escape that Heidegger identifies.

James is in agreement with Irene here. There is no escape from having to think through categories and universals, but we can liberate ourselves from the tyranny of particular categories and identifications by seeing them only as temporary and provisional. We do this by de-identifying with our own knowledge and representations through explanatory substitution. Explanatory substitution is a subset of his general theory of experiential substitution summarized in “A World of Pure Experience” (1904).

According to my view, experience as a whole is a process in time, whereby innumerable particular terms lapse and are superseded by others that follow upon them by transitions which, whether disjunctive or conjunctive, are themselves experiences, and must in general be accounted at least as real as the terms which they relate … Some experiences simply abolish their predecessors without continuing them in any way. Others are felt to increase or enlarge their meaning, to carry out their purpose, or to bring us nearer to their goal. They ‘represent’ them, and may fulfill their function better than they fulfilled it themselves. (203)

And the relationships most relevant for Passing involve those bits of experience that ‘represent’ others—the explanations that “stand in for” or “translate” whole collections of experiences.18 Either Clare or Irene may identify as “Negro,” and such an identification can serve productively as an abbreviation for all of the beliefs which either one may hold that follow from that identification. And the categorical description can stand in for how either of them may be treated by others: getting kicked out of the Drayton, or being

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18 Wittgenstein also talks about the substitution of explanations. In Section 19 of Philosophical Investigations he describes the “translations” that one must make in order to understand the meaning of a command. The “translation” is sometimes an additional set of words or phrases with the “same” meaning, but the “translation” can also be an action. (12) As in James, the substitution/translation is successful when it leads to the “intended” action. Of course this raises a further point: what is intention? But this is beyond the scope of this brief note.
physically at risk of violence from a racist husband. But we err, James says, when we reify and essentialize the category, and forget to treat it in this provisional way.\textsuperscript{19} Irene does seem, however, to engage in just this kind of provisionality. She does separate herself from category, and refuses its essentializing and reifying imputation. How, then, does she fail to liberate herself from its effects?

Let us first see how Irene enacts the principle of substitution, and thereby sets up a provisional relationship with the very categories and formula that might threaten to confine her. One of the significant plot threads in the story is the triad of relationships among Irene, her husband Brian, and Clare. It is never made clear whether Brian and Clare are having an affair, or how we are to make sense of the often-suggested lesbian desire between Irene and Clare. And the quality of the marriage between Irene and Brian is similarly lost beneath ambiguity, fear, and suspicion, as seen through Irene’s eyes. Larsen makes necessary both Irene’s and the reader’s provisionality and suspicion. In this pluralistic world, any gesture, word, or glance can have multiple interpretations. A moment of crisis emerges out of this general indeterminacy during a pre-party

\textsuperscript{19} At this point, the essay could take a very different turn—toward a consideration of time and narrative that would invoke a lot of both Bergson and Wittgenstein. It is Bergson who most helped James to develop his thesis of change as a fundamental feature of existence. And this leads, of course, to the provisionality and temporality of truth. Irene, like James’s version of the good empiricist, must return to the question over and over, because truth does not inhere in some objective, static reality “out there.” Truth is also not a mirrored correspondence between ideas held in the mind and reality “out there.” (This is, however, the thesis of the British Empiricists, such as Locke.) Truth is a moving target, for James. Similarly for Wittgenstein, who credits James with many of his breakthroughs in the \textit{Philosophical Investigations}. His “meaning in use” theory of language is narrower than James’ “truth in action,” but there is an obvious parallel. Rationality cannot be understood solely from within rationality, or language solely from within language. From \textit{Philosophical Investigation}:

“114. \textit{Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus} (4.5) ‘The general form of propositions is: This is how things are.’—That is the kind of proposition one repeats to oneself countless times. One thinks that one is tracing nature over and over again, and one is merely tracing round the frame through which we look at it.

“115. A picture held us captive. And we couldn’t get outside it, for it lay in our language, and language seemed only to repeat it to us inexorably.’” (Wittgenstein 53)
conversation between Irene and Brian. The two discuss the early arrival of Clare, who
Irene had not invited. While Irene assumes this is just Clare’s “having way,” her
presumptive intrusions into the lives of others, Brian eventually discloses that he had
invited her on his own.

Irene cried out: “But, Brian, I—“ and stopped, amazed at the fierce anger
that had blazed up in her.

Brian’s head came around with a jerk. His brows lifted in an odd
surprise.

Her voice, she realized, had gone queer. But she had an instinctive
feeling that it hadn’t been the whole cause of his attitude. And that little
straightening motion of the shoulders. Hadn’t it been like that of a man
drawing himself up to receive a blow? Her fright was like a scarlet spear
of terror leaping at her heart.

Clare Kendry! So that was it! Impossible. It couldn’t be. (Larsen
216-7)

Irene regains the semblance of self-assurance, and, as if she and Brian are conspiring to
keep silent about the affair that she thinks she has discovered, they talk about the
upcoming party and how Clare and Hugh will get along. Note that even in these brief
moments Irene almost simultaneously affirms and then denies the fact that she most fears.
And there is nothing in Brian’s behavior, nothing he discloses, that can tip the scales.
Irene’s hermeneutics of ordinary behavior cannot help her identify the links between
Brian’s gestures, or Clare’s comments, and the purported relationship underneath. Irene,
and the reader, must maintain a provisional attitude about all of this “evidence.” She
continues to doubt the very stories she is telling herself about the suspected affair, and the
reader is encouraged to doubt her own accounts of her own actions. Where most critics
see this provisionality as evidence of Irene’s insecurity and instability, we can see instead
how it offers the possibility of liberation from habitual narratives and categories. As
James would recommend, by refusing certainty, she makes room for the new.

Perhaps, though, what Irene shows us is that such provisionality can only be
maintained for a short time when one’s very life is not threatening to break apart. Perhaps
such philosophical equanimity is unsustainable in a social and political situation—the
United States in the 1920s—where one’s very existence is a “problem.”20 Irene will
continue to think “provisionally” even toward her own actions, but no longer with the
liberatory potential. She becomes alienated from what she does as a defense mechanism
against the possible truths. Toward the end of the party, Irene drops a tea cup and it
shatters into “white fragments.” Significantly, the narrator reports the “death” of the
teacup with passive wording: “There was a slight crash. On the floor at her feet lay the
shattered cup” (Larsen 221). Though she retrospectively claims responsibility for
purposefully dropping the cup, the narrator gives us reason to doubt how deliberate it
was. Irene is relieved, for she had always found the cup— inherited from Brian’s
ancestors—ugly, and discloses that she dropped the cup purposefully. “I’ve never figured
out a way of getting rid of it until about five minutes ago. I had an inspiration. I had only
to break it, and I was rid of it for ever” (Larsen 222). This, of course, foreshadows the
eventual death of Clare. But between this moment and that final scene, Irene will
continue to doubt that there is an affair. The attitude of provisionality that James
recommends for breaking the hold of formula, for driving a wedge between pieces of

20 Here I am referencing DuBois’s provocative and implicit question, “How does it feel to be a problem?”
in The Souls of Black Folks (1903).
“evidence” and the underlying realities, is psychologically unsustainable and can, as we see, result in alienation.

Larsen has created a world where virtually nothing is certain, where many important events and experiences can be interpreted in a plurality of ways. And this world purports to be liberatory for Irene and Clare. It suggests that when claims of certainty—particularly about our identities and our relationships to others—are suspended, we make room for new identities, relationships, and possibilities for action. Of course Larsen only poses this as a possibility, and the trajectory of the novel eventually reveals the deeper problems with this strategy. But it is quite consistent with the pragmatists’ perspective. As James writes in “The Will to Believe (1896),” certifiable knowledge is not to be found on the human plane.

Objective evidence and certitude are doubtless very fine ideals to play with, but where on this moonlit and dream-visited planet are they found? I am, therefore, myself a complete empiricist so far as my theory of human knowledge goes. I live, to be sure, by the practical faith that we must go on experiencing and thinking over our experience, for only thus can our opinions grow more true; but to hold any one of them—I absolutely do not care which—as if it never could be reinterpretable or corrigible, I believe to be a tremendously mistaken attitude, and I think that the whole history of philosophy will bear me out.” (James, “Will to Believe” 725)

So James is determined, in his reflective hours, to hold fast to a principle of provisionality about all that he knows. His rhetorical question, which I have emphasized in the above quote, is crucial. James is not denying that certitude about some matters—such as mathematics—is impossible. But his concern here is with the domain of ordinary, quotidian existence. Whatever one is certain of, he shows, is certain to be overturned, adjusted, seen anew, at some later time. This perpetual search for understanding is, for
James, a quest without end, and as such is as much story as scientific or philosophical investigation.

Irene’s quest is pragmatic, for she is not in search for meaning or understanding for its own sake. She is driven by the need to know what to do. In this indeterminate, pluralistic world, any certainty would have provided respite from the exhausting—if liberatory—work of maintaining philosophic doubt, or what for a time was a healthy suspicion. At the party that will host Clare’s death, Irene seems to attain certainty about the affair. During an exchange between Irene and Clare, Irene reflects upon Clare’s “air of innocent candour … A conviction that the words were intended as a warning took possession of Irene” (Larsen 234). And just a moment later, as Clare rejoins the party, Irene reflects.

Ah! The first time that she had allowed herself to admit to herself that everything had happened, had not forced herself to believe, to hope, that nothing irrevocable had been consummated! Well, it had happened. She knew it, and knew that she knew it. (Larsen 234)

Again, there is no disclosure, nothing that can be definitively called evidence or an admission, only an inaudible something that snapped into place.

Through the end of the novel, Irene sees herself as if from outside. She evaluates her larger life goals and values like an expert sizing up her moral worth. And she weighs the possibility that she can endure the intrusion of Clare in her life, like a physician trying to determine the condition of a sick patient, and wondering whether it is best to operate, or let the disease run its course. “[S]he still intended to hold to the outer shell of her marriage, to keep her life fixed, certain. Better, far better to share him than to lose him completely. Oh, she could close her eyes if need be. She could bear it. She could bear
anything” (Larsen 235). Yes, she could endure if only her financial, social, and familial security would remain intact. These calculations are voiced as if they come from an outside observer assessing her chances at enduring, and they convey a sense that Irene is being compelled, mechanically, toward an act which she is powerless to resist. The arguments in favor of removing Clare from the scene take Irene up in their inexorable logic. And yet, Irene ultimately regains a sense of the faintest hope that Clare would not be “free” to pursue Brian unfettered. As long as Bellew did not know about Clare’s identity, then Clare would not obtain the provocation to leave him. So when Bellew bursts in on the party and discovers that Clare is black, Irene may have felt caught up again in the logic that demanded the removal of Clare from her life.

Irene becomes implicated, and implicates the reader, in this epistemic web through the very selective telling and concealing by the narrator. Again, the narrator’s passive voice and disembodied descriptions are crucial. Irene runs across the room and lays a hand on Clare’s bare arm. “One thought possessed her. She couldn’t have Clare Kendry cast aside by Bellew. She couldn’t have her free” (Larsen 239). But as we will see, this is not enough to indict her. The narrator withholds a causal description of events, and in its place offers a mere collection of incidents. “One moment Clare had been there, a vital glowing thing, like a flame of red and gold. The next she was gone” (Larsen 239). The subsequent moments produce a variety of eye-witness accounts, each incomplete, and all inconclusive. And Irene can offer no help in interpreting these conflicting accounts. “What happened next, Irene Redfield never afterwards allowed herself to remember. Never clearly” (Larsen 239). Did Irene push Clare? Was it Bellew, perhaps? If
it was a push, was it deliberate or an accident? It would be no small thing for one person to push another out of window, and without so much as a struggle. So did Clare jump, or did she faint? It also seems impossible that either of these could have happened without someone, everyone, seeing precisely what had happened.

Larsen’s refusal to allow closure on this crucial question is quite purposeful, and momentous. Epistemic completeness is an illusion, and there is great danger in asserting a single narrative or explanation for human activity in a pluralistic world. Like James, Larsen must insist on the recursive retelling and re-explaining of the “same” thing in order to create the possibility of liberation from the tyranny of formula. But James takes a different orientation to authoritative or seemingly objective versions of events when he insists upon the distinction between an insider’s and an outsider’s description of experience. In “The Experience of Activity” (1904) he writes:

> We must not forget namely in talking of the ultimate character of our activity-experiences, that each of them is but a portion of a wider world, one link in a vast chain of processes of experience out of which history is made. Each partial process, to him who lives through it, defines itself by its origin and its goal; but to an observer with a wider mind-span who should live outside of it, that goal would appear but as a provisional halting-place, and the subjectively felt activity would be seen to continue into objective activities that led far beyond … You think that you are acting while you are only obeying someone’s push. You think you are doing this, but you are doing something of which you dare not dream. For instance, you think you are but drinking this glass; but you are really creating the liver-cirrhosis that will end your days.” (285)

It is perhaps a lapse on his part that he uses the word “really” as if to suggest that the wider view is in some sense more correct. This provides a strange moment of peremptory certainty in an essay that goes on to highlight the importance of the choice of perspective
from which to describe a “single” experience. It makes no small difference whether Clare is “acting while [she] is only obeying someone’s push.” And we would expect James to resist the claim of outside authority, as Larsen’s ending surely does.

At stake for Larsen here is the push back against centuries of authoritative pseudo-science, political manipulation, Jim Crow laws, terrorism through lynching, and the historical fact of slavery—all of which said to Blacks in effect, “you think you are doing this, but you are really doing something you cannot imagine.” The view from the white, imperious outside was always determined to impose its own narratives, categories, and formulas onto black bodies and into black minds and spirits. When Larsen resists such finality and makes it impossible for any view from the outside to peremptorily, authoritatively assign meaning and provide explanation for what Irene or Clare may or may not have done, she preserves a space and opens a possibility. This possibility is not for self-narration or insider explanation, and, as we have already seen, it is not the space for Heideggerian Dasein. What is here insisted upon is recursive engagement.

There is no certain or single truth about what happened at the party on the sixth floor, but what Passing offers instead is a hermeneutic method. Endings of realist novels that predate Modernist experiments typically ended in stability. The conflict or tension that was introduced early in the story, and which the narrative worked out over the course of the plot, comes to rest in some stable, legible solution. The villain is brought to justice

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21 This bears comparison with neo-Kantian Wilhelm Windelband’s (1848-1915) distinction between idiographic and nomothetic kinds of knowledge. According to Windelband, the natural sciences aim to discover generalizable laws of nature, or nomothetic knowledge, in order to master nature. Idiographic knowledge is the aim of the human “sciences,” and seeks the description of unique aspects of individual reality (Audi 976).

22 For example, “You think you are asserting your rights as human beings, but you are really violating the implicit and explicit rules under which you are not a full and equal person in the United States.”
or the couple marries. Such closure depends upon a fixed, objective reality to which the characters and readers orient themselves. Larsen and James, however, recognize that experience is a stream in which the only certainty is change. So rather than a foundation or set of static principles or even values to affirm, each offers a method of engagement. Does the reader have a theory about what happened? Won’t she or he return to the story to test that theory? What possibilities does such return offer?

According to James, recursive interpretive engagement offers the possibility of eventually, slowly remaking our world. In the second lecture of *Pragmatism*, “What Pragmatism Means,” he writes that we must treat our theories as tools. This is the heart of Pragmatism: it is a method rather than a set of foundational epistemological principles or propositional statements about the world.

*Theories thus become instruments, not answers to enigmas, in which we can rest.* We don’t lie back upon them, we move forward, and, on occasion, make nature over again by their aid. Pragmatism unstiffens all our theories, limbers them up and sets each one at work… (James, *Pragmatism* 32)

For James theories and formulas must be accountable to the use to which they are put. “[A]n idea is ‘true,’” he writes, “so long as to believe it is profitable to our lives” (James, *Pragmatism* 42). There is profit in re-imagining Irene’s world, in wrestling with the possibilities for a different outcome if only Irene had done this, or if only Clare had been that.

*Passing* both personalizes and politicizes this incommensurability. To return to Heidegger’s theories and terms, people and institutions buy into categorical thinking and reproduce “mathematization” onto the lives and bodies of other people. We see relations
of power and can identify who gains and who loses, and we read *Passing* against an historical context of the American slave trade, Jim Crow laws, eugenics policies, and the serious and sometimes lethal consequences of defying “mathematization.” The thingness of the world and the humanity of humans are now “merely the mathematical unfolding of [their] principles” (“Modern Science, Metaphysics, and Mathematics” 305). Such a world is not a home for humans, according to Heidegger, and is not hospitable to human activity. Of course there is action in the world; things happen. Irene is caught in just such an unfolding, reading even her own identity as a concept. She is strangely incapable of directing or even residing within her own activity. And yet, she is capable of fully reporting all of her confused and contradictory experience.

Even the so-called unreliable narration of *Passing* (see Butler) affirms the subjective perspective and insists on giving a hearing, literally, to one woman’s struggle against an age. The reader is brought along inside every turn and reversal and contradiction that Irene experiences. Every pre-thought that then fizzles out into confusion, every almost-feeling that threatens to break into legibility but then escapes before it can be identified, is held momentarily for consideration. There is a fact-ness about this narration that is indeed, extremely reliable precisely because it refuses, as much as it can, to be overwhelmed by concept and ossified in formula. Larsen’s “stream of consciousness” narration is liberatory just as James imagined his “stream of thought” is more honest. In “The Stream of Thought” chapter, James writes that sameness only inheres in objects, including objects of thought, but not in experience. “[N]o state once gone can recur and be identical with what it was before” (*Principles I*, 230). Experience
is new at every moment, though it “points to” sameness in the object. “What is got twice over is the same OBJECT. We hear the same note over and over again; we see the same quality of green, or smell the same objective perfume, or experience the same species of pain” (Principles II, 231). The “stream of consciousness” narration gives us, then, the authentic newness of reality perpetually in creation. And the reality that is created now need not—cannot—be identical to the reality of a moment ago. Only concepts and formulas can be self-identical, and we become determined and controlled by them only when we treat them as if they are more real than our experience.

As we see when we pair Passing with the philosophical questions current at the time, especially those of James, both Irene and Clare emerge as liberatory, questing figures who are struggling with more than the material, economic, legal, and social impediments of 1920s New York. Just like so many other Modernists, Larsen is inventing new ways of knowing and being in a desperate effort to create alternatives to the chaotic, crushing age. Much good work is already being done to put the so-called Harlem Renaissance writers in conversation with Modernist experiments from other locales and periods. I hope that by focusing on the deeper questions of meaning and experience, and finding philosophical underpinnings for the aesthetic choices Larsen is making, we will discover that not only is Larsen in conversation with a long philosophical tradition, but that she contributes some very new insights to that conversation.
Chapter 3: *The Man without Qualities* by Robert Musil: A Moral and Practical Laboratory

*The end of the human race will be that it will eventually die of civilization.*
–Ralph Waldo Emerson

Robert Musil referred to his novel, *The Man without Qualities* [*Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften*], as a “moral laboratory.” He thought of it less as an aesthetic object than as a functional space to conduct experiments in thinking, feeling, and believing in order to challenge the destructive machinery of modernity, to facilitate the reintegration of the fractured, atomistic individual, and to catalyze the regeneration of civilization as a whole. It is crucial that all of our interpretive work here be framed by this pragmatic function of the artistic work. According to Matthias Luserke-Jaqui and Philip Payne, “The aim that Musil pursues is an ambitious one: ‘Ich möchte Beiträge zur geistigen Bewältigung der Welt geben. Auch im Roman’ (Gesammelte Werke II, 942: I want to make contributions toward the spiritual mastering of the world. Through the novel as well.)” (Luserke-Jaqui and Payne 320). *MwQ* is in this important sense pragmatic. Here, remaking the world must begin (but cannot end) with rediscovering one’s connections to the world—intellectual, spiritual, and emotional connections—and this entails intense awareness of what one does and how one’s actions connect to thoughts, feelings, perceptions, and

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23 Cited in Winokur 67

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beliefs. The test subject, Ulrich, is deployed in the environment of the novel in order to conduct experiments in introspection and (in)action that offer a reconnection with his inner voice, soul, or feeling—*Gefühl*, as Ulrich refers to it. According to Ulrich, what is needed is a certain kind of scientifically-minded or disciplined thinking that also accounts for how feeling, intuition, faith, and even mystical experiences are kinds of knowledge. Ulrich reflects, “People simply don’t realize it, they have no idea how much thinking can be done already; if they could be taught to think a new way, they would change their lives” (*MwQ* 37). Even as Ulrich attempts new ways of engaging with reality and acting on new kinds of knowledge, he is not an exemplary figure. Musil treats him more like an hypothesis, and invites the reader to do the same.

In many important ways, Musil’s project here is quite similar to William James’s pragmatism. For example, each is anti-foundational, meaning that they are quite suspicious of abstract systems, fixed categories, and totalizing absolutes. Each was influenced by the scientist and philosopher Ernst Mach, whose analysis of scientific principles and practices showed how facts are embedded in a larger experiential context, and treated as theories in our engagement with reality. Both *MwQ* and James extend this analysis to human experience more generally, and emphasize the utility of ideas (and the test of utility for purported facts). In short, each works with a version of the statement, “truth is what works.” All purported facts are held in suspicion, and true only in context, a context that includes human purposes.

As a result both *MwQ* and James’s pragmatism operate according to similar methods. I will focus on two—the *Essayismus* of *MwQ* and James’s *principle of*
substitution. Each is a rhetorical and analytical practice that examines and describes any “single” thing from multiple perspectives, though multiple disciplinary lenses, and for a variety of imagined or actualized purposes. For both *MwQ* and James, no explanation or perspective is ever absolutely true or final, but always subject to further analysis and open to additional perspectives. Each maintains a robust suspicion of thoughts and ideas as the endpoints of thinking. Instead of viewing the finished thought or idea as the culmination of thinking, they want to see thoughts and ideas as catalysts for further thinking and deeper engagement with reality. Both *Essayismus* and the Principle of Substitution are intellectual practices, but they are more than this. As I will show, James and Musil each believed that their respective practices of investigation create the conditions for the moral, spiritual, and emotional understanding and awareness that they say must inform choice and action. Each is concerned ultimately with how people are to live and what they are to do, and only derivatively with the nature of truth, reality, knowledge, or experience. And as we will see in the last part of this chapter, each is trying to develop an approach to moral questions that is not subject to simple attributions of right and wrong. But neither do they spend much time specifying what the good is, or what our orientation to it ought to be. Intuition, action, and deliberate transgression have a large share in their attempts to understand how to know what is morally the thing to do. They each wrote from a sense of emergency, as if there was no greater task than to help people individually and society as a whole learn how to respond to the challenges of modernity.
Elizabeth Goodstein’s description of the landscape of modernity and the challenge for any individual to find his or her bearings here provides a helpful starting point for my project. “Modern experience is conditioned by the continuous destruction of the historical, cultural, spiritual and aesthetic contexts that give human life meaning—by what Benjamin called the eclipse of Erfahrung [lived, practical experience and knowledge; know-how] in favor of punctual Erlebnisse [events that occur serially, and are discrete, unique and personal]. In modernity, experience is defined, so to speak, by its own disappearance” (Goodstein 10; my English definitions). People are losing a sense of embeddedness in traditional moral, cultural, and historical frameworks, and in the sense of their own life as an evolving story. According to the logic of the machinery of

24 John Arthos provides an excellent explanation of the philosophical stakes in the emergence of the term Erlebnis at the end of the nineteenth century. Erlebnis “became a term of art for Wilhelm Dilthey and others in the nineteenth century who were turning away from the modeling of the human sciences on the objectivism of the physical sciences…Erlebnis…founded thought in the inexhaustible meaning of experience” (Arthos). Arthos defines Erlebnis (as it would have been understood by Dilthey’s contemporaries) as “event, occurrence, adventure, experience.” Erfahrung, on the other hand, “connotes the manifestation of the traditionary experience of a community. This communal experience is founded not in the inner recesses of the individual mind but in the institutions of tradition and the life of the polis, an eminently civic experience” (Arthos).

The “disappearance” of experience (Erfahrung) that Benjamin and then Goodstein refer to is the sense that what a person does or what happens to a person can best be described or explained if that event is extracted from historical and biographical context. This is the objective, scientific rendering of human events divorced from the richness of personal context. According to Arthos, Gadamer’s critique of Erlebnis overlooks one of its main features, as developed by Dilthey: Erlebnis “suggests a strategy against the reductive methodology of science, it hovers on the brink of narrative theory, and it paves the way for a theory of the symbol as an uncontrollable sited of meanings. Its orientation in the unique and personal experience of a life offers support to Gadamer’s move from the inductive nature of scientific reasoning towards an understanding that seeks in a phenomenon ‘its unique and historical concreteness’” [Gadamer’s quote from Truth and Method] (Arthos). Arthos did not specifically analyze the observations or arguments given by Benjamin and later Goodstein, but, consistent with his thesis, both Benjamin and Goodstein are making a similar mistake. This does not, however, vitiate their central claims about the “disappearance” of experience and ways of knowing.

25 See early work on this by Max Weber, especially The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism (1904-5) for contemporary efforts to analyze the modern, rational mechanisms for developing a sense of self. In Weber’s view, rationality is leading to “disenchantment,” or the replacement of the sense of mysticism of life by science, and programmatic organization of life—the “iron cage” of bureaucracy. See Charles Taylor’s Sources of the Self (1989) for more on disembeddedness and the rationalistic conception
modernity, authority for comprehending human action has been ceded by the individual to abstract constructions—the theories of the physical and social sciences, for example.2627 The very sciences and technologies that promised to free human beings from the bondage of nature and contingency paradoxically trap people in rationalistic formula and programmatic behavior. At the heart of the modern dilemma is what Lukács calls “transcendental homelessness.” These edifices of knowledge, the apex of rational, programmatic progress as promised by the Enlightenment, have little guidance for the individual, and are inimical to the particularity of human feeling, thinking, valuing, and acting. For Goodstein, this prompted a “quotidian crisis of meaning” because individuals are unable to find guidance for discovering or creating meaning in their own lives in these objective ways of knowing. “Self and world collapse in a nihilistic affirmation that nothing means, nothing pleases, nothing matters” (Goodstein 1).

of personal identity—the “punctual self.” And again see Giddens’s *The Consequences of Modernity* for more on disembeddedness.

26 The nineteenth and twentieth centuries in particular saw the development of genuinely positivistic sciences along the lines laid out by Auguste Comte. Social sciences like Economics, Sociology, and Anthropology developed rationalistic models of all expressions of human life, and codified the investigative principles of positivistic social sciences. The development of sociology by Émile Durkheim is one example. The development of psychology is another, and I will say more about James’s contributions and observations about this new science below. See also the Introduction for more.

27 This crisis in understanding and agency has often been cast as a battle between two ends of a binary. C.P. Snow’s “two cultures” analysis is one example. Here, the binary is essentially a quantitative vs. qualitative way of making sense of reality, or in disciplinary language, (positivistic) sciences vs. humanities. Other binaries that are often mapped onto this rough epistemological framework include objective vs. subjective, explanation/analysis vs. story, and nomothetic (natural sciences) and idiographic (historical sciences). Obviously any one of these terms is subject to a variety of interpretations. This list is meant only to show the ways in which the epistemological crises of modernity have been interpreted.

We can see how Benjamin’s and Goodstein’s *Erlebnis vs. Erfahrung* can be mapped onto this framework as well. As we will see, both James and Musil implicitly and very often explicitly accept that these binary terms are helpful in understanding the empirical and ontological challenges of modernity. But each refuses to take sides, and instead they show the value of each way of knowing or of making meaning of experience. This pragmatic orientation to forms of knowledge and practices of meaning making ultimately allows for the deconstruction of the binary mode of casting the dilemmas of meaning making, and maps out a holistic, engaged practice instead.
"The Man without Qualities" is Robert Musil’s attempt to create an engaged, creative epistemology in response to these challenges to personal identity and meaning. When Musil began writing *MwQ* in 1921, the world was recovering from the devastation of the First World War, a war that no one seemed to want but that swept up millions of lives in its own mechanical logic. The war seemed to vitiate the promise of a new age of rational control and the ability to engineer a better world. For Musil, the war seemed to be, not an exception to, but the direct consequence of the Copernican revolution that his protagonist, Ulrich, identifies. In the chapter entitled “A Man Without Qualities Consists of Qualities Without a Man,” Ulrich ruminates:

> But today responsibility’s center of gravity is not in people but in circumstances. Have we not noticed that experiences have made themselves independent of people?...Who can say nowadays that his anger is really his own anger when so many people talk about it and claim to know more about it than he does? A world of qualities without men has arisen, of experiences without the person who experiences them, and it almost looks as though ideally private experience is a thing of the past, and that the friendly burden of personal responsibility is to dissolve into a system of formulas of possible meanings. (*MwQ* 158-9)

Ulrich regards his every action, thought, feeling, or event as merely an instance that exemplifies one of many possible impersonal formula. Categorial ways of comprehending our world—scientific understanding of human experience, in particular—have become traps that reduce life to *nothing but* formula, and provide no moral or spiritual guidance. Living becomes mechanism without ultimate value.

In the United States, William James was also wrestling with the new crises and opportunities inherent in objective and categorial ways of thinking about human agency, identity, value, and experience. He died just a few years prior to the start of the First
World War, but still regarded civilization as in crisis. James feared that Westerners, and Americans in particular, were becoming victims of their own success, that civilization was weakening individuals by simultaneously making them materially too comfortable, and overtaxing them psychologically and spiritually.²⁸ Like Musil, he identified the alienating effects of what he calls “vicious abstractionism,” a dogmatic and almost religious regard for concepts and formulaic or scientific explanations of human experiences that are treated as more real than the original experience. (This is a theme that I will return to several more times, for it is so crucial to James’s project.) Concepts then tyrannize over our subsequent experiences and reduce them to “nothing but that concept.” “Abstraction, functioning in this way, becomes a means of arrest far more than a means of advance in thought” (Meaning of Truth 249). We are thwarted not only in our knowing, but also in our feeling, sensing, and acting. Through their writings Musil and James each attempts to free individuals from the hyper-rational “machine” of modernity and restore a sense of human dignity and individual authority, especially regarding truth, value, and agency. Broadly stated, they provide not just new ways of understanding the self, knowledge, or experience, but new and very similar practices and methods for engaging with one’s own experiences, and new practices for interpreting reality. Though they responded to the particularity of their historical and geographical concerns—James in the United States at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century,

²⁸ Though James is not explicit, there is no mistaking that he is thinking of the upper class. He was not unaware of the plight of the suffering masses especially in great American cities, and often expressed great sympathy for lower classes. But his concern about threats to civilization has a distinctly aristocratic tone.
and Musil in Austria and Germany in the first half of the twentieth century—there is tremendous syncopation of their methods and overlap among their projects.

Neither of their projects is finished, nor can they be. Without universalizing their projects, we can appreciate that their responses to a particular moment of modernity are relevant today and are still open invitations to our engagement with these questions. To the degree that we are still wrestling with similar questions of selfhood, experience, and the disembedding logic of the machinery of modernity, their observations, analyses, practices, and methods are helpful to us today.

Review of Literature

In 1930 Musil released the first installment of *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften*, Volume I, Parts I and II. Only critics within Germany immediately recognized it as a great achievement (Mehigan 2) and many compared it favorably to Proust, Joyce, and Mann. His second installment in 1932 added only thirty-eight chapters, a continuation of Volume I, and this disappointed readers and critics who had expected more. Sales had always been slow, and this anti-climactic output didn’t help reawaken interest (Rogowski 14-15). Musil and his wife of Jewish extraction, Martha, fled Berlin for Vienna in 1933. Musil’s works were kept current in Germany for awhile, but in 1941 his works were banned in Germany and Austria. Musil and his wife had already escaped to Switzerland and kept up an effort to secure passports to Britain or the U.S. Robert Musil died in 1942, and Martha posthumously assembled the text of Volume II (Part III and the *Nachlaß*) from Musil’s writings.
Until 1952 and Adolf Frisé’s edition of Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften, there was virtually no scholarship on Musil, and the little that was produced was hagiographic or in the “praising great men” style of the early nineteenth century (Rogowski 22). The English translation of Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften by Ernst Kaiser and Eithne Wilkins in 1953 generated exceptional praise among very few, and mystification and abject dismissal by most. So, in both the German- and English-speaking worlds, Musil’s reception was restricted to only a small number of academics (Rogowski 23).

Many early critiques of MwQ treat it as a “psychological” novel. Hermann Pong’s (1956) psychoanalytic reading of Ulrich treats him “as a prime representative of the modern existential condition of ambivalence, a neurotic condition that is as acute, if not more so, after the Second World War as it was in Musil’s time.” Alfred Focke (1957/58) also sees this novel in universalist terms: a “religious myth about the ‘fundamentally tragic status of human nature as such.’” A 1965 study by Gerhard Irle aligns Musil with Faulkner, Kafka, and Woolf in its focus on the question of sanity as such in the modern context (Rogowski 146-7).

By the latter 1950s, controversies erupted over the validity of certain editions of Musil’s works. Since Musil was always revising Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften, and many of the chapters in his collected papers are indeterminately related to the novel, Adolf Frisé’s 1955 re-edited re-release of the novel was excoriated by the English-language translators, Kaiser and Wilkins (Rogowski 23). Through the 1950s and ‘60s several strains of Musil criticism emerged, including new political readings of Musil. Many studies of Musil more generally attempted to appropriate and contemporize his
critique of bourgeois values, his diagnoses of the ills of modernity, or forecast the
dissolution from within of the utopian projects of the twentieth century’s totalitarian
experiments. Frankfurt School Kritische Theorie, for example, provided sophisticated and
self-aware readings of Musil that stressed the subject position of the reader, thus enabling
new insights into the socio-political aspects of both Musil’s original works and Musil
scholarship (Rogowski 33).

From the 1970s through the mid-1980s much Musil criticism derived from neo-
Marxist criticism from a variety of traditions, especially the Frankfurt School and Georg
Lukács (Rogowski 37). These tended to be critical of Ulrich’s detachment, seeing it as a
function of his aristocratic privilege. In the vein of Ideologiekritik, Götz Müller (1972)
draws on Horkheimer to show how Musil’s novel catalogues a collection of
representatives of the “false consciousness” that ultimately proved so destructive—of
individuals and of central European civilization (Rogowski 155). Hartmut Böhme’s
Anomie und Entfremdung (1974) draws on Musil’s socio-political writings to put MwQ in
context. Rather than withdrawal, Musil was developing “countermodels in the shape of
the various utopian projects envisaged by his protagonists” as critical responses to social
inertia and spiritual disintegration (Rogowski 156-7).

Several stylistic studies attended to the use of irony and satire to encourage doubt
about easy answers to the challenges of modernity. Beda Allemann’s very influential
Ironie and Dichtung (1956) treats irony from a Heideggerian analysis of literature.
According to Allemann the ironic position in the modern novel enacts and also
perpetuates a deep suspicion about the possibility of certainty regarding existential
concerns. Because neither the narrator nor the protagonist allows every perspective to have validity, there is no “fixed vantage point from which to lay claim to a greater degree of authority” (Rogowski 148). Both Walter Sokel (1960/61) and Arntzen (1956) see Musil’s irony as satire that is uneasy with simplistic solutions to a culture in crisis. Albrecht Schöne’s stylistic treatment of Musil’s use of the subjunctive mood adds to the view that Musil’s distanciation or refusal to identify with any particular purported “solution” or vantage point is productive, and derives from his training as a scientist (Rogowski 149-50). Both Werner Hoffmeister (1965) and Dorrit Cohn (1978) follow up on this attention to narrative style in their analysis of the technique of free indirect discourse (erlebte Rede) in MwQ (Rogowski 150).

In the 1990s there were many critiques of MwQ which attempted to show how the novel was “doing philosophy,” or at least how it was indebted to schools of philosophical thought or particular philosophers. Critics identify connections with or indebtedness to Meister Eckhart, Friedrich Wilhelm Schelling (Bohn, 1988), Ernst Mach (Claudia Monti, 1979, 1981; Manfred Diersch, 1990), Ludwig Wittgenstein (Gargani, 1983; Wallner, 1983; Kampits, 1992), and Friedrich Nietzsche (Venturelli, 1980; Olmi, 1981, 1983; Wallner, 1984). Harmut Cellbrot’s 1988 investigation identifies a Husserl-like phenomenological method in MwQ that delights in the endless recursion of perception and cognition (Rogowski 170).

This is only a small sampling of the enormous critical output on Musil’s works and MwQ. The following works have much more relevance to my particular project, so I will treat them in more detail. Lowell A. Bangerter’s “Experimental Utopias: The Man
without Qualities” (1988), for example, provides analyses of the major themes of the work and how they pervade the various characters and relationships. According to Bangerter, Musil sets up Ulrich as both the symbol of and a seeker after der andere Zustand [The Other Condition], which Bangerter identifies as love-mysticism. Ulrich is also the technological man incapable of answering the question for himself: “How am I to live?” Musil is most interested in the way any particular person experiences the world; it is phenomenological. Ulrich, the man of possibility, the essayist, encounters many other representatives of the period who come together in the Parallel Campaign, a metaphor for the era, which will lead to war. “[T]he pathological condition of an Austrian society made up of people great and small, all of whom are concerned only with their own trivial or glorious schemes while the empire staggers on the edge of collapse” (9). It is also, according to Bangerter, a parody of Musil’s own individual quest for life’s meaning. Musil attends to universals of the human condition, and portrays the failure of this historical period to satisfactorily attend to/appreciate/recognize them. I think, however, that MwQ is not simply a critique of modernity, but an active attempt to create both a language and a method for engaging these important questions. What is at stake is nothing less than the salvation of civilization, not simply the fortunes of particular people or nations, as Musil sees it.

Thomas Harrison’s “Robert Musil: The Suspension of the World” (1992) provides an analysis of the philosophical influences on Musil, and resonances of those philosophers and philosophical commitments within the works of The Confusions of Young Törless and MwQ. With Mach, Husserl, Heidegger, and others, Musil’s works
critique the “reality” of fictive abstract codes and structures—in science, narrative, or even ordinary ideologically informed representations. Ideologies have a certain “habit,” or self-reproducing logic. Ulrich attempts to overcome or suspend such reality through mysticism, Essayism (described below), and eventually through abolishing reality. His is a search (like some of his contemporaries’) for the valuations that would allow or inform choices and actions. It is the arbitrariness and ambiguity that so paralyzes Ulrich, or rather, fails to stir him. While ideas follow the principle of sufficient reason (or ought to, according to Ulrich), history follows the principle of insufficient reason. Therefore, ideas are poorly equipped to comprehend historical reality. The destruction of misleading or ossified metaphor, explanation, and narrative has the potential to reveal reality to us.²⁹

For Ulrich, authenticity is the “primal condition of life” (41). It is here that art has a role, to restore authenticity, the metaphysical condition of life (41-2). According to Harrison, this is similar to Adorno’s claim of the utopic possibility of art (43).

While Harrison helpfully traces the philosophical parallels between Musil and his philosophical contemporaries, he quotes Musil out of context. We get little or no sense of where the quotes fit in the narrative flow of the novels, or how they may be ironically

²⁹ There is a clear connection here with the Russian Formalist’s concept of ostraniene, translated as Entfremdung or “enstrangement.” In 1925, Viktor Shklovsky writes “Automatization eats away at things, at clothes, at furniture, at our wives, and at our fear of war…And so, in order to return sensation to our limbs, in order to make us feel objects, to make a stone stony, man has been given the tool of art. The purpose of art, then, is to lead us to a knowledge of a thing through the organ of sight instead of recognition. By ‘enstranging’ objects and complicating form, the device of art makes perception long and ‘laborious’…Art is a means of experiencing the process of creativity. The artifact itself is quite unimportant” (Theory of Prose 1925/1990, 6). Shklovsky goes on to detail how the creative use of language and multiple narrative perspectives forces our re-experiencing of things we have had long been familiar with. Ordinary life becomes reanimated for us, as we carry the aesthetic experience outside the novel or story into our daily living. Personal, sensory experience replaces the use of abstract concepts to apprehend reality. Clearly there is a parallel (though not an identical relationship) between the “abstract concepts vs. experience” quandary that concern Musil and James. No critics, to my knowledge, have noted the connection between ostraniene and MwQ or James.
entertained. There is no attempt to see the philosophical perspectives as part of a story
told by people in the storyworld, as the very experiencing of philosophical ideals that are
themselves troubling to Musil. There are significant consonances with James’ Radical
Empiricism, particularly with the essays “The Will To Believe” and “The Experience of
Activity,” but Harrison does not see them. I will, of course, be providing those
connections below. And I will build on his insight about the role of art, and connect it
with Musil’s understanding of the ways that scientific investigation creates theories or
“productive fictions” in order to guide our acting.

In “Robert Musil: Literature as Experience” (1994) Burton Pike provides a very
interesting analysis of how *MwQ* foregrounds issues of narrative, description, and
representation in parallel with phenomenology (of Husserl, especially, but also Mach,
James, Bergson, and others). He shows how Musil attempts to render personal experience
and fiction/fabrication in scientifically valid forms such that a new language and
knowledge of reality could be developed. Ultimately the aim is driven by moral concerns.
According to Pike, Musil was determined to create a vision of reality to overcome the
ossified languages that seemed to lead to false unity. Reality is irreducibly plural, but can
be—Musil hoped—comprehended with a sufficiently attentive and alive fiction. The
vagueness of reality need not render reality uncertain. Musil’s experimental process
unfolded in his novel, as he placed his various characters in a variety of situations and
then observed them, both in their actions and in their self-descriptions. Such experiments
in the storyworld demanded narrative experimentation as well. Here Pike helpfully
connects devices such as free indirect discourse and the use of philosophical
argumentation to how the novel works, and what it does to/for the reader, with appropriate attention to reader-response theory (82-6). Pike also makes a very helpful connection with what amounts to Bakhtin’s concept of heteroglossia. But because he does not mention Bakhtin or use the word “heteroglossia,” it is unclear whether he is aware of the latter’s theory (84). I will be referencing several of Pike’s works, and expanding upon the brief connections he makes to James. Ultimately, Pike provides an extremely helpful analysis of the tensions among representation, communication, and inquiry, and how, according to \( MwQ \), language can both enable and thwart our attempts to grasp and affect reality.

Several critics have focused on the distinction between what is often called “objective knowledge” and “experience,” and how especially at the end of the nineteenth century, advances in science were breaking down these distinctions. Allen Thiher’s monograph, *Fiction Refracts Science: Modernist Writers from Proust to Borges* (2005), describes how Musil attempted to overcome the “two cultures” dilemma. According to Thiher, Blaise Pascal set out the most relevant and resonant explanation of the dilemma of the “two cultures”: literature and science each claim knowledge of the world in ways that are mutually incompatible. Literature, he writes, is in fact deeply informed by scientific thinking. (Additionally, I would claim that scientific imagining is deeply literary/fictionalized and narrative in its principles and practices.) Also, it is important to emphasize that Musil’s *Essayismus*, like science, is not only an evolving collection of ideas or intellectual principles, but a practice. This is how my analysis goes beyond
Thiher and others who merely identify the parallels between or ways that science and *Essayismus* are intellectually similar.

Stefan Jonsson’s “A Story with Many Ends: Narratological Observations” connects the unreliability of the narrator of *MwQ* to Ulrich’s predisposition to perpetually question reality. The narrative structure relativizes everything. It works against the “classical realism.” The objective/scientific register of description (a weather report, for example) is undercut by the view from the individual (153). According to Jonsson, Musil’s novel is not simply narration, but metanarrative that continuously interrupts the narrative. “The point of the narrator’s constant interruptions of the story is precisely to defamiliarize this realm. There is a fascinating conversation between Ulrich and the narrator such that each one can reply to the other, as if they do not exist in separate registers. The novel’s voices and structures cannot be accounted for in any totality.

Austin Harrington’s “Undivided, Not-United: Robert Musil’s Community” (2003) appreciates how *MwQ* explores what it means to have a living, alert engagement with reality rather than a satisfactory image of reality. He begins with a question with undefined terms: What is an “authentic” response to modernity? There are two possible answers, he writes: (1.) the appropriation of “qualities” of the ideological codes for thought and action; or (2.) affirming “constitutive ambivalence, difference and multiplicity, and not limiting the possibilities of cultural and ethical conduct to any single governing project or moral law” (177). *MwQ* experiments with the second in order to critique the first without totally vitiating it. Musil’s irony does not simply oppose Enlightenment discourses, but “seek[s] ways of critically rescuing them through a
dialogue with their negation” (179). In Musil, the interpenetration of outside and inside is what can recover this Enlightenment discourse, but at the same time it seems to make action impossible.

In “Apocalypse and Utopia in the Austrian Novel of the 1930s: Hermann Broch and Robert Musil” (2004) Graham Bartram and Philip Payne show that both Broch and Musil are experiencing and intervening in what they describe as a cultural crisis that produces the secondary effects of “social and political upheavals of war, revolution and economic crisis” (94). Following Nietzsche’s assertion/discovery that “‘objective’ truth is an illusion, a theological relic,” the novelist can help create the new and necessary fictions-cum-truths that will help individuals “on a tightrope walk over the abyss of nihilism and unmeaning” (94). “The Man Without Qualities is, in Musil’s phrase, a ‘moral laboratory’ where the best kinds of human being are subjected to test.” Musil’s modern world, like the world of MwQ, is irreducibly plural, “the product of many … narratives merged into one” (102). Ulrich keeps faith with such a plurality. Even as he constantly seeks integration amongst his disparate selves, he refuses easy formula, the tyranny of concepts, and the codes of behavior that reduce all particularity and newness to conformity and habit—in thinking and acting. The task of the hero in this novel is to sustain this productive alienation until he somehow finds a way forward into “the other condition.” The Parallelaktion is Ulrich’s attempt to force this new millennium by drawing together the three primary drives of Seele (“soul” in the character of Diotima), Gewalt (“brute force” or “violence” in the character of Arnheim), and Geist (“spirit” or “intellect” in the character of Ulrich). This would thwart the typical Austrian
*Durchwursteln* ("muddling through"), a habit of people and of an entire culture, and make possible a new beginning. That beginning, the *Parallelaktion*, has no hope of actually being taken up, but the point of its proposal is as an experiment that Musil conducts in the laboratory of his novel. It is an experiment aimed at diagnosing the ailments of modern civilization while simultaneously serving as an impetus to a cure. Seeing this novel as an experiment is consistent with the themes of *Essayismus* and with the unrelenting irony, but the authors, I think, fail to appreciate just how serious these experiments are. They still see *MwQ* primarily through a Modernist aesthetic lens and fail to appreciate how fundamental questions of knowledge and action are at stake not just in *MwQ*, but in a reader’s *engagement* with the text.

Patrizia McBride’s *The Void of Ethics: Robert Musil and the Experience of Modernity* (2006) opens her investigation by centering *MwQ*—correctly, I think—around a fundamental ethical question, “How should I live?” This is not merely the beginning of philosophy, but a question Ulrich asks in reflecting upon the entirety of his own quest (*MwQ* 972). The particularly modern slant on the question—that the lack of an ethical center is an anomaly signifying “dysfunction and malformation”—engendered Modernist aesthetic responses, she writes. Typical German Modernist experiments depicted and diagnosed the struggle to represent the fragmentation and disillusionment confronting the individual now stripped of “the century-old notions of self, subject, history, community, God” (5). But Musil went beyond diagnosis. In the first volume, the “essayistic utopia” is an attempt to bring “the Other Condition” to the cognitive level of ordinary experience” (19). The second volume enacts the failure to envelope ordinary experience within the
Other Condition. In either case, the failures are, according to McBride, Musil’s attempt to “warn[] against the dangers of overdetermining the ethical by filling its cognitive void with yet another absolute vision of the good life” (19).

Mark M. Freed begins his monograph, *Robert Musil and the NonModern* (2011) by noting Musil’s antipathy to traditional philosophy, and sees his *Essayismus* as an attempt to ask philosophical questions from the boundary of the systematic/rational and unsystematic/non-discursive. By referring to Musil as “nonmodern,” Freed emphasizes Musil’s attempt to avoid the false dichotomy typically served up by postmodern critiques of modernity. Musil’s *Essayismus* is “a mediation of science on the one hand and life and art on the other: that is, as a way to open a discursive space between objective truth and subjective experience” (6). Musil’s fictional works perform this mediation by offering essays and even characters and events as experiments that the reader helps complete. “In colliding denotative and narrative discourses in a single paragraph (Freed briefly analyzes the famous opening paragraph of *MwQ*), Musil’s *Essayismus* points to the modernist purification characteristic of denotative discourse and gestures toward its alternative: a nonmodern, essayistic mediation of the human and nonhuman, which takes place not quite on the page but rather in the reader’s mind as a product of the juxtaposition of these two descriptions” (8).

Walter Moser’s analysis of some of Musil’s works in “The Factual in Fiction: The Case of Robert Musil” (1984) also explores the false dichotomy between fact and fabrication. His close reading of selected passages of *MwQ*, particularly the opening passage, reveals Musil’s interest in setting out a critique of discourse by creating a
language of fictionality that depended upon the interaction between scientific and literary-descriptive language in the novel. “No clearcut decision [between the scientific and ordinary description of the day in the opening paragraph] is made as to which version is better or more useful; on the contrary, the text produces uncertainty quite systematically” (413). According to Moser, Musil’s ironic narrative positions and multiplicity of descriptive modes was aimed primarily at destabilizing our assumptions about “established discursive behavior, attitudes, positions and beliefs, and to open them up to the possibility of new formations of discourse” (414). Rather than asserting the primacy of any particular discursive mode, Musil rejects the supposed semiotic fixity of either type of description. Moser claims that this requires the reader to “move on from a semiotic to a discursive reading” (415). M30 Musil has a pragmatic interest in what counts as “accurate” or “faithful” descriptions of the world, and this pragmatic interest is revealed in his attendance to the way any particular description is deployed by characters in particular contexts.

According to Moser, Musil is quite sensitive to the ways in which discourse, especially what passes for scientific discourse, can seem to “explain away” the human or ordinary dimensions of events or situations that might otherwise have profound psychological or spiritual meaning. He attends to the conversation between the gentleman and the lady while viewing the aftermath of the truck accident on p. 5. “She has a blind trust in the power of any discursive ordering (irgendeine Ordnung) that she expects to

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30 Moser is not quite clear what he means here, but I assume something like the following: The correspondence theory of reference and the semiotic (referential) theory of meaning is supplanted by “meaning in use,” to use a term from Wittgenstein. If this is what he means, than I am in agreement that this is the direction MwQ is going. Furthermore, the pragmatic dimension of “meaning in use” is found before Wittgenstein in James, as I will show below.
protect her against the chaotic appearance of the factual world. This reflex—we all have it to a certain extent—is problematized and criticized by means of its narrative ironization in Musil’s novel” (418). This type of description “negates the exceptional nature of the individual experience” (419). Moser goes on to note how this sets up a conflict between individual subjectivity and “collective phenomena and their discursive ‘equivalents’” (419).

Genese Grill’s “The “Other” Musil: Robert Musil and Mysticism” (2007) picks up on the long recognized thread of mysticism, especially in the unpublished chapters of *MwQ*. Musil was interested throughout his life in historical mysticism and the possibility of deploying narrative as a tool for the creation of a mystical state/experience. The “mystical consciousness … is in itself a metaphorical realm—a temporary “other condition” wherein individuated elements combine and divide with unforeseeable effects” (336). The pairing of opposites (the twinning, *ratoïd* and *nicht-ratoïd*) in crime, science, action, religion, sexual union, etc. reflected his narrative experiments in the desirable yet disturbing contact with the Other. Grill’s analysis of the transcendent possibilities in transgressions, such as incest and murder, links mystical experiences to a higher morality that Ulrich is seeking, one that must be in opposition to the rational, rule-bound systems of the bourgeois. The eternal moment of contact with a higher moral sphere is in a sense fleeting, and for Grill, this provides an important clue to the novel.

The moments when they remember—those fleeting moments of insight that syncopate the endless text with shocks, are our true subject … [It is] the very nature of mystical union that it does not endure … This attention to the moment is, I would suggest, a key to understanding the form of the unfinished novel: each moment, experience, perception, is to be valued in
its own right, as complete. From one moment to another, however, there is fragmentation, doubt, and alienation.” (352)

Such a conclusion, I think, very nearly reduces the novel and the mystical moments that it tries to invite to aesthetic experiences.

Without claiming to determine directions of causal influence, in The Vanishing Subject: Early Psychology and Literary Modernism (1991), Judith Ryan traces the lines of influence among artists, scientists, and philosophers in the United States and Western Europe from 1870 through 1940. No critic besides Ryan has spent more than a few paragraphs analyzing the biographical, historical, and philosophical connections between James and Musil. She is particularly focused on the development of psychology as a distinct field that emerged out of empiricist philosophy and pre-positivist scientific work. She concentrates on Franz Brentano and Ernst Mach in Austria and William James in the United States, as they share many perspectives and areas of research focus.

Determined to investigate the philosophical underpinnings of psychology, each of these philosopher-psychologists accorded a high value to introspection as a method of researching experience. And though at least Mach and James conducted laboratory experiments on sensation and perception, their ultimate goal was to investigate the nature of consciousness. The components, if you will, of consciousness include self and world, somehow mediated by thought, each domain not clearly distinguishable from the other in the limitless and ever-changing “stream of consciousness,” to borrow James’s term. “The self was no longer firmly anchored in the body but in consciousness itself, and this was no longer a discrete unit but included everything that was within the individual field of perception.” This is the “vanishing self” to which Ryan’s title refers. Ryan’s assessment
of the *use* of mystical states is also helpful. “The point of Ulrich’s lengthy meditation has been to find an unmystical way of looking at mystical experience. According to his new theory, ecstatic states are not glimpses into another world but another way of seeing this one” (Ryan 221). Mystical states are, according to Ryan’s interpretation, an inversion of internal/external.

Writers were especially quick to appropriate and transform these new philosophical ways of reimagining the self and its relation to world, and of conducting their own psychological experiments with point of view, perception, and identity. Ryan focuses on writers from German-speaking and English-speaking countries, including Rilke, Kafka, Joyce, Hofmannsthal, Döblin, Henry James, Stein, Woolf, and Musil, among others. Taking the writers individually, Ryan locates each within a set of questions posed by the three empiricist psychologists. She identifies many biographical connections among them—Stein attending William James’s lectures, or Musil writing his dissertation on Mach, for example. But the comparative analysis of the philosophical-psychological writing and research with the literary work is most revealing.

Ryan’s investigation of the lines of influence between Musil and Mach, for example, shows how *The Confusions of Young Törless* reflected but also reworked Mach’s positivistic conception of the self. “Young Törless is a brilliant depiction of an empiricist crisis experienced by an adolescent who is unaware that the crisis is anything but a personal one” (208). Narrative techniques, such as Musil’s characteristically free-floating narrative perspective, were invented in order to enact the destabilization of formerly fixed categories (self and world), and also partly as experimental responses to Hofmannsthal’s
identification of the crisis of language. Characters, too, were enlisted to experimentally enact philosophical positions. Referring to *MwQ*, Ryan writes, “Moosbrugger is the ‘it thinks’ of Ernst Mach’s ideal empiricist syntax” (217). Ryan also notes Musil’s occasional parallels with James’s observations regarding cognition.

What I think these analyses fail to adequately develop is the connection to philosophical developments in American Pragmatism, particularly that of James. Musil’s use of irony shows the impossibility of singular certainty, but nonetheless the need for deliberate action. The irreducible plurality of reality, to use James’s term, is not necessarily an insurmountable challenge. Indeed, like James, *MwQ* is developing not only an epistemology of pluralism, but a psychology of layered, interactive selves. *MwQ* treats irony as tool, in the way that, as Schöne above suggests, a scientist treats hypotheses. That is, irony and the multiplication of possible explanations of reality serve to enhance ways of knowing in order to take action. As some of the following critics note, *MwQ* is a laboratory for Musil, like a scientist, to work out his own ideas about action and ultimately lead to action itself.
Brief Overview of the Novel and Primary Themes

*The Man without Qualities* takes place in Kakania\(^{31}\) in 1912-13, and much of the plot is organized around the “Parallel Campaign” [*Parallelaktion*], the preparations for the 70\(^{th}\) anniversary of Emperor Franz Josef’s reign in Austria, which is designed to shadow and compete with Kaiser Wilhelm II’s 30\(^{th}\) anniversary in Germany in 1918. Ulrich participates as advisor to the Parallel Campaign (PC), which is designed to invigorate and unify Kakania, and, perhaps, join all of German-speaking Europe in one common cultural identity. As we follow the conversations among the PC participants, we see that it is less a representation of extant Austrian values and history than an attempt to invent them. Paradoxically, this programmatic, deliberate campaign for unity is precisely what helps to fragment the country, harden national divisions, emphasize partisan loyalties, and set the stage for war. As secretary to the planning committee, Ulrich attempts to negotiate the various competing interests from culture and arts, science, the military, education, commerce and industry, and social engineering, as representatives from each of these domains attempt to covertly co-opt the campaign for their own ends. Endless initiatives, meetings, and conversations ultimately fail to produce any overt action whatsoever, and by the end of Volume I it becomes clear that the PC has merely served as window dressing for war profiteers and the military to push the Austro-

\(^{31}\) This is Musil’s sarcastic term for the inherent contradictions in Austria and the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy. “K.U.K. stands for Kaiserlich königliche.” “Kakania” also references juvenile slang for feces. “On paper it was called the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, but in conversation it was called Austria, a name solemnly abjured officially while stubbornly retained emotionally, just to show that feelings are quite as important as constitutional law and that regulations are one thing but real life is something else entirely. Liberal in its constitution, it was administered clerically. The government was clerical, but everyday life was liberal. All citizens were equal before the law, but not everyone was a citizen. There was a Parliament, which asserted its freedom so forcefully that it was usually kept shut” (*MwQ* 29).
Hungarian Empire toward war. The internecine conflicts within the PC and the impending war that will engulf all of Europe are not just the material consequences of historical events; they serve as metaphors for the fractured individual in perpetual battle with self and society. The inertia and authority of ideas, particularly the worship of science, mathematics, and belief in progress through rational, programmatic thinking in general—symbolized by the PC—ultimately lead to separations among people, and to an alienated self.

Ulrich takes a twelve month “vacation from life” in order to devote himself to living provisionally and to conduct empirical investigations into his own psyche. In accord with what he thinks are the relevant scientific principles, he will restrict his own activity and interaction with the world as much as possible in order to isolate the object of study—himself—from the moral and practical consequences of his experiments in thinking. He treats both himself and his thoughts as objects, but this is only the first step of the extended program he sets for himself. As we will see, Ulrich is developing a new way of thinking about thoughts as quasi-organic wholes which are bound up with sensations, intentionality, memory, feeling—indeed, an entire life. In the laboratory of his mind, he attempts to separate thoughts-as-experiences from that which the thoughts refer to—ideas, the truth-value of the associated propositions, objects in the world, sensations, or the momentary experiences that “produced” those thoughts. He treats his own thoughts as problems or questions posed to him, and which he wants to see as independent of him, save for their being contained within the laboratory. Thoughts can be studied almost like
a biologist would study a creature in its native habitat, or in an artificial enclosure, like
the one that Ulrich is devising.

Already we can note an interesting parallel with James. In the first volume of The
Principles of Psychology, James lays out the methods of investigation. Here he is
interested in how to study thinking, which seems to move too fast and be too elusive to
grasp. Indeed, it seems impossible to separate the thought that one wants to isolate from
the very act of trying to view it.

[T]he psychologist must not only have his mental states in their absolute
veritablenes, he must report them and write about them, name them,
classify and compare them and trace their relations to other things. Whilst
alive they are their own property; it is only post-mortem that they become
his prey. (James, Principles I 189)

These “post-mortem” concepts can be treated as objects in their own right. James goes on
to describe the active, recursive relationship between these thought experiences and the
more static-feeling concepts, again, laying out a method of engagement that is ever alert
to how concepts are in a sense dead on arrival. The concept captures and exsanguinates
experiences, but for purposes of making sense of those very experiences. Ulrich is the
psychologist to himself, and invites the reader to study him as a scientist might study an
interesting organism in the laboratory. In addition, MwQ sets up testable theories, the
results of which can perhaps be applied outside of the novel.

Musil offers this novel as a field of practice in such new thinking and living and
how it might repair the ruptures among thinking, feeling, and acting as exemplified by the
paralysis of many of the characters, especially the protagonist. “Musil’s novel thus
configures those elements as adaptive responses to the modern landscape of universalized
skepticism in which people are adrift, bereft of epistemic certainty, of moral conviction, and even a sense of their own genuine presence as actors” (Goodstein 335). Ulrich, after all, never seems to escape the cycle of rumination in his laboratory. His experiments in thinking and feeling never lead to the kind of deliberate action that he had intended. New understanding and Ulrich’s new objectivity\textsuperscript{32} is necessary, but not sufficient for the kind of integration and healing for the individual, or the renewal of civilization that Musil thought was necessary. The reader, however, need not be paralyzed. The literary devices, particularly the narrative voice, prompt new ways of understanding world, and enact disruptive interpretive practices that the reader can extend outside the bounds of the novel. Musil draws the reader into the novel’s experiments in thinking so that the reader can be more attuned to the intellectual, ethical, and spiritual messages of their “inner voices,” which can then inform action. What is needed, Musil thinks, is not new ideas or representations of reality, but new ways of thinking, acting, and being in the world. We need, he thinks, not a new, static image of objective reality, but new practices for engaging with and even constructing dynamic reality, practices that escape the alienating

\textsuperscript{32} In 1929 Max Brod described the “New Objectivity” [\textit{Neue Sachlichkeit}] as a justifiable rejection of the “noble passions of the heart, those that strive to surpass daily routine,” because it is these passions that were so effectively harnessed by nationalists seeking war. “The young writers see only the quotidian—the document, the photograph, the report—objectivity, beyond which there is nothing to conquer, beyond which there is no meaning to be sought. Religious interpretation of any kind appears to them an illusion” (205). Brod goes on to ascribe sound political and psychological reasons for such a refusal of interpretation. “Insofar as the content of the New Objectivity includes the destruction of false glorification, it should fulfill its function to the utmost. For from this perspective it is a new impetus and a true beginning, a justified protest of the young against the war makers and despots who remain at the helm, the outcry and last hope of humanity. But if objectivity means Americanization, the refusal of the heart, of problems, of love, then it is not a protest against war, but rather against its result, its continuation, and, finally…its approbation” (206). Interestingly, it is up to “the woman of tomorrow,” according to Brod, to rescue the benefits of the New Objectivity from its dangers. This provides a clue to the role of Agathe in \textit{MwQ}. 129
and dehumanizing aspects of modernity, and ultimately transform our relationships with ourselves and one another.

Thoughts Are Experiments

As we have already seen, Musil and James drew from scientific approaches, and interpretive and creative principles and practices more commonly found in the arts and literature to create innovative methods for understanding reality. Indeed, they saw no essential opposition between these two approaches but rather a convergence between scientific and humanistic ways of experiencing, analyzing, and representing reality. In line with similar innovations by Dilthey and Weber, for example, they drew from scientific and empirical epistemologies and practices to develop new epistemologies for understanding ordinary human experiences. Above I introduced Musil’s project and how the novel fits into it, and now I want to provide the relevant aspects of James’s work. We will see how James, too, attempts to reverse the Copernican revolution through which human beings were no longer the center of the very worlds they were creating, worlds that seemed increasingly to operate like enormous and complicated machines in which people were merely the gears and levers.

We might introduce James’ entire project with this phrase: thought in the service of action. All of the investigations that have as their end a changed person or a changed world begin in attempts to understand the nature of reality. What is true of ourselves and

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33 The new human sciences of sociology and history were regarded as Wissenschaften, that is, positivistic ways of thinking about areas of human experience that, in this case, were formerly reserved to the arts and humanities.
our world? For James, this question of truth is intimately tied to the question of value and what we will do as a consequence of that truth.

Pragmatism asks its usual question. “Grant an idea or belief to be true,” it says, “what concrete difference will its being true make in any one’s actual life? What experiences [may] be different from those which would obtain if the belief were false? How will the truth be realized? What, in short, is the truth’s cash-value in experiential terms?” (*Meaning of Truth* v)

Note the way that James describes truth not as a possible correspondence between thought and reality, but truth as the outcome of some action that follows an hypothesis. All thoughts are in a sense testable theories about reality in the laboratory of life. There is no neat separation between issues of fact and value.34 One cannot ask, “Is x true?” without implicitly asking attendant questions, “For whom?” and “For what reasons do we want to know?” If we fail to ask or be aware of these attendant questions, we risk treating thoughts and ideas in disengaged, objective ways. For James this is an instance of “vicious abstractionism.”

As I already mentioned, vicious abstractionism occurs when ideas are accorded “more reality” than the individual who has the idea, or the entire living context of thought, feeling, belief, sensation, and action that provide the environment for the idea (*Meaning of Truth* 249). Such objectivist or abstractionist thinking, according to James, may be making his contemporaries feel disembedded from the world, alienated from their selves and their reality. Philosophy as James reinvents it can, however, help. The goal of

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34 Hume (in the *Treatise of Human Nature* (1738)) makes the point that reason alone cannot lead, by logical necessity, to any particular moral action. Reason can and does, of course, help inform choices that may lead to any particular action (T3.1.1.27), but not in the logically binding way that Kant later attempted to demonstrate via the categorical imperative. James occupies a third position that appreciates that propositions of fact (the domain of reason, for Hume) both imply moral positions and imply psychological needs. So for James, an “is” always and already is implicitly bound up with “ought.”
philosophy ought to be pragmatic, he writes. Putting it bluntly, rather than an individual having correct thoughts and values, philosophy ought to guide people toward being better thinkers, valuers, feelers, and actors. He thinks that modern Western philosophy begins with a fundamentally misguided question: “What can I know?” James wants to restore to the center of philosophy what he thinks is an historically and psychologically more fundamental question: “How should I live?”

There can be no final, definitive answer or programmatic way to respond to such pragmatic questions for James or Musil. This is not, however, a failing of their methods and conceptual approaches. Instead, we would do best to think of James’s many essays and investigations, and MwQ’s many approaches as scientific experiments that may increase our confidence or belief in any particular idea or course of action, but do not conclusively prove the idea. At best they describe how to create the conditions for a range of deliberate and purposeful actions, even if their methods do not compel any particular action. The experiments often do not leave the laboratory of the mind. In MwQ, for example, the narrative voice is perpetually proposing explanations for events and descriptions of people—theories, really—testing them within the fictional world, and analyzing the results—the consequences that follow from such theories. Theories operate not so much like propositions that have a truth-value as questions in a larger discursive and practical context. Such questions are always embedded in the particularities of the story in the case of MwQ, and in the particularities of a life, for James. Taking the root of the word “question” literally, then, we see that Musil and James each see their practice as a quest. Knowledge is not sought for its own sake, but to provide guidance in meeting
particular challenges in living. Indeed, this attitude is crucial to the method of Essayismus, one of the fundamental structuring devices in *MwQ*. James’s principle of substitution (PoS from here forward), one crucial part of Radical Empiricism, works in a very similar way to Essayismus. Each operates from the principle that there are multiple ways in which reality can be experienced, understood, and represented, and each explanation serves particular purposes.

Let us take a close look at an example of Essayismus from the novel, and we will see how provisionality about any particular explanatory context is produced and begin to imagine the variety of actions that might follow from multiple explanations. Many critics take the opening paragraph of the novel as a typical example of Essayismus. In this paragraph the narrator offers a quasi-scientific explanation of the weather by referencing meteorological principles such as fronts and pressure systems. But he closes this paragraph with a simple, evaluative summation: “It was a fine day in August 1913” (Musil 3). As Walter Moser explains, “No clearcut decision is made as to which version is better or more useful; on the contrary, the text produces uncertainty quite systematically” (Moser 413). Of the paired descriptions of the weather, one in pseudo-scientific, meteorological language, and the other in the language of depersonalized, yet

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35 I again refer the reader to Patrizia McBride’s *The Void of Ethics: Robert Musil and the Experience of Modernity* (2006), which centers the book around Ulrich’s quest. *MwQ* is not merely a diagnosis of a crisis in language, ethics, and culture that brought about the catastrophes of world wars and unthinkable violence. It is very much an individual’s quest inspired by the fundamental philosophical question, *How should I live?* while simultaneously critiquing the age’s determination to obviate that personal quest or peremptorily answer it with science, money, progress, and even (as some modernist artists and writers did) with aesthetics. McBride correctly identifies a crucial thread in *MwQ*: All philosophical questions are also personal questions, no matter how universalist the “answers” pretend to be. This is, after all, a novel filled with essays, but is not itself an essay. It is a in part a psychological journey. Again, we have the tension between narrativized experience and objective knowledge, but seen through the lens of Ulrich’s quest, in McBride’s analysis.
value-dependent and banal terms, Moser says that the narrative voice refuses to arbitrate. The narrator seems to be posing a question to the reader: “Which version is better?” Even to begin to respond, we must reflect on the purposes and implications of each version. In the above example, Musil’s narrator is not moving the reader toward choosing one or another “version” of reality. Are these versions indeed describing a single, objective reality but with different concepts, or are these concepts helping to create particular realities? It is not possible to answer, and *MwQ* forces this question upon the reader again and again. The goal of *Essayismus*, and for most of Volume I, is simply to experience the plurality of ways of knowing, and the attendant provisionality of any particular way. The reader will then consider the connections among the ways that reality is experienced, explained, and understood, and the possible actions that may follow from these ways.

We should take note of another feature of this opening paragraph, and this is the move from the quasi-scientific explanation to the banal and evaluative. This is in microcosm the larger movement of *MwQ*. Early on Ulrich thinks, “People simply don’t realize it, they have no idea how much thinking can be done already; if they could be taught to think a new way, they would change their lives” (*MwQ* 37). And the kind of thinking is important. In the opening paragraph, the scientific and abstract makes a place for the human-evaluative. The two are not necessarily opposed. Indeed, it does not seem possible to do without either. The challenge of *MwQ* is the right balance, or rather, the best kind of engagement with each, and with reality through each. Ulrich’s career track marks an evolution, but here, as if to confirm the commitment to deriving the evaluative and personal from the general and abstract, he moves from the practical to the universal
and absolute. Ulrich is first a cavalry officer, then an engineer. Finally, coeval with his “vacation from life,” an intended suspension of practical outcomes, he gives up engineering and turns toward mathematics, “which is the new method of thought itself, the mind itself, the very wellspring of the times and the primal source of an incredible transformation” (MwQ 35). For Ulrich theoretical mathematics implies a focus on ultimate metaphysical principles that implies the direct contact with reality that he seeks, and creates the possibility of a changed life. As such, mathematics takes on mystical qualities.

If light, warmth, power, pleasure, comforts, are man’s primordial dreams, then present-day research is not only science but sorcery, spells woven from the highest powers of heart and brain, forcing God to open one fold after another of his cloak; a religion whose dogma is permeated and sustained by the hard, courageous, flexible, razor-cold, razor-keen logic of mathematics. (MwQ 35-6)

Ulrich imagines his evolution as arising from a world prior to overt action, a world in which the activity of thinking is itself procreative. If thought—mathematical thought in particular—makes contact with reality as such, then merely changing how one thinks changes reality. By turning his attention to mathematics rather than engineering, he believes he can make unmediated, felt contact with reality beneath or prior to any particular possibility, and in so doing create the possibility of remaking the derived world. He goes on to describe this as “a conscious utopianism that does not shrink from reality but sees it as a project, something yet to be invented” (MwQ 11). For Ulrich, this apparent abdication from living is, paradoxically, the way to renew one’s engagement
with reality, a reality that is beneath convention, habitual ways of thinking, and the autonomy of unexamined ideas.\textsuperscript{36}

Ulrich notes that the word “essay” is also translated as “attempt,” for it derives from the French infinitive \textit{essayer}, "to try" or "to attempt." In science, as in \textit{Essayismus} and the PoS, there can be no final, definitive understanding of reality, but only provisional attempts or temporary stopping points in one’s engagement with reality. According to Philip Payne \textit{Essayismus} reflects “an existential perspective—a non-dogmatic, forward-looking, open-ended and experimental approach, suitable for an era in which certainties had been set aside” (Payne, “Introduction” 11-12). In Chapter 62 of \textit{MwQ}, “The Earth Too, But Especially Ulrich, Pays Homage to the Utopia of Essayism,” the narrator explains \textit{Essayismus} as a method of rational inquiry that is suspicious of certainty. \textit{Essayismus} multiplies images of reality and ways of knowing in order to break the bonds of naïve realism, which is an assumption that there is a single, objective, publicly accessible reality “out there” passively available for us to perceive, describe, and explain. Rather, according to \textit{MwQ}, reality is unstable, and not reducible to precise formula or explanation, but is created in moments of engagement with “it.” The concern for the “constructedness” of reality is reflected in the narrative voice as the narrator’s attention moves from questions of \textit{What is reality?} to \textit{How is reality created or interpreted?} This shift appears as a de-emphasis on content (what) to a relative increased emphasis on practice (how). This is consistent with the broader Modernist innovations—a

\textsuperscript{36} Ulrich’s “withdrawal” further confirms the thesis that this is a quest. In Western literature, from the epic to the novel, the hero typically withdraws from ordinary society in order to undergo a change. The return is in some way also transformative for the society to which the hero returns.
focus on language, narration, and perspective, often referred to as an aesthetic choice \[37\] to focus on the how of representation rather than the what of reality. Modernists, in comparison to earlier writers of, say, the realist novel, sought to place greater demands upon the reader as interpreter, who cannot be a passive “recipient” of the what of the story, but had to attend more to how the story is being told.

From our historical standpoint we readily recognize that the what and how as hermeneutic questions are interdependent. But at the time that Musil (and James) were writing, the paradigm shift in comprehending this interdependence was underway, in part because of their philosophical analyses of experience. \[38\] Prior to the Modernist novel, the reader certainly had to take account of the perspective and purposes behind any narration. What MwQ emphasizes, though, is the explicit, experimental strategy in interpreting an unstable and perspective-dependent fictional world. The reader will not be able to provide a neat summing up of rules or practices of engagement, or mine this novel for instructions on how to think and act. This novel has something to teach the reader, but not by simple example or methodical instruction. \[39\] As Lukács observes, “The novel …

\[37\] We must keep in mind, however, that for modernists, there are political and psychological dimensions to this. It is not merely an aesthetic choice. See Chapter 2 where I discuss how recent critiques of the study of the modernist period are expanding the “modernist projects” beyond the aesthetic.

\[38\] See above where I reference Richard Rorty’s *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (1979/2009) and his critique of the Western philosophical tradition since Plato, particularly its privileging of representational theories of knowledge over James’s pragmatic theory of truth: “‘what it is better for us to believe’ in order to solve concrete problems of living (8).

\[39\] MwQ is not a *Bildungsroman*, but it is in line with that tradition, and does share many attributes. For example, Ulrich does develop, but not teleologically, that is, not in accordance with some design toward a determined end. Rather, he develops his capacity for belief itself, and his openness to ways of knowing that are not strictly rational (programmatic and scientific), not neatly narrative (developmental and progressive), and not subjectivist, like the Romanticists. In the paradigmatic *Bildungsroman*, Goethe’s *Wilhelm Meister’s Apprenticeship*, the hero’s development depends upon outside social influences. These are certainly present in MwQ, but Ulrich never allows himself to be subject to this socializing external influence. This is a necessary defense, since no outside influence can be trusted. Everyone is seeking his or her own end, and not the good of society. Ulrich mediates everything that enters his field of experience. This changes with
appears as something in process of becoming” (72-3), and \textit{MwQ} exaggerates this necessary incompleteness. It cannot be truly completed, even by the reader, because its purpose is to stimulate ethical engagement, and “completion” implies ceasing. Like the novel, the reader is encouraged to see him- or herself as “in process of becoming,” a set of exploratory, ongoing scientific experiments.\textsuperscript{40} Results from this engagement laboratory are provisional, and lead to more questions, hypotheses, and more experiments in thinking, feeling, believing, and acting. I will attend below to the ethical and moral dimensions of \textit{Essayismus} and the PoS, but first I need to say more about how each is connected to the larger historical move in which questions of ontology (what is?) are necessarily connected to questions of epistemology (what can we know, and how can we know it?).

\textit{Essayismus} is not restricted to aesthetic productions. In “Robert Musil: Precision and Soul” (2000) Michael Andre Bernstein writes that \textit{MwQ} (like Musil’s life) reads like “a series of events in search of a plot” (129). Recalling Benjamin’s and subsequently Goodstein’s observations about the disappearance of experience, we might say that \textit{MwQ} operates from an epistemology grounded in \textit{Erlebnisse}\textsuperscript{41} (isolated events or adventures) and tries to extrapolate from those moments a quest grounded in \textit{Erfahrung} (lived, the arrival of Agathe. By the time she helps create \textit{der andere Zustand}, Ulrich has reached the end of his deliberate, rational, hermetic attempts at development. Toward the end he is seeking an epiphany, which continues to elude him. But the real quest here is the reader’s quest; Ulrich’s quest is only a pragmatic vehicle for the practices of engagement and the moments of epiphany that may occur for the reader, moments that cannot be captured in the narrative form.\textsuperscript{40} Wolfgang Iser’s Reader-Response Theory comes to mind. See the Introduction where I discuss how the reader’s participation is a requirement of the story to emerge. \textit{MwQ} is particularly dependent upon the reader conducting experiments in thinking outside of the text.

\textsuperscript{41} In \textit{Truth and Method}, Gadamer states the following: “It is surprising to find that, unlike the verb erleben, the noun Erlebnis became common only in the 1870s. In the eighteenth century it is not to be found at all, and even Schiller and Goethe did not know it… Apparently the word enters general usage at the same time as it begins to be used in biographical writing” (53).
practical experience; know-how). Perhaps the task of any person in modernity is to render the apparently separate events of one’s life as experiences that hang together as part of a quest. In assembling the story of our life, we might wonder if there is a trajectory here, a single thread, or whether they are they just isolated incidents. Lacking teleological explanations to organize the episodes of our lives into a meaningful story (one aspect of “disembedding” according to Taylor and Giddens), is it not possible to develop an almost infinite number of narratives through which to represent all the thoughts, feelings, experiences, and actions that occur between one’s birth and one’s death? Do the narrative elements of a life and the attendant meaning of events emerge on their own, or are they imposed by whoever tells the story? MwQ raises these questions and does not answer them. This is part of the narrative strategy to break identification with any single narrative or version of events and invite the reader to engage in the experiments of the novel.

To help our investigation into Essayismus, let us look at James’s PoS, which similarly prioritizes engagement over static truth. He discusses PoS in two very different but overlapping ways. In the first case, James writes that for any particular “activity-

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42 For comparison see Aristotle’s distinction between art and experience—Metaphysics, Book 1 (980ff). For Aristotle, this was a helpful distinction between ways of knowing, not an existential riddle. See also Nicomachean Ethics, Book VI for a parallel distinction between scientific knowledge and practical wisdom.

43 Hannah Arendt offers a very helpful response to this question when she writes that no one can be the author of his own life story, since the meaning of that story is so much larger than the actions of the autobiography’s “hero.” “The disclosure of the ‘who’ through speech, and the setting of a new beginning through action, always fall into an already existing web where their immediate consequences can be felt. Together they start a new process which eventually emerges as the unique life story of the newcomer, affecting uniquely the life stories of all those with whom he comes in contact. … Although everybody started his life by inserting himself into the human world through action and speech, nobody is the author or producer of his own life story. In other words, the stories, the results of action and speech, reveal an agent, but this agent is not an author or producer. … Nobody is its author.” The Human Condition (1958), 184.
experience,” as he calls it, a variety of explanations can be proffered. We can think of an activity-experience as an event or collections of events within a particular time span in some roughly circumscribed location and in which agency is a relevant dimension—a person’s doing something, to put it simply. In “The Experience of Activity” (1912), James gives an example of how any particular “activity-experience” can be represented in multiple ways. “You think you are doing this, but you are doing something of which you dare not dream. For instance, you think you are but drinking this glass; but you are really creating the liver-cirrhosis that will end your days” (“Experience of Activity” 285). Note how one explanation can be substituted for another for the “same” activity-experience.

This particular event can be described very locally; it references what a person is doing over say an hour, takes into account a rather simple motive, and a set of simple bodily movements and process. Or the event can be described in reference to a much longer span of time and a much wider range of physiological process, and without regard to the individual’s conscious motive. Though here the narrator seems to claim authority for the explanation and discount the agent’s interpretation of his own action, further along in the essay James undercuts this “outsider’s” authority and encourages a great deal more skepticism about the “correct” version of events. James goes on to provide other

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44 It is again tempting to refer to Arendt’s analysis of agency and narrative authority. “The perplexity is that in any series of events that together form a story with a unique meaning we can at best isolate the agent who set the whole process into motion; and although this agent frequently remains the subject, the ‘hero’ of the story, we can never point unequivocally to him as the author of its eventual outcome” (The Human Condition, 185). Notice that, as in James, there is not a clear delineation between the action and the way the action is described. Agent and author are equivocated here, as if to suggest that the agents write (construct) reality, but do not authorize its unequivocal interpretation.

45 James does not reference Freud in this essay, or much at all in his work, though he was clearly aware of Freud. It is tempting, however, to see this section of “The Experience of Activity” as a response to scientific explanations of human behavior that perhaps claim too much interpretive authority. Freud’s theories from the turn of the twentieth century onward maintain that much of human behavior and meaning
examples of how any activity-experience can be explained by reference to agents and intentions, an ecology of ideas in competition, or a description of nerve cells and motor discharges. James argues that any of a variety of causal “agents” (not just the individual who is the subject of the action) can be identified as the source of the activity. Any of a variety of causal explanations purports to describe the “real facts of activity” (“Experience of Activity” 285). But all explanations compete, and none is complete, verifiably true, or a place to rest indefinitely. Here, as in Essayismus, James’s method is prescriptive. He deliberately creates multiple versions of the “same” reality as a method of investigation by which a person can expand ways of knowing reality.

In other essays, James’s discussion of PoS is descriptive, as he treats substitution not as an optional investigative or analytical practice designed to expand our conceptual take on reality, but as fundamental to human cognitive, sensory, and emotional experiencing of reality and of acting in or on the world. This way of discussing PoS is empirical; according to James, substitution is simply what experience as a whole (and not just thinking) is and how it works. In the chapter entitled “The Stream of Thought” in Principles I (1890) James writes that

Consciousness, then, does not appear to itself chopped up in bits … It is nothing jointed; it flows. A ‘river’ or a ‘stream’ are the metaphors by which it is most naturally described. In talking of it hereafter, let us call it the stream of thought, of consciousness, or of subjective life. (239)
The stream of ever-changing flows is the model of PoS. In our thinking as in our sensing, we seem to move from one to another discrete sensation or thought, though actually there are not true disjunctions. What we think of as the gaps are themselves experiences for which we may lack an obvious referent. In “A World of Pure Experience” (1904), James writes of experience as “a process in time whereby innumerable particular terms lapse and are superseded by others that follow upon them by transitions” (203). James goes on to describe the intentionality of each of these “particular terms,” the goal of each of which is merely to lead into some other experience. “The only function that one experience can perform is to lead into another experience” (203). Experiences—and thoughts are “bits” of experiences, in this account—constantly substitute and are substituted for by other experiences in this functional progression. Each “particular” experience contains within it the seed of its own supersession. “Whoever feels his experience to be something substitutional even while he has it, may be said to have an experience that reaches beyond itself. From inside of its own entity it says ‘more,’ and postulates reality existing elsewhere” (“A World of Pure Experience” 205). That something more can be another thought, a sensation, a feeling, or an action. An action, for example, can be born out of sensations, thoughts, feelings, or other actions. A sensation is born out of thoughts, other sensations, actions, or a feeling, and so on, always reaching for the “more reality” existing beyond itself. This reaching, this intentionality in each

46 It is worth noting the parallel to Hegelian dialectic, which operates almost like a hermeneutic circle in which “opposing positions in the domain of spirit are not mutually exclusive; they rather complement and modify each other within the framework of a higher totality” (Yovel 37). For both James and Hegel, thoughts seem to seek their own completion in reality. Recall James’s succinct definition of truth: “The truth of an idea is not a stagnant property inherent in it. Truth happens to an idea. It becomes true, is made true by events” (Meaning of Truth vi).
experience, is not something added to experiences, but implicit in having any experience. Each of these substitute experiences is a temporary pausing point that serves only as a provisional terminus in an overall continuity of experience in which each “bit” of experience actively gives rise to others. This sense of constant movement is important: it implies that reality is not something that can be captured in static concepts.

In the above James does not provide clear distinctions among the various kinds of experiences, and does not claim that this movement through experiences is a smooth one, or even precisely how it works. He writes of states of consciousness and sensations and also of feelings and actions, all of which are aspects of Experience. “This is why I called our experiences, taken all together, a quasi-chaos. There is vastly more discontinuity in the sum total of experiences than we commonly suppose” (Experience of Activity 204). For James there is no clear boundary separating mind and world, or divisions among the many aspects of a person’s interaction with a putatively external world (James, “How Two Minds Can Know One Thing” 231). This is not idealism, however, for that would give the exclusive preference to thought. Central to all of James’s characterizations of the PoS or experience more generally is the sense of movement: a thinking agent experiences the constant substitution of one idea for another, or sometimes the substitution of a sensation or even an action for an idea, in order to achieve something. The quest for “more reality” is inherent in all thinking, feeling, sensing, and acting.

This explanation of how thought, feeling, sensing, and acting are all interwoven and perpetually giving rise to experiences does not yet account for truth. Isn’t there something at stake in the movement through experiences so that it is not simply idle
play? Can an action, sensation, or feeling be true or false? James does not have a single conception of truth, or even a specific definition that he does not treat provisionally. For sensations, percepts, more specifically, the problem of truth does not arise, since for James percepts are not “in the mind.” As Hilary Putnam points out, James has a rough correspondence theory of truth, but this turns into a verification theory of truth through which some action is taken which ultimately results in percepts “confirming” a train of concepts (Putnam 171-2). Already I seem to have gone too far afield, and it would take quite more explanation. As James said when delivering a lecture on truth, “Such an account is vague and it sounds at first quite trivial, but it has consequences which it will take the rest of my hour to explain” (Pragmatism, 98; quoted in Putnam 173). For our purposes, the point is that truth is not something inherent in an idea or even a relation between an idea and reality. Truth is a word we can use to describe a felicitous agreement of a set of concepts and percepts over a span of time and within a particular context.

Truth lives for the most part on a credit system. Our thoughts and beliefs ‘pass,’ so long as nothing challenges them, just as bank-notes pass so long as nobody refuses them. But this all points to direct face-to-face verifications somewhere, without which the fabric of truth collapses like a financial system with no cash basis whatsoever.” (Pragmatism 100)

The connection between truth and action is forcibly stated. And we should also note the inherent provisionality or even vulnerability of truth. Let us recall that for James, truth is not an attribute of an idea, “not a stagnant property inherent in it” (Meaning of Truth vi), but a way of describing how well our ideas enable us to function in the world.

Any idea that helps us to deal, whether practically or intellectually, with either the reality or its belongings, that doesn’t entangle our progress in frustrations, that fits in fact, will agree sufficiently to meet the requirement. It will be true of that reality.
The true, to put it very briefly, is only the expedient in the way of our thinking… (Meaning of Truth vi-vii)

Truth is intimately related to purposes. James develops the connection between true ideas and activity even further in when he writes, “the possession of true thoughts means everywhere the possession of invaluable instruments of action … The possession of truth, so far from being here an end in itself, is only a preliminary means towards other vital satisfactions… (431). For James, having ideas that can be said to be true or false means “having” experiences that can give rise to more or less adequate ways of acting. “The only function that one experience can perform is to lead into another experience” (203). (Here is where the prescriptive and descriptive explanations of PoS are interconnected.)

If a person can be deliberate in substituting particular thoughts for others, thereby multiplying ways of knowing any particular bit of experience, this person can multiply ways of engaging that reality. The point of PoS, like Essayismus, is not to arrive at a single, true idea, but to continually move from idea to idea in a practice that guides a person’s engagement with reality to re-embed the person’s action into a context in which it acquires meaning. The challenge, however, is to determine which context. What the action is depends upon how it is thought of and described in language. This is a question of relevance and practicality.

Much of MwQ consists of Ulrich’s meditations, his essayistic investigations of possible actions. So his actions are only hypothetical or imagined—that is, fictional—and the narrator has not made the link between these various explanations and any particular action. By multiplying versions of reality (various descriptions, analyses, and explanations, for example) and ways of knowing (scientific analysis, metaphorical
comparison, anecdotal allusion, for example), the narrator, Ulrich, and the reader are learning how to create new possibilities, literally, new realities, for what might otherwise be taken to be a single, static reality. This draws our attention to and responsibility for how we, individually and collectively, construct reality. Such construction is often a mechanical operation, but we can be more deliberate about creating the conditions for new constructions to evolve. As they are evolving, they cannot be said to be true, but they are not entirely false, either. As James writes, “The truth of an idea is not a stagnant property inherent in it. Truth happens to an idea. It becomes true, is made true by events. Its verity is in fact an event, a process” (Meaning of Truth vi).

By treating empirical statements as testable theories we use to engage reality, Essayismus shows an interesting relation between fiction and truth. MwQ often seems like a loose collection of broad, empirical generalizations, brief narratives of episodes, and deeper scientific analyses that would be more at home in psychology or sociology textbooks. Even for the scientific analyses, there is no overlooking their status as artificial constructions deployed by the narrator, by Ulrich, and occasionally by other characters, to discover important features of reality in an ever-evolving interplay of concepts. Every concept is owned or voiced, as they sometimes compete and sometimes coexist in a conceptual ecosystem in which none has final authority. Perspective is implicit in any of these seemingly objective descriptions or explanations of reality. According to Mark Freed, Musil’s Essayismus is an attempt to render a new experiential mode of knowing-being that collapses or refuses to recognize a hard and fast distinction between fact and fiction. “By destabilizing denotative discourse, Essayismus draws into question the very
possibility of an accurate description of the world, and, hence, the possibility of Truth as the single correct one. Consequently, any single description can be only a partial representation of the way things are, what Musil refers to as a “partial solution” \textit{(Partiallösung)} \ldots Musil conceives of the essay as a discursive space specifically suited for those areas of human experience which do not admit precision in the ordinary sense” \cite{9}. As Freed’s point suggests, \textit{MusQ} regards precision as static, and seeking precise explanation results in incomplete understanding. \textit{Essayismus} as practice works against coming to rest in any particular concept. If we refuse to anoint any particular version of reality as “the right one,” then we can, at least for a moment, occupy a space of creative not-knowing. This epistemological insight has consequences for our human dignity and sense of autonomy and control. If we can recognize that every “bit” of experience implicitly reaches for the “more,” in James’s language, then we remain deliberately engaged in constructing reality, and alive to the creative possibility inherent in every experience. What is at stake is not simply what we know, but how we act, what we care about, and what we feel.

\textbf{Irony and Science}

This heightened engagement with our own creative freedom in perpetually constructing our reality seems to be at odds with one of the more critically noted features of the novel—the incessant ironic tone of both the protagonist and the narrator. The comparison with James, however, reveals how empowering irony can be, at least for the reader, if not for Ulrich. Following critics such as Beda Allemann, Walter Moser, and
Goodstein, I argue that the reader is supposed to view irony as a device to create productive doubt, which thereby empowers an individual regarding his/her choice about how to understand or represent reality and experience. Allemann sees irony as specific to literature, a device that provides escape or relief from reality (which he calls Spielraum (4)) in the aesthetic realm. I think this is far too limiting a view of irony. I agree with Walter Sokel (1960/1) who takes issue with Allemann’s apolitical, purely aesthetic analysis of the irony in MwQ. Sokel (1960/1) points out that MwQ offers not a personal escape from reality but a laboratory to conduct experiments in concept creation, perspective, feeling, and acting. This is only a temporary departure from other parts of one’s life, and the reader departs in order to later return with more awareness of and sensitivity toward experience, and with a greater range of choices in how to act. Like later writers, such as Goodstein, I see the irony of MwQ as exemplary of an organizing method for all ordinary experience in modernity. Goodstein notes the connection between boredom and irony, the latter being an adaptive response to the modern, disenchanted world.

Boredom epitomizes the dilemma of the modern subject, for whom enlightenment has also meant fragmentation—for whom modernization and scientific progress have caused, in Max Weber’s term, the “disenchantment” of the world such that history and religion can no longer anchor identity in the fabric of collective meaning. (3)

Irony allows a skeptical distance even from this feeling of disenchantment and creates a space in which one can work on his or her own thoughts, feelings, and actions. The self becomes a project. In describing this irony that “self-reflexively implicates the reader” (Goodstein 357) in this project of co-creation, Goodstein quotes from Musil’s
posthumous papers: “[C]onstructive irony … is the interconnectedness among things from which it emerges naked. One thinks of irony as ridicule or jeering” (MwQ 1764). Both Musil and Goodstein recognize that irony need not imply such dismissal. MwQ takes on the enormous task of “forging a language of reflection adequate to the historical circumstance of modern human ‘being without qualities’” (Goodstein 338) and inviting the reader to reflect “upon the dilemmas brought about by the conflict between modern, scientifically inflected and traditional, religiously grounded modes of interpreting subjective experience” (Goodstein 337). That ironic distance and a healthy self-skepticism pervade the novel should not be surprising. Though the two are related, skepticism is one move or one position in the larger dance that is irony. By “skepticism” I mean simply an abiding doubt about the possibility of true knowledge of reality. There is a long philosophical tradition that discerns a variety of skepticisms, but these distinctions are not necessary here. Skepticism can be general or specific to one particular claim, purported fact, or proposition. In contrast, irony (in MwQ) is an interpretive and communicative activity. As we see in MwQ, irony is not a stance or simple move, but involves affirming something in or order to question it, and using that question to prompt reflection upon the very mechanisms of affirmation, doubt, and belief.

Irony has historically not always been understood this way. Indeed, theorists have often disagreed on what irony is and how it works. Both ancient Greek (eirón) and Roman (ironia) traditions used the terms to denote dissembling. Socrates pretended to be

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47 We might further distinguish irony and skepticism from cynicism, which also carries both popular and specialized philosophical meanings, and has evolved over time. Peter Sloterdijk demonstrates that contemporary (post-Enlightenment) cynicism is “enlightened false consciousness” (Sloterdijk 192). “But modern cynicism is more than this, it is an all embracing rejection of new values, it means the end of hope, it produces ‘listless egoism’ and detached negativity” (194).
ignorant in order to draw his interlocutor into difficulties. For Roman rhetoricians like Cicero and Quintilian an ironic statement is one where what is meant is the opposite of what is said. In later European thought irony is not so much an overt contradiction between two communicative registers, but rather a contrast which can heighten a reader’s or audience member’s awareness of actions, statements, beliefs, feelings, or fundamental philosophical or spiritual worldviews. By the time that the Modernists’ experiments were attending more to fundamental epistemological questions, irony could even describe a skeptical attitude toward life and reality (Cuddon 427-32).

Modernist irony refers to the subversion of any stable value-position in literary narrative, resulting for example from ambiguous modes of discourse (see FREE INDIRECT DISCOURSE) and/or the use of indeterminate points of view, as in the novels of Flaubert, Musil, and Mann … These writers implicitly question and ironically target not only the belief systems of their fallible characters but also the very notion of the ‘omniscient’ narrator, suggesting a mindset of general skepticism. (Herman, et al 263)

The above definition is inadequate, for it suggests that irony performs a negative function—that of producing a belief that the only certainty is that one does not or cannot know. Rather, As Austin Harrington writes, irony is the way that creatively challenges the certainties of an entire era in order to invite greater (not diminished) engagement and agency.

Since Schlegel, Kierkegaard and Adorno, philosophers have long stressed that irony is not the antithesis of its subject. Irony is neither the antithesis of ‘p’, nor the synthesis of ‘p’ and ‘not p’, but the paradoxical conjugation of ‘p’ and ‘not p’. Irony is the thinking of a thought in relation to its limits of possibility. It is a work of the self, a work of unending ‘engagement and detachment’ (see Elias, 1987) that challenges the self to find autonomy, meaning and ethical togetherness with others by means of a critical journey into the reverse of these values, so as to disclose the possible
dogmas and naiveties that subtend them when they are asserted without circumspection. (Harrington 72-3)

Note that for Harrington, the engagement that irony fosters is intellectual (engagement with ideas) and social (engagement with other people’s ideas, voices, and interpretations, the “ethical togetherness”). Irony is not a solitary endeavor, but a communicative invitation to engage—it is a social practice. It may be helpful to see a connection between MwQ and earlier literature (17th century forward) in which irony is used to obliquely communicate a perspective or pose a question that cannot be conveyed (as well) directly. The satire of Swift’s “A Modest Proposal” (1729) comes to mind. While MwQ is not entirely satire (it has satirical moments, certainly), it shares with satire the use of irony as a double-move: affirming X in order to call X into question. Satire usually has a single target, or X, in mind, whereas in MwQ, the affirmation and questioning of X is followed by a similar treatment for Y, Z, and so on. For Herman et al this procedure has as its goal a “general skepticism” about anything that might be affirmed, whereas I see the irony of MwQ as a device that choreographs a reader’s moves through various dispositions and attitudes. Essayismus, specifically, is a method in which the goal is not the passive receiving or having of correct thoughts, but thinking more flexibly, responsively, and creatively through multiple interpretive strategies in interactions with irreducibly pluralistic reality.

Irony as activity of engagement in MwQ has much in common with scientific investigation and theorizing; in each case, a concept is a theory that is tested by subsequent actions (the X that is affirmed in order to be questioned). This use of irony also fits nicely with James’s PoS in which “The only function that one experience can
perform is to lead into another experience.” When X is affirmed, it is part of an entire experience; it entails a cluster of associated thoughts-feelings-actions-sensations which are substituted for by further clusters that, in a sense, reflect back upon and call into question the “original” experiences. Again, experiences are not simply thoughts or the “having” of ideas, but moments of thought-feeling-action-sensation that inherently intend other, new clusters of thought-feeling-action-sensation. To quote James again, “Whoever feels his experience to be something substitutional even while he has it, may be said to have an experience that reaches beyond itself. From inside of its own entity it says ‘more,’ and postulates reality existing elsewhere” (“A World of Pure Experience” 205).

Every experience calls itself into question, which leads to further experiences. We might say that James’s epistemology is itself ironic, but only if we keep in mind the very specific way in which I have been discussing irony. For James and MwQ, irony is not a destructive or deconstructive method for affirming only skepticism, nor a way of keeping the world at arm’s length in order to examine it as mere object. Rather, irony is method for heightening our sensitivity to our own thoughts and the complexity of our ordinary experiences. Thoughts are theories that are tested through actions. James comes to this creative, provisional, enhanced skepticism through his work as a scientist, perhaps as Musil did. I will say more about the connections between scientific practice and irony below, but first I want to go into more detail about exactly how irony works in MwQ.

48 See also Albrecht Schöne’s (1961) observation that the subjunctive mood “was a rhetorical gesture of the artist designed to promote understanding of plural perspectives, not to flatten them out in one direction or another. Schöne claims that this preference for the subjunctive mood comes from Musil’s training as a scientist.
Let’s return to Moser, who sees irony as “an agent in a critique of discourse which is used to question established discursive behavior, attitudes, positions, and beliefs, and to open them up to the possibility of new formations of discourse. Musil’s favorite way of performing irony operates by means of de- and re-contextualization of discursively fixed elements” (Moser 414). The reader is never able to be secure in any perspective or explanation, and this exercise is necessary to break the bonds of naïve trust in rationality in order to understand how to use ideas by highlighting the multiple ways in which any particular event might be represented. Ideas are things that a person can do something with. They are theories about reality that we may elect to test. This reminds the reader that we have a choice among “equivalent” explanations, and forces attention on why someone would select any particular explanation or way of representing an event. (This is the “challenge … [to] the self to find autonomy, meaning and ethical togetherness with others by means of a critical journey” that Harrington mentions.) New relationships with one’s thoughts and reality are made possible by deliberately creating or recognizing the distance between one’s thoughts and one’s self. This is the creatively disruptive function of provisionality and irony. Ulrich seems to appreciate this as an idea, but fails to fully embrace it in action. The reader can see him as a negative example, but his failing does not vitiate the potential use of irony. I will discuss this in more detail below, but first I want to show how both James’s and Musil’s uses of provisionality are consistent with basic principles of a particular kind of rationality: scientific theorizing and investigative practices. Science and scientific ways of thinking about reality were, for both, contributing to the tyranny of rationality, and so they were critical of scientific excess, or
“scientism” as I describe it in the note below. But for them, science also provided the methods for responding to hyperrational modernity.

Both James’s principle of substitution and Musil’s *Essayismus* are quite similar to the attitude of provisionality in modern science. Ideally, empirical sciences never accept or claim finality, only usefulness, of its propositional statements. Sciences make no claims to absolute or universal truth, or to capturing reality as it “really” is. All of its theories will be superseded, replaced by more accurate theories, more useful theories, within some new contexts and for some new needs. In these senses, both empirical science and Ulrich’s predisposition to distance himself from any of the objectivist or subjectivist descriptions or explanations of his own actions and identity are ironic.

Other critics (see previous footnote) have identified the parallels between irony and empirical science. My claim is stronger: The epistemologies of both empirical science as described by Mach and James, and irony as we see in *MwQ*, perform the same interpretive and communicative activity and for the same pragmatic, experimental purposes. *Essayismus* is the breakthrough innovation that allows us to see this.

*Essayismus* and empirical science refuse finality. Each operates functionally, that is, with a perpetually hypothetical disposition. Furthermore, scientific theories, the

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49 Scientism, as I have been using the term, refers to faith in science to provide precise and final explanations of the essential nature and workings of reality. Scientism accepts a deterministic and reductively material universe, and tends to treat “science” as a monolithic set of beliefs that promise rational, engineered control over nature.

50 This provisionality may seem at odds to claims that science provide “objective truth” of reality “as it is.” This is more a common notion of science, and James, but especially Musil, take issue with this naïve view of science, which is often referred to as “scientism.”

51 See Thomas Kuhn’s *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1970) for more on how paradigms— theories, assumptions, and practices—are superseded.

52 See both Ryan’s *The Vanishing Subject* (1991) and Thiher’s *Fiction Refracts Science* (2005) for more on the interesting intersections between scientific and literary epistemologies and modes of representation.
essayistic moments in \( MwQ \), and the plural representations of James’s principle of substitution, can all be said to be productive fictions. Like the novel itself, our ordinary ways of understanding experience and our sophisticated scientific theses are essentially constructions that we use to engage with a reality that we cannot claim to capture mimesically in language or concept. Indeed, according to James and Musil, it is an illusion that there is a single reality out there to be captured at all. Remember that the blending of subjective and objective, and the complexity of “reality” as both activity experience and representation, imply that there is no clear boundary between thought and reality, and a very complex interdependence between truth and fiction.

The above description of science and its implicit provisionality is largely accepted by scientists and philosophers today, but is actually the result of the work of people like James and others around the turn of the twentieth century. Though I wrote that James and Musil owe their pragmatic orientations to knowledge and experience to scientific principles, lines of influence are not necessarily one-directional. James certainly was at the forefront of the philosophy of science, and in his own way, Musil entered the discourse on scientific practice and principles as well. One individual link between them is Ernst Mach, who features quite prominently in the development of modern scientific principles. James and Mach had a very active correspondence, and often saw their own ideas about ontology, epistemology, and the philosophy of science reflected in the other. And Musil wrote his Ph.D. thesis on Mach, and was sympathetic to much of his thinking. All were very much influenced by Darwin, whose theories of adaptability were taken up by Mach and James. In what follows, I will be using some of Musil’s interpretations or
glosses of Mach, both to help elucidate Mach’s thought, and also to show Musil’s commitments to Machean lines of reasoning.

Mach writes that scientific theories are tools that individual scientists and scientific communities create and apply in order to comprehend and manipulate the world. Inspired by Darwin, Mach appreciated that our thinking, just like our ability to use tools, satisfies our need to survive and reproduce. Scientific thinking is no exception. We develop and use these theories not because they correspond with reality in some sense, but because they work for us. Mach writes, “Every scientific interest may be viewed as a mediate biological interest.” (Mach quoted by Musil in On Mach’s Theories 20). There is a functional relationship between the theories and beliefs all of us create and deploy, and the world outside of thought or “prior to” thought, we might say. Describing scientific investigation in ecological terms, Mach writes of a theory “adapting” itself to facts, “the accuracy [of which] goes no further than is required by immediate interests and circumstances” (Mach quoted by Musil, Mach’s Theories 22). Again, Musil glosses Mach and writes that the concepts and theories of science are nothing but “economical tools to help us adapt adequately to the practical demands arising out of our relation to our environment” (Musil, Mach’s Theories 16). The functional descriptions of correlated phenomena and our interactions with them (If I do x, then y will happen because of natural law L) do not allow us to make any claims about reality an sich. According to Musil, “The concepts of natural science acquire their content from experience and from the regularities given through experience … [O]ne speaks of mass, force and heat-states, etc.” He quotes Mach on this point: “[O]ne gives this a name or connects a certain image
with it, but this is only to represent familiar processes, no more. Nothing can be deduced or inferred from it which is not the product of experience” (Mach quoted by Musil, Musil on Mach 49). In other words, all we seem to have are discrete phenomena, and we infer the causal connections among them and may mistakenly think we are describing objective reality. Causality, according to Mach (and following Hume), is a metaphysical myth. We use these causal theories, but, cautions Mach, that does not make them true explanations or descriptions of some objective reality.

While the young Musil agrees with Mach on most points, he is frustrated by what he thinks is a too-provisional treatment of scientific theory. He writes that Mach “himself only adopts his theory as a useful explanatory device—not as an account of reality” (Musil, Mach’s Theories 32). Musil, however, is seeking a conceptual framework that would do two things: allow us to describe reality an sich; and provide useful guidance for ordinary individuals who are concerned not so much with understanding reality as such, but with moral and ethical questions. As Ulrich says about all of the scientific and practical questions that concern him, they all revolve around a central question: How am I to live? Essayismus marks an advance in Musil’s thinking over his career, an advance in using scientific principles developed by Mach to ask the fundamental practical and ethical questions.

James, in contrast to the young Musil, is well along in developing a more robust theory of experience by the time that Musil is writing his dissertation (1908). There is no
evidence that Musil ever read James or became familiar with his writings.\textsuperscript{53} Still, both will develop theories of experience that refuse to accept the neat (and false) distinction between thought and reality. Their critiques of science were designed to do two things. First, along with Mach, they reject the scientistic, naïve view of science as providing objective truth about a single reality. Secondly, they are developing sophisticated responses to the questions, Who am I? and What should I do? that are informed by an understanding of how science actually works. If the tools of scientific epistemology were inadequate by themselves to provide responses to these questions, there is an even deeper puzzle posed by language itself.

For both Musil and James, the method of engagement that each offers is intimately tied in with their critiques of language as well as both the natural and constructed limits of expression in getting at the crucial aporias each is striving to identify and overcome. Musil inherits a tradition identified in Germanistik as Sprachkrise and Sprachkepsis—the “crisis of language” and the “suspicion of language.” Hugo Hoffmannsthal’s 1902 “Lord Chandos Letter” \textit{[Ein Brief]} is the paradigmatic expression of this Sprachkrise/kepsis. Here the protagonist loses “the ability to think or speak coherently about anything at all” (Hoffmannsthal, 121). The first symptoms of the fragmentation of his thinking, where “Everything came to pieces, the pieces broke into more pieces, and nothing could be encompassed by one idea” (Hoffmannsthal 122), is his inability to voice opinions and make value judgments. He loses his facility with

\textsuperscript{53} James and Mach did enjoy a lively correspondence. They shared manuscripts and cited one another’s research in their own works, as Gerald Holton shows in “Ernst Mach and the Fortunes of Positivism in America” (1992). According to Holton, “Mach confirms [in letters] that in his way of thinking he stands close to pragmatism, although without ever having used that term” (35).
objective/categorical concepts that make the world a rationally apprehensible place, and then he loses his sense of connection with other people and the world around him. Musil, James, and Ulrich don’t experience the total failure of objective/categorical concepts, but do strive to identify the limits of thinking through abstraction while creating new modes of representing experience not able to be captured in such rationalistic ways.

The clear and distinct ideas and universal values espoused by the Enlightenment seem to elude Hofmannsthal’s narrator’s intellectual grasp. However, this apparent isolation gives way to brief moments of harmony, the “swelling tide of higher life,” the “steeply rising tide of heavenly feeling” (Hofmannsthal 123). The “mysterious, wordless, infinite rapture will come not from contemplating the starry sky” (Hofmannsthal 126) but from humble, simple, momentary experiences: “a dog, a rat, a beetle, a stunted apple tree, a cart path winding over a hill” (Hofmannsthal 125).54 He senses that he is barely fit for conducting the affairs of his estate, and to be in ordinary company is oppressive. Yet he doesn’t experience this “vast empathy” (Hofmannsthal 124) as liberating or transcendent, only confusing and frustrating because of its inarticulability. For Hofmannsthal, according to Robert T. Gray, the limits of understanding and expression are implicit in “the static abstractions and rhetorical logic of the cultivated languages” (Gray 338). In other words, cultivated languages, like the German that the Chandos narrator is using,

54 James notes that Tolstoy says almost exactly the same thing, though he is more overtly religious. This was Tolstoy’s great “conversion.”
have become good, he thinks, at capturing scientific abstractions and propositional thoughts, but fail to adequately express individual, living experience.\textsuperscript{55}

Musil’s \textit{Partiallösung} to this dilemma (\textit{Essayismus}) treats the expression of an idea as an experimental hypothesis that can stimulate and guide action, but need not refer to some extralinguistic reality. Like James’s PoS, this avoids the problem of correspondence, the commonplace assumption that words, sentences, and the experimental hypotheses themselves, must correspond to some part of reality to be meaningful. Instead, what we see in both PoS and \textit{Essayismus} is that we can \textit{use} words, descriptions, and theories about reality, not to capture reality, but to move ourselves forward in solving problems.\textsuperscript{56} This functional aspect of what Wittgenstein later refers to as “language-in-use” is true even if we are reading, or speaking or writing to ourselves. Even though Musil has made the early breakthrough in understanding language as a kind of tool, he seems unable to break free of the correspondence theory of truth, and still wants to create a language that captures reality \textit{an sich}.

\textit{Essayismus} does not satisfy Musil’s desire to capture the wordless epiphanies of the “higher life” exposed in moments where language breaks. He is caught in the problem of reference, where “referring to” something seems like a way of capturing that something in word and concept. That is, though, like James, he is critical of the theory of

\textsuperscript{55} This provides a nuance on the “two cultures” debate referred to above in which the apparent precision of scientific or propositional (fact-based) language is opposed to the language of human experience characteristic of the humanities. As we saw with the “two cultures” debate, this is a false dilemma.

\textsuperscript{56} It is not clear whether Wittgenstein ever read Musil or was familiar with \textit{Essayismus}. We can clearly see, however, that at the same time that Musil is writing \textit{MwQ}, Wittgenstein is developing a theory of language-in-use that avoids the classical problem of reference, the problem that at the time was “solved” with correspondence theories of truth and meaning. See in particular early sections (6-13) of Philosophical Investigations where Wittgenstein argues against the theory that words serve as names for parts of reality.
truth as correspondence, he is unable to fully dispense with the assumption that language must refer to some supra-linguistic reality. Recall Musil’s frustration with Mach. Mach describes scientific theories as tools that provide guidance for practice, and as provisional “answers” to “immediate needs and interests.” At this early point in his career, Musil is dissatisfied with this pragmatic theory of concepts, for he wishes for scientific theories to grasp reality _an sich_. By the time he is developing _Essayismus_ in _MwQ_, he has a more sophisticated pragmatic theory of concepts, and _Essayismus_ is consistent with James’s pragmatic theory of truth. But Musil wants more, wants to force concepts and language to connect in some tighter way with reality, even if he is not sure what that way is. I think Musil’s frustration with language, and with concepts more generally, is played out by Ulrich. Ulrich’s seeking after what he can only call “the Other Condition” (_der andere Zustand_) indicates his initial willingness to leave behind language- and rationality-centric ways of knowing, and enter into a new mode of knowing, feeling, experiencing, and acting. However, he hopes that out of this will emerge a new language, a new way of representing (capturing in word and concept) the sacred and mystical in ordinary experience. That is, he wants this new language to grasp—to correspond to—what Chandos calls the “higher life.” So he is trying to force language to do what he admits is impossible. Musil’s desire to create this new language comes from his appreciation of the historical moment. Civilization, he thinks, is in a state of crisis, and it cannot be rescued or healed one person at a time, one private, wordless comprehension at a time. Musil seeks a reproducible method by which anyone can discover the “higher life.”

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57 See Ryan’s _The Vanishing Subject_ (1991) for more on Musil’s free-floating narrative perspective as an experimental response to Hofmannsthal’s identification of the _Sprachkrise_.

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James sidesteps the dilemma as posed by Chandos by avoiding the “vicious
abstractionism” entailed in treating ideas like objects and giving them privileged
ontological status. Like Mach, James treats scientific theories and ordinary ideas about
reality as tools that invite experiment with reality, reality that is neither singular nor
stable. We do not have true or false ideas; rather, we use ideas to engage with and
construct many possible realities as we go. James’s term for this multiplication of
perspectives is “irreducible pluralism.” He writes that we can find no philosophical
document, no scientific theory, no purportedly factual “proposition ever regarded by any
one as evidently certain that has not either been called a falsehood, or at least had its truth
sincerely questioned by some one else” (“Will to Believe” 725). And this is in part
because “No concrete test of what is really true has ever been agreed upon” (“Will to
Believe” 725). Such skepticism is required to loosen the bonds of scholasticism, blind
faith, or implicit self-identification with any particular idea or theory. We create distance
between ourselves and our ideas when we multiply our ways of understanding any
particular thing or experience, and allow these multiple understandings to co-exist. James
calls this the empiricist (as opposed to the absolutist) disposition.

The absolutists in this matter say that we not only can attain to knowing
truth, but we can know when we have attained it; while the empiricists
think that although we may attain it, we cannot infallibly know when. To
know is one thing, and to know for certain that we know is another. (“Will
to Believe” 723)

Because as empiricists we cannot know for certain that we know, we must suspend our
commitment to anything we think we know. For most facts and theories, absolutist
certainty is unnecessary as long as we are in the position of judge or investigator. We can
remain the empiricist as long as we need not act. The empiricist is precisely the role that Ulrich chooses to play, but, as I just discussed, Ulrich (and Musil) cannot let go of the absolutist’s desire to capture der andere Zustand in language, in some set of concepts, that would make it not andere, but der bekannte Zustand.

Playing the part of the empiricist is, as we have seen, productive as long as it allows a multiplication of creative possibilities for understanding and action to emerge. Again, this empiricism functions just like the irony of MwQ; it invites sustained engagement with multiple ways of relating to reality. In both, our resistance to singular, exclusive representations of reality, and our willingness to entertain yet another way of engaging and creating “realites,” multiply our possibilities for action. But it is not clear how to take such action. Where is the moment where one should finally act? How does one know when to embrace, if only temporarily, one “version” of reality and act? Ulrich is caught by this question, and for all of Volume I, he remains unable to answer it. As a “possibilist” (or empiricist, in James’s absolutist-empiricist binary) he can “conceive of everything there might be just as well, and to attach no more importance to what is than to what is not … .Such possibilists are said to inhabit … the subjunctive mood” (MwQ 11). (Indeed, even the grammatical structure of the novel, this laboratory of ideas, reinforces this posture, as much of it is written in the passive voice.) Rather than taking overt, deliberate action, Ulrich is orienting himself to ideas, events, even his own experiences, as if there is no natural or assumed connection among them. (Stated differently, rather than using ideas as tools that he takes in his hand for action, he treats ideas as containers that he must fit himself into, and which restrict his action.) Even his
own actions cannot, for him, be more “real” than the alternatives that he could have taken, or, to preserve the subjunctive-passive tone, could have been enacted.

If he monitors his feelings, he finds nothing he can accept without reservation. He seeks a possible beloved but can’t tell whether it’s the right one; he is capable of killing without being sure that he will have to. The drive of his own nature to keep developing prevents him from believing that anything is final and complete, yet everything he encounters behaves as though it were final and complete … [T]he present is nothing but a hypothesis that has not yet been surmounted. What better can he do than hold himself apart from the world, in the good sense exemplified by the scientist’s guarded attitude toward facts that might be tempting him to premature conclusions? Hence he hesitates in trying to make something of himself; a character, a profession, a fixed mode of being, are for him concepts that already shadow forth the outlines of the skeleton, which is all that will be left of him in the end. (MwQ 269)

By living in suspended animation, he thinks he is avoiding the errors that commitment to any particular choice entails. By living here—or failing to really live, as he discovers—he believes that elusive certainty is rendered irrelevant. He looks forward to developing into what James calls the “absolutist” at some point. His method is to accumulate enough empirical data and multiply the essays and possibilities such that one of those essays or possibilities will itself compel the absolutist position and he will make a decision. As Bernstein notes, Ulrich’s vacation is a long meditation on meaningfulness and events, an attempt to “discover in himself the intellectual rigor, spiritual intensity, and emotional depth that, he has grown to feel, must underlie any meaningful action” (129). He is seeking the necessary conditions for action to be meaningful. He operates with the implicit belief that one of his ideas or theories, when taken in as thought-object rather than as an experience, will compel action. He does want to be capable of action, but no particular action can satisfy this criterion of sufficient reason. He is caught in a cycle of
perpetual revision. This recursive questioning is not just an epistemological dilemma, but a moral and spiritual one, for what is most at stake in this novel and in Musil’s particular historical moments is the question, “what should I do?” Who we are and what we should do are not, for Ulrich, empirical questions, but questions of ultimate moral value.

The reader should not, however, overly identify with Ulrich, since he is not able to definitively respond to the above question or provide much in the way of moral guidance. By his example he shows us that explanations of how things work is not the same as providing a response to the question, “what should I do?” He has a vast range of explanations for himself, his actions, his experiences, and even his choices, but these descriptive, nomothetic propositional statements do not provide prescriptive guidance or even idiographic explanations. He can analyze himself as a “what” but loses the sense of himself as a “who.” Ulrich’s diagnosis of the pathology of the age includes the observation that individuals experience their own lives, even their identities, as mere distanced epiphenomena. Many seem to be spectators and analysts rather than creators of their own lives. In the chapter entitled “A Man Without Qualities Consists of Qualities Without a Man,” Ulrich ruminates:

But today responsibility’s center of gravity is not in people but in circumstances. Have we not noticed that experiences have made themselves independent of people?...Who can say nowadays that his anger is really his own anger when so many people talk about it and claim to know more about it than he does? A world of qualities without men has arisen, of experiences without the person who experiences them, and it almost looks as though ideally private experience is a thing of the past, and that the friendly burden of personal responsibility is to dissolve into a system of formulas of possible meanings. (MwQ 158-9)
This is the trap that *Essayismus* and “possibilism” can become. Creating such a distance from one’s own thoughts, values, and actions is not in itself a problem. Indeed, such scientific objectivity allows us to multiply our ways of knowing ourselves. The problem is twofold: treating one’s own experiences as *nothing but* a set of abstract concepts; and *constant* provisionality with regard to one’s own motives, thoughts, feelings—one’s very self. Here we see another connection with what James calls “vicious abstractionism.”

Abstraction, functioning in this way, becomes a means of arrest far more than a means of advance in thought. It mutilates things; it creates difficulties and finds impossibilities … The viciously privative employment of abstract characters and class names is, I am persuaded, one of the great original sins of the rationalistic mind. (*Meaning of Truth* 250)

Rather than treating ideas as tools to be used for our purposes, we treat ideas as containers and try to fit ourselves into them. Whatever parts of our personal experience does not fit is discarded as irrelevant. Ulrich regards his every action, thought, feeling, or event as merely an instance that exemplifies a particular formula. Escaping “vicious abstractionism” is a question of balance rather than of absolutes, for certainly one cannot simply think whatever one wants and then fashion reality in that image. The tool, after all, must be fitted to the user and to the materials and environment. But as we see above, Ulrich is subject to “a system of formulas of possible meanings,” and struggles to re-identify with any of the possibilities and qualities he has multiplied. Our engagement with the world is mediated by a variety of concepts we use. We all create hypotheses about the world and use them to take action. As James writes, “*Theories thus become instruments, not answers to enigmas, in which we can rest.* We don’t lie back upon them, we move forward, and, on occasion, make nature over again by their aid” (James,
Pragmatism 32). This is probably the most significant distinction between James and the Essayismus of MwQ. Though Ulrich claims to be seeking a way to take deliberate, appropriate action, in practice Essayismus enables him to defer acting. He suffers with the loss of familiar ways of doing, being, and thinking, while the new way, “the Other Condition” [der andere Zustand] as Ulrich names it, is not yet born. Gradually, Ulrich’s sense of idleness and impotence bears down on him. He seeks escape from the Essayismus and provisionality that have not yet opened the door to something else. His life seems to be all preparation and deferral. In what follows I will discuss some of his attempts to emerge from the paralysis of his personal Essayismus. None is ultimately successful for him, but even these failures offer guidance for the reader.

Envying Men of Action

In the preceding sections I have described the limitations of Essayismus and the Principle of Substitution for the integration of the individual that Musil and James each in their own way are trying to facilitate. I have described the practices as “experimental” to highlight that the practice is one of open possibility and discovery that makes possible new ways of relating to self and world. The “tyranny of concepts” must be overthrown in order to make room for new versions of reality and ways of knowing, experiencing, and acting. These new versions operate like theories that will then be tested through further engagement. Without having to affirm any particular theory as true, we can utilize them for particular purposes. Each theory or version is true enough to further our engagement with reality or we might say, possibly true. Such “possiblism” as Ulrich calls it, is not a
static perspective but a way of being in dynamic tension with our concepts and our multiple versions of reality. Our concepts are more like open questions, answered only provisionally and with productive suspicion. Even our actions appear to us as questions posed of reality, completed or “answered” over time. Yet even these answers are not final, in keeping with the principles of Essayism and the Principle of Substitution. Because the practices provide no natural endpoint or conclusion, it is possible to remain in a state of suspended animation, as we see with Ulrich. The questions can remain as thought experiments. So the practices that promote provisionality, openness, engagement, and the possibility for new action do not provide guidance for any particular action.

To recap, for both James and Musil, practices of engagement like Essayismus and PoS are necessary but not sufficient conditions for original, creative action that eludes the tyranny of concepts. They are inspired by pragmatic purposes, but the practices themselves cannot engender further action. Indeed, these practices can be ways of deferring action if they serve merely as intellectual exercises. They lose their pragmatic dimension. What is needed are methods for eliciting original, creative, and, as we will see, moral action out of the valuable experiments of Essayismus and PoS.

In the following section I will discuss various proposed “solutions” to this aporia. Both James and MwQ experiment with social, psychological, and moral transgressions as a way of stimulating action from these emotional and ruminative experiments. I want to use one episode early in the novel to serve as a kind of synecdoche for how these experiments can create the conditions for specific kinds of action. In the scene I will describe, Musil invites the reader to regard Essayistic experiments as a kind of training or
habit creation. The hypotheses and procedures from the “laboratory” can thereby make
certain kinds of action more likely outside the laboratory. Indeed, Musil compares the
essayistic thought experiments to the training of an athlete. Let me provide context.

In Part I, Chapter 7, “In a Weak Moment Ulrich Acquires a Mistress,” Ulrich had
been attacked, beaten, and robbed by three men. The following morning he had,
characteristically, described the men and the attack in a variety of ways. One of the most
interesting features of his rumination is his appreciation for the physicality of the fight,
the unconscious yet beautiful mechanism of an athlete in training. For Ulrich had trained
as a boxer and still had a punching bag in his house that he would work regularly.

The fascination of such a fight, he said, was the rare chance it offered in
civilian life to perform so many varied, vigorous, yet precisely coordinated
movements in response to barely perceptible signals at a speed that made
conscious control quite impossible. Which is why, as every athlete knows,
training must stop several days before a contest, for no other reason than
that the muscles and nerves must be given time to work out the final
coordination among themselves, leaving the will, purpose, and
consciousness out of it and without any say in the matter.” (MwQ 24)

Later he describes this feeling of his trained body responding to the demands of an
opponent as an experience of “almost total ecstasy or transcendence of the conscious
mind … akin to experiences now lost but known in the past to the mystics of all
religions.” The muggers did, in fact, beat up Ulrich owing, he says, to an early tactical
mistake. But this error and the consequent injuries he suffers do not vitiate for him this
nearly transcendent moment of pure doing. He goes on to compare boxing to a “species
of theology” because it is rationally directed, choreographed brutality. (MwQ 24). Note
that rationality is what organizes and directs the training for the purposes of effective
action, but that conscious thought cannot be part of the moment of crisis.\textsuperscript{58} Instead, the athlete must trust his or her training and let the body respond.

So here we have in microcosm an explanation of how effective, responsive action can be elicited from a deliberately habituated nervous system in a moment of crisis, and how this is a kind of mystical or transcendent experience. Later in the novel when Ulrich was growing weary of his “vacation from life” he noted that “If he monitors his feelings, he finds nothing he can accept without reservation … [H]e is capable of killing without being sure that he will have to … [T]he present is nothing but a hypothesis that has not yet been surmounted” (\textit{MwQ} 269). Yet here, when fighting for his life, he does not have the problem of choosing to accept or not accept this or that theory or explanation of his circumstance or himself. He must only act. So the immediacy of this emergency gives him the certainty that he otherwise lacks. In James’s language, he is an empiricist when he is at his leisure, and an absolutist when under attack. And he begins to see this emergency action as the solution to his torpor. The practices that make such responsive action possible are not themselves conscious, and in fact conscious control will interfere with the proper execution of the mechanical responses. It is rationality that notices these connections, sets up the training regimen, and analyzes the results. But nowhere is there a moral evaluation of Ulrich’s action. He does not even condemn the muggers in any moral sense, and he sees them in the moment of the fight only as “a spontaneous materialization of free-floating hostility” (\textit{MwQ} 21). Indeed, Ulrich’s analysis of his action and

\textsuperscript{58} It is worth noting that boxing has been referred to since the early 19\textsuperscript{th} century as “the sweet science.” See Pierce Egan’s \textit{Boxiana} (1829) for more.
experience leaves open the possibility that he would have acted and felt just the same even if he had been the aggressor.

I suggest that the reader is supposed to see this as a model for how the practice of *Essayismus* provides only the training and conditioning for action but not guidance for any particular action. Musil may even intend this episode as an internal critique of the practice of *Essayismus* as such. Just as the athlete must practice innumerable moves, and in that training become ready for whatever an opponent may do, the ruminative Ulrich is preparing for action—action as mechanical response. But action to what end, in what context? What is Ulrich’s larger challenge? The greater threat that he faces is not to his body, but, as he sees it, to his spirit. The threat is modernity where, according to Goodstein, because people are losing their sense of embeddedness in traditional frameworks of culture and value, they are losing a sense of themselves as subjects of an evolving story. The fight is against deracinating, programmatic rationality, but it is not yet clear, to this man without qualities or even to Musil, I think, what the fight is for. Musil, I think, recognizes that *Essayismus* and a provisional stance is a creative and necessary response to modernity, but it is not enough by itself. There is raw action and the feeling of efficacy and transcendence of rational thought, but it is mere mechanism without a moral dimension. And that is precisely why it is so difficult to imagine what kinds of original and creative actions ought to be called for(th) from the practice.

James also seeks “solutions,” ways of prompting original action that overcome the alienation and inertia of what he calls the over-intellectualized and over-civilized modern individual for whom moral guidance has been reduced to scientific explanations of the
mechanical processes of life. The Principle of Substitution allows for indefinite review of experience and action, so, like Essayismus, offers no natural escape from thought exercises. His definition of truth (“Truth happens to an idea. It becomes true. Is made true by events” (Meaning of Truth vi).) incorporates practice and the consequences of action, but this is still inadequate to guide a person toward particular, productive activity. One of James’s “solutions” to the paralysis of endless thinking is the “strenuous life.” In James’s view, the modern, Western individual is a victim of the success of civilization. We have grown soft and weak, he writes, as a result of being “over-civilized.” This weakness is not merely physical but also spiritual, cultural, and psychological. Like Musil, James ties together these various threads of threat, response, bodily performance, and spirituality in his call for a “moral equivalent of war.” He recommends a vow of poverty in order to rouse the individual to greater awareness of life as adventure, to cease an endlessly ruminative, provisional existence and take action. But what sort of action? And where is the moral guidance in such action if the individual is merely responding to life as if to an emergency? Like Musil’s MwQ, James’s “solutions” promise to provide guidance for the reader, but we will see that at best they only extend the play of possibilities into morally questionable arenas and promote social isolation.

For Ulrich, an early model for action comes in the form of Moosbrugger, a “man of action” who parallels the boxer figure above. Moosbrugger is a murderer, but seems initially to Ulrich to provide a solution to the tyranny of concepts. Moosbrugger is a carpenter, a powerfully built, broad-shouldered man with “good-natured strong paws” and “a face blessed by God with every sign of goodness” (MwQ 67). He is also guilty of
having savagely killed a prostitute by stabbing her thirty-five times, and then cutting her apart. For Ulrich and his circle he becomes a cause célèbre in large part because they refuse to accept that such an innocent looking person could be correlated with such a crime. No one doubted that his hands had wielded the knife, but no one could agree on the relevant causal explanation. Various characters attempt to comprehend him each from their own perspective, and the analyses comprise an essayistic collection of often ambiguously consistent half-truths. Moosbrugger himself resists qualification, and functions as a parallel “man without qualities.” Here we see how the judge provides a peremptory description of Moosbrugger’s crime.

This judge added it all up, starting with the police record and the vagrancy, and presented it as Moosbrugger’ guilt, while to Moosbrugger it was a series of completely separate incidents having nothing to do with one another, each of which had a different cause that lay outside Moosbrugger somewhere in the world as a whole. In the judge’s eyes, Moosbrugger was the source of his acts; in Moosbrugger’s eyes they had perched on him like birds that had flown in from somewhere or other. (MwQ 75)

From Moosbrugger’s point of view, his actions are disconnected from one another, each emerging out of some cause unique to that moment. This is not just the case for Moosbrugger’s violent actions, but a consistent motif in the novel. According to Pike,

All the [overt] actions in the novel are seen as random and irrational irruptions of violence into the fabric of deferral, and all the characters’ attempts to resolve situations through action, spontaneous or premeditated, fail. Violence in this novel is always presented as the outbreak of primitive instinctive force, a blind will to action. (Pike, “Without End” 367)59

59 I included the qualifier “[overt]” in the above quote to clarify that when Pike is referring to actions, he means the things that people do that are not simply thoughts or feelings. Throughout this paper, however, I have been following James in seeing thoughts as kinds of actions, though thoughts are obviously not external in themselves. Thoughts may have external “signs”—expressions, words, things that people do with their bodies, or, writ large, maneuvers, plans, plots, reactions, and interpersonal “doings.” But it is important for James (and for Musil, too) to regard thoughts themselves as kinds of actions. For both James
Moosbrugger is the “man without qualities” taken to a horrifying extreme. As Pike explains, “Of what value to the mind of this insane man are the fixed moral values of society in ordered, sequential time, or, in literary terms, the ‘law of narrative order’? (Pike, “Without End” 365). No discernible pattern emerges out of the sequence of events. Moosbrugger is not only alienated from his own actions, he is not recognizable as a whole, consistent self to himself or others. The narrator makes the following observation:

He was clearly ill, but even if his obviously pathological nature provided the basis for his attitude, and this isolated him from other men, it somehow seemed to him a stronger and higher sense of his own self. His whole life was a comically and distressingly clumsy struggle to gain by force a recognition of this sense of himself. (MwQ 71)

Someone whose actions “perched on him like birds that had flown in from somewhere or other” has no sense of his life as continuity, or his self as a unity. The judge imposes a narrative on Moosbrugger’s actions because without that narrative, he is incoherent as a person. Even if Moosbrugger’s actions have been rendered coherent by the ascribed narrative, he is nonetheless in violation of the moral codes of his society, and, indeed, of any society we can imagine. Moosbrugger does not deny that he killed the woman, and his entire defense rests on the interpretation of his actions. He “simply wanted his deeds understood as the mishaps of an important philosophy of life” (MwQ 72). That philosophy, apparently, makes it possible for action—violent yet effective action—to emerge seemingly out of nowhere. Ulrich initially sees Moosbrugger as a partial solution to his own paralysis because he enies Moosbrugger’s refusal of static, categorial

and Musil, after all, changing the ways one thinks can and does have profound effects on how one overtly acts. In this sense thoughts are actions.
concepts, and his capacity for effective action (he succeeded in what he set out to do).
There is only a blind urge to strike out against threats and preserve or affirm one’s self.⁶⁰
So, like Ulrich when he is attacked and responds out of his training as a boxer, there is
effective action. However, morality is not yet factored in, and at this point Ulrich does
not see this for the problem that it is.

Near the end of Part II (Volume I), Ulrich has become quite impatient with his
“vacation from life,” his inaction. His methodical, solitary role as cultural analyst and
observer has been played out. “I can’t go on with this life,” he ruminates, “and I can’t
keep on rebelling against it any longer, either” (MwQ 689). “At the same moment the
incredible idea flashed through his mind to commit some crime, or perhaps it was an
unfocussed passing image, for he was not thinking of anything in particular. It might have
had some reference to Moosbrugger” (MwQ 689). He contemplates this possible “crime”
during a conversation with the head of the of the Parallel Campaign, Count Leinsdorf, in
which they observe an angry, impatient crowd in the street below. Ulrich thinks,

They did not really want to attack of rip anyone apart, although they
looked as if they did. They made a serious show of being enraged, but it
was not the kind of seriousness that drives men into a line of fire, not even
that of a fire brigade! They’re only going through some kind of ritual, he
thought, some time-hallowed display of righteous indignation, the half-
civilized, half-barbaric legacy of ancient communal rites no individual
need take wholly seriously. (MwQ 687)

But it would become quite serious in the Germany of the 1930s, and it seems that Musil
is referencing the growing popular desire to take action, any action, simply in order to

⁶⁰ Schopenhauer’s binary Will [Wille] and Representation [Vorstellung] is of course in play here. We see in
each case, Moosbrugger and Ulrich, that Will erupts, and, when undirected by rational, creative thought, or
even a sense of purpose beyond willing, it can be violent and destructive.
affirm a sense of national, cultural, historical, and individual identity. Like Moosbrugger, Germany seems to be making a “distressingly clumsy struggle to gain by force a recognition of this sense of himself.” Indeed, the slogan of the Parallel Campaign becomes simply “Action!” In a conversation with Ulrich, General Stumm explains the origin of the new slogan.

“The people on the council are saying that the times are getting a new spirit … And this new spirit won’t have many ideas in it. Nor is it a time for feelings. Ideas and feelings—they’re more for people who have nothing to do. In short, it’s a spirit of action, that’s really all I know about it.” (MwQ 845)

Here, the Parallel Campaign avoids specificity, and Ulrich, too, resists qualifying what his emergent action will look like, as long as it is “effective” and decisive. General Stumm wonders whether the call for “Action!” is merely cover for imperialism, a desire like that of the boxer to see and feel oneself in perfect, unconscious control of one’s body (politic) in a fight for one’s life. “‘But it has sometimes occurred to me,’ the General added pensively, ‘to wonder if, in the end, that isn’t simply the military spirit?’” (MwQ 845).

What Stumm calls the military spirit becomes meaningful because of how it connects with the way individuals and the nation think about and construct their identities. At the time of writing MwQ, Musil is watching Germany attempting to recover a sense of national identity and power through fascism and National Socialism, and eventually through military “adventures” in Europe, the Middle East, and North Africa. “Action!” for the Parallel Campaign (pre-World War I) is framed as a reaction against progressive values, cosmopolitanism, egalitarianism, all of which, in the rhetoric of the
day, make a people weak, and also against the aridity of intellectual, scientific, and artistic elitism. Action thus framed can appeal to one’s desire to be quit of potentially ceaseless analysis and questioning in order to recover a sense of one’s own power. War provides release from this, and, like Ulrich’s fight, promises to create “almost total ecstasy or transcendence of the conscious mind … akin to experiences now lost but known in the past to the mystics of all religions.” The call for action, any action, to break out of the passivity and provisionality of his ironic spectatorial posture, surfaces in Ulrich as the inchoate urge to commit a crime. Action itself is not necessarily violent and morally wrong, but “Action!” and Ulrich’s “crime” certainly seem to be, even if none of the agents is able to fully comprehend what, precisely, they are aiming to do. One of the only ways in which it seems possible to escape the tyranny of concepts is to behave irrationally, that is, criminally and destructively.

James does at least recognize that there are moral and political consequences to the self-affirming kind of action that he initially seems to recommend as part of the “strenuous life.” In “The Return of William James,” Frank Lentricchia draws from James’s Principles of Psychology to illustrate how for James, the feeling of raw acting is at the core of personal identity.

“But all of the things that we think we ‘own,’” James says, are “transient external possessions” with the sole exception of the “innermost center within the circle,” that “sanctuary within the citadel,” the “self of all the other selves,” of which we can never be dispossessed: the “home,” the “source,” the “emanation” of “fiats of the will” – a feeling of an “original spontaneity,” an active power within, without constraining ground, that becomes the ground of our personal freedom to say yes or no, to open and shut the door, and a point of departure for James’s anti-imperialist pluralism. That feeling of original spontaneity is James’s phenomenological postulate for the inviolability of self, or of a self that
should be responded to as if it were and deserved to be inviolable. (Lentricchia 18)

Lentricchia points out that for James, the “active power within” and the source of the self that is beneath ideas is tied to political and social action and an expression of personal freedom. A person discovers or makes himself through inaction or through personal action that is necessarily also political and social. (Ulrich, too, is discovering this as he senses the end of his “vacation from life.”) Lentricchia identifies the necessarily political dimension of action as a quality that is lacking in the philosophy of Emerson, James’s godfather.

In the heat of James’s anti-imperialist activity, Emersonian nonconformity was simply not enough – it lacked (my anachronism is the point) James’s muscular pragmatism – for the disturbing implication of Emerson’s divestiture of agency and sovereignty from the individual was political passivity, not political action. (Lentricchia 19)

For James there is a danger that the political means to express individual sovereignty itself becomes “a trace of the will of the imperialist that James and Emerson abhorred” (Lentricchia 19). The individual must engage moral questions, questions about what sorts of actions would be good—for both the individual and other individuals or society as a whole. Of course, even if one engages conscientiously with moral questions, there can never be a guarantee that one is acting in the best possible way. But to eschew such moral engagement and to act simply for the sake of raw self-affirmation as Emerson seems to recommend, is, as James was aware, potentially to be made the tool of imperialists’ motives.

A generation earlier in the United States, James and New York governor Theodore Roosevelt also each appealed to a sense of nationalistic purpose and
exceptionalism as they engaged in a battle for the soul of the country. Carried out in newspapers and journals, their debates reflected a parallel fear about the nation’s and individuals’ character, and a need to respond to the shared sense that America was becoming weak and “unmanly,” a victim of its own civilization. As Patrick K. Dooley shows in “Public Policy and Philosophical Critique: The William James and Theodore Roosevelt Dialogue on Strenuousness” (2001), both James and Roosevelt promoted the military spirit as a cure for weak bodies and characters, but for different ends. For Roosevelt, the paradigmatic American is the cowboy: his courage and sense of adventure are both moral and physical, and, as he conquers the West, his racialized ambition is imperial. The frontiersman and cowboy “is the grim pioneer of our race; he prepares the way for our civilization from before whose face he must himself disappear (Ranch Life: I, p. 369)” (quoted in Dooley 167). The “cowboy virtues” are “the stern, manly qualities that are invaluable to a nation,” (Roosevelt, quoted in Dooley 166) and must be fostered through imperial adventures. Common to both the cowboy and the warrior is, crucially, the love of strife and the strenuous life that serves as the training ground for body, mind, and spirit. Both the individual and nation need such an arena and the challenges offered by martial adventures in order to develop the kind of character Roosevelt thinks is lacking. With the disappearance of the West, as the cowboy’s efforts successfully “civilized” it, new proving grounds must be found. In a speech delivered in the wake of the U.S. victory in the Spanish-American War (1898), and his heroic victory in Cuba as part of that conflict, Roosevelt notably warns the country about the dangers of being overly civilized.
The timid man, the lazy man, the man who distrusts his country, the over-civilized man, who has lost the great fighting, masterful virtues, the ignorant man, the man of dull mind, whose soul is incapable of feeling the mighty lift that thrills “stern men with empires in their brains” – all these, of course, shrink from seeing the nation undertake its new duties (“The Strenuous Life”, Works XIII: p. 323; quoted in Dooley, 167-8)

According to Roosevelt, Americans are great civilizers—they “tamed” the wild West, for example, but that very victory threatens their character, for they then become soft and lazy. Adventures must be sought, grounds to test men and strengthen them in both body and spirit, and for Roosevelt, imperial conquest fits the bill. Americans must have agreed with him, for Roosevelt became a living legend, and moved up the political ladder to the position of vice president, later becoming president upon the assassination of President McKinley, and then successfully winning a second term.

James, too, was fearful that both individual men and the nation as a whole were growing weak, a victim of “over-civilization.”61 And he, too, sees war as the cure, not just for the nation and the race, but for individuals for whom “civilization” has meant insularity from the spiritual and moral battle that he thinks life ought to be.

War and adventure assuredly keep all who engage in them from treating themselves too tenderly … Death turns into a commonplace matter, and its usual power to check our action vanishes. With the annulling of these customary inhibitions, ranges of a new energy are set free, and life seems cast upon a higher plane of power.” (Varieties 365-6)

James recognizes war for the horror that it is, and seeks what he calls the “moral equivalent of war” in an essay by that title from 1910, and also in telling sections of

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61 It is worth noting that James, Roosevelt, and Musil all suffered from a profound insecurity over physical weakness. Each was quite sickly as a child and young adult, and each responded in different ways: Roosevelt by hunting, camping, exploring, and warring; Musil through demanding daily physical exercise and distinguished service in WWI; and James, through the rest cures and hydrotherapies of the day. Ulrich exercised daily and, as we see above, was a fit athlete and trained in boxing.
Varieties (1901). His call for “the strenuous life” in order to strengthen the character of both the individual man and the nation is clearly reflective of a more general concern for the enervating effects of industrial work, numbing bureaucracy, and the ease of an acquisitive, consumer-driven society. He had inherited the discourses of neurasthenia, man as energy system, and concern over the degeneration of the race, of the late nineteenth century. War, he thinks, cures such degeneration and softening, and James likens it to the ascetic discipline of the saint. In “The Value of Saintliness” chapter of The Varieties, James asks rhetorically, “Does not the worship of material luxury and wealth, which constitutes so large a portion of the ‘spirit’ of our age, make somewhat for effeminacy and unmanliness?...Are there not hereabouts some points of application for a renovated and revised ascetic discipline?” (Varieties 365). The saint is, for James, a hero who squarely faces the wrongness of the world, and who is cleansed and purified by voluntary suffering, suffering with a purpose (Varieties 362-3). The saint treats life as a battle, the enemy being one’s own weakened character. The strenuous life revitalizes one’s spiritual self; manly adventures strengthen and purify not just the body but also the soul. The modern, civilized individual rightly, according to James, recoils from imperial warfare and “the need of crushing weaker peoples” (Varieties 367), so James recommends moving the field of battle to the interior, to the self. Yet he does not

62 The need to remove the baroque adornments from the surface of life and get at its vital, living insides reflects an aspect of primitivism. “Savages,” as James often refers to the unconquered non-Westerners, are living more “authentic” lives, he thinks. War puts us in contact with our deeper, more primitive (in some sense more real, he says) selves. “Ancestral evolution has made us all potential warriors; so the most insignificant individual, when thrown into an army in the field, is weaned from whatever excess of tenderness towards his precious person he may bring with him, and may easily develop into a monster of insensitivity” (Varieties, 366). And again, “Yet the fact remains that war is a school of strenuous life and heroism; and, being in the line of aboriginal instinct, is the only school that as yet is universally available” (Varieties, 367).
recommend that everyone become a saint, only that “monkish” asceticism become the center of focus for the over-civilized and materially comfortable.

One hears of the mechanical equivalent of heat. What we need now to discover in the social realm is the mechanical equivalent of war; something heroic that will speak to men as universally as war does, and yet will be as compatible with their spiritual selves as war has proved itself to be incompatible. I have often thought that in the old monkish-poverty worship, in spite of the pedantry which infested it, there might be something like that moral equivalent of war which we are seeking. May not voluntarily accepted poverty be ‘the strenuous life,’ without the need of crushing weaker peoples? (Varieties 367)

James’s proposal—voluntary poverty—is ultimately not convincing, not least because, despite his fervent argument, he fails to take up the life he recommends. Because “the prevalent fear of poverty among the educated classes is the worst moral disease from which our civilization suffers” (Varieties 369), it must be squarely met and conquered, he writes. James, of course, never took such a vow. Despite this, it is worth noting the arguments for a “moral equivalent to war,” and how, for James, the action, adventure, courage, and self-sacrifice entailed in war, saintly asceticism, and voluntary penury is physical, psychological, and crucially, moral.

Both James and MwQ continue to experiment with alternatives to provisionality and “vicious abstractionism,” yet each struggles to articulate an alternative. Each treats suffering, transgression, violence, and the moral challenges in dealing with these experiences pragmatically. That is, they are not ends in themselves, but only means toward an as-yet undefined “higher” experience of reality. As Dooley points out, James had long been interested in tapping into higher levels of physical and spiritual energy, and believed that people tend to make “use of only a small part of our possible mental
and physical resources” (James, “The Energies of Men” (1906), quoted in Dooley, 162-3). War, according to James, requires one to operate at an elevated pitch, and, like the ascetic or saintly life, to discover vast interior resources and live on a “higher” plane. For Ulrich the “higher life” is discovered in moments of threat, like in the robbery, or, as we will see in the following section, experienced as a transcendence of rule-based morality.

Transgression and Spiritual Awakening

Many critics have described Part III, “Into the Millennium (The Criminals),”63 as utopic (see Wilkins and Kaiser (1962), Luft (1980), Blasberg (1984), Zingel (1999), Jonsson (2000) (Mehigan 9-10) ). They claim that Musil was working out a way in which Ulrich would transcend the scientification of the modern ethos and contemporary ways of experiencing reality, and this would in turn provide an historical and cultural alternative to The Great War, and the subsequent fascism and racialized totalitarianism of the 1930s that Musil watched with horror. Many different borders would be transgressed in the process. Ulrich cannot make this metamorphosis alone, and in Part III, the combination of Ulrich and Agathe makes possible the development of form and content, understanding and action, rationality and spirit, method and practice, together. The protagonist is now plural. The incestuous joining of the siblings—explicitly enacted only in certain chapters

63 There has been much scholarly debate over how to include sections of the Nachlaß in order to faithfully complete Musil’s last novel, and keep it consistent with the larger currents of his writing career. There is of course no simple solution for the unfinished work, and I won’t attempt one here. Instead, I will work with the extant materials as Musil’s wife, Martha, had prepared them for publication in 1942, and leave the speculation to others. This means, of course, that there can be no final verdict on Ulrich, Agathe, or the Parallel Campaign. And this is perhaps as it should be. Without a definite ending, readers have no choice but to read this novel with precisely the kind of possibility-engendering provisionality that is both the wisdom and the failing of Ulrich himself.

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of the Nachlaß and not in the 1942 version of the novel—represents the transgression of boundaries which ordinarily keeps these domains of human experience discrete and separate. The conversations between the siblings, and Agathe’s impulsive way of acting challenge Ulrich; he gradually awakens to other ways of knowing that are non-discursive and arise from the edges of rationality. The “illicit” sexual attraction between the siblings marks a border crossing, but not mere transgression of social mores. What exactly such transgressions manifest and how they point toward the utopic “solution” that Musil was working out is at the center of our inquiry. Transgression is easily understood as something socially or morally negative—as that which defies an accepted norm, law, code, habit, belief, etc. Even Ulrich imagines the catalyst for the next step in his experiment in living as a “crime.” But the reader is asked to consider how transgression is not only negative, but provides a necessary curative to reductive scienticism and hyper-rationality for the sake of individual and social good.

Through Agathe—or, better, through their pairing—they will deliberately violate social codes as a way of inaugurating and externalizing Ulrich’s break with his attempts at hyperconscious, deliberate action. As the scene depicting their second-day meeting continues, Ulrich and Agathe agree to honor their deceased father’s wish to replace in his coffin his military and royal service medals with counterfeits that he had had made. The apparent dishonesty of this switch prompts a conversation about morality. Agathe asks her brother, “Don’t you ever bother about what’s expected of you?” “‘Society’s virtues are vices to the saint,’ he ended with a laugh” (MwQ 756). Characteristically, Ulrich will not fully own such a posture, but this sense of the gravity of action will grow stronger.
Again we are reminded of Ulrich’s sympathy for Moosbrugger. Though Ulrich did not approve of the viciousness of the murder, he did identify with Moosbrugger’s resistance to the conceptual frameworks of science and morality that ensnared Moosbrugger’s actions and reduced them mechanistically to simple formula. Transgression against social codes seems to contain the possibility of original action that defies reductive rationalistic formula, but it also contains the possibility of profound cruelty, savagery, and violence. Ulrich seeks the former, but without duplicating the systematization of human action that reduces all ethical activity to fixed moral rules. As we have already seen, James, too, was working out a positive version of transgression in his search for a “moral equivalent of war.” His alternative is voluntary poverty, which, he thinks, parallels the asceticism of the saint, and thereby opens the door for personal epiphany. The life of the saint or of the voluntarily penurious is, James writes, “objectively useful” (Varieties 365); it forces us to tap into “the soul’s heroic resources” (Varieties 362) and stimulates the spiritual growth that James feels is necessary for over-civilized Westerners and for our evolution as a species. Ulrich also references the figure of the saint in his critique of “society’s virtues.” The resistance to deontology—morality based upon societal rules—from the first two parts of the novel is now growing into something wider. Ulrich had intuitively resisted moral rules, as we see in the case of Moosbrugger, but was not able to put anything in their place to guide him.

Now, however, Ulrich is beginning to develop a positive moral practice, but that practice and the intuition and feeling that guide it are not articulable. As the conversation with his sister continues, he says, “In some situations, I personally don’t very much care
whether something is right or wrong, but I can’t give you any rules you could go by” (MwQ 756). In place of discrete rules, Ulrich is asserting the value of experimentation and intuition in ethical judgment, and the importance of the particularity of circumstance and context that may evade simplistic moral formula. The conversation as a whole is another step in the move from discrete moral rules to a total moral outlook.

James, too, recognizes the importance of intuition for moral choices. We must seek the right “proportion” of abstract rules and intuitive knowing, even, and perhaps especially, if our intuition leads us to break rules that fail to apply in a particular case.

In point of fact, there are no absolute evils, and there are no non-moral goods; and the highest ethical life—however few may be called to bear its burdens—consists at all times in the breaking of rules which have grown too narrow for the actual case. There is but one unconditional commandment, which is that we should seek incessantly, with fear and trembling, so to vote and to act as to bring about the very largest total universe of good which we can see. Abstract rules indeed can help; but they help the less in proportion as our intuitions are more piercing, and our vocation is the stronger for the moral life.64 (“The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life” 625-6)

For James morality entails an entire orientation to the good and the widest possible context for our action. Ulrich is not quite at the point of thinking so holistically, and certainly cannot articulate what it would be like. The reorientation to reality may not be articulable, and James is comfortable with that. James provisionally describes the desire for clarity and precision in matters of the spirit as the view that “all our beliefs ultimately [must] find for themselves articulate grounds.”

64 We can imagine Raskolnikov in Dostoevsky’s Crime and Punishment (1866), or Nietzsche, certainly, making the same argument. Because James considers himself basically a morally good person, and imagines that he is addressing an audience that wants basically to do good, he may not imagine how easily this appeal to intuition can go wrong. This is just what Ulrich is discovering.
Vague impressions of something indefinable have no place in the rationalistic system, which on its positive side is surely a splendid intellectual tendency, for not only are all our philosophies fruits of it, but physical science (amongst other good things) is its result. *(Varieties 73)*

Note that he is not disparaging clear and distinct ideas and the science and philosophy that are derived from adherence to rationalistic principles of evidence, clarity, abstraction, and logic. James goes on to say, however, that rationality cannot compel belief. “[I]n the metaphysical and religious sphere, articulate reasons are cogent for us only when our inarticulate feelings of reality have already been impressed in favor of the same conclusion … Instinct leads, intelligence does but follow” *(Varieties 74)*. The discernible and articulable codes of conduct captured in deontological and virtue ethics may appeal to our rationalistic side. “But it will fail to convince or convert you all the same, if your dumb intuitions are opposed to its conclusions” *(Varieties 73)*. In questions of faith in “the reality of things unseen” (the title of this chapter in *The Varieties*), we tend first to have a *feeling* of knowing, he says, and only later does our rational justification follow. James is here speaking about belief in God or “a something there” or any of a variety of ways in which people try to capture the sense that, paraphrasing Emerson, “the abstract divineness of things, the moral structure of the universe, [is] a fact” *(James, Varieties 57)*. And so he is not restricting his observations merely to the domain of human activity under the purview of morality. He is concerned with a total orientation toward the cosmic order of which moral insight is just one aspect. Ulrich does not have this totalizing perspective yet, but he is moving in that direction.

The title of Part III is appropriately “Into the Millennium (The Criminals).” As we have seen, transgression functions as a way of breaking rigid rationality and allowing
some new way of knowing, being, and acting to emerge. It functions for Ulrich in the same way as the fight with the muggers early in the novel. He had alluded to the fight in mystical terms because he responded out of some inarticulable, inner reserve, and now he is trying to use moral transgressions to shock him into a similar mystical knowing. But it is still not clear what that new way—described by Ulrich only as “the Other Condition” [der andere Zustand]—will look like. To find out, the novel takes the reader through various experiments. For example, in Chapter 15, “The Testament,” Agathe reflects on her decision to divorce her husband Professor Hagauer. In order to keep him from claiming any of the money that she would inherit from her father, she decides to illegally change their father’s will, something they might be able to do as long as the will was still in the desk drawer where he had left it. Ulrich seems to be clinging to a sense of propriety, but it becomes clear that this is only to mask his inability to make choices and take action. Agathe’s deliberateness is a challenge to him, and he reflects that “he could no longer bear the indecision he had loved, and it seemed to him that it was precisely Agathe who had been given the mission of bringing him to this point” (MWQ 864). Let us recall James’s comment about moral decisions in “The Will to Believe.” “A moral question is a question not of what sensibly exists, but of what is good, or would be good if it did exist” (“Will to Believe” 730). The turn that Ulrich needs to make is, in the language of empiricists, from an is to an ought, from description to prescription. Yet he wants the question of what ought to exist to emerge from the entire set of questions that have occupied him for the first part of the novel: what is? Scientific and categorial ways of knowing do not directly respond to the question of what ought to exist, but Ulrich has
spent most of his one-year vacation from life assuming that he would know what he ought to do if only he could arrive at the correct ways of describing and knowing what he is. Because of Agathe’s impulsivity, Ulrich is forced to awaken to what James calls the liveness of the moral questions implicit in her action and his complicity. James writes that moral questions are live because “They are measured by [one’s] willingness to act” (“Will to Believe” 718). It is her transgression that forces his thinking about moral questions to action, but even here his action is only that of support: he will keep her secret. So he is not yet the initiator, but neither can he mount a successful rationalized refutation of her action.

In James’s phrase, intellectualism’s edge is breaking against her action, just as intellectualism had failed to adequately capture Moosbrugger’s action. “[H]is sister’s gently fierce determination, an inextricable blend of purity and criminality, left him momentarily speechless. He could not accept the idea that this person, quite openly engaged in committing a bad act, could be a bad person” (MwQ 866). This echoes the resistance that Ulrich’s social group had against thinking that someone with Moosbrugger’s face could have committed such horrible acts. We believe first, and justify subsequently, and clearly, this sometimes leads us to dangerous conclusions. In an aporia that echoes the Sprachkrise of the Lord Chandos Letter, Ulrich has no words to account for what his sister is doing, and so he reflects while she goes through the desk drawer.

Had he not said that in the highest state of human awareness there was no such thing as good and evil, but only faith or doubt; that strict rules were contrary to the innermost nature of morality and that faith can never be
What Ulrich references in this moral emergency is the highest pitch of human experience, of the kind that James finds in “the strenuous life.” Here, the “soul’s heroism” is catalyzed. For Ulrich, this moment of crisis is somewhat negative and threatening, whereas for Agathe, it is a welcome way forward. She feels a need to act, and this makes it possible for her to believe in her act; that is, ironic distance or provisionality is impossible. The narrator focalizes through Agathe: Agathe was going to forge the will without “any thought at all. An aura of justice with flames, not with logic, hovered about her.” The narrator describes her act in Edenic terms, as “a magical encounter between Me and You, the madness of original creation before there was anything to compare it to or anything to measure it by” (MwQ 867). Here, for Agathe and for the narrator, there is no transgression and shame because there is no moral law, no gap between the act and one’s commitment to the act, no interference from abstract moral principles. She acts with “an inextricable blend of purity and criminality” that characterizes the creator of value. While Ulrich appreciates the decisiveness of Agathe’s judgment and action, he cannot be similarly unreflective. Agathe’s implicit dismissal of the moral dimensions of action is perhaps psychologically satisfying, at least for her, and offers a way out of unrelenting provisionality and spectatorship, but is morally empty. That is, it provides a psychological container—belief—that still needs judgment to be filled with appropriate “contents.”
The unfinished task of *MwQ* is to combine Agathe’s sense of moment and willfulness with Ulrich’s circumspection and pluralistic engagement so that moral challenges can be faced and actions taken. As I have already stated, this integration cannot happen within the novel, but must be attempted by the reader. The “unfinish-ability” is essential to the pragmatism of the novel and provides the opening and invitation to the reader. Of course this can be made with a novel that does have an ending, but the essential “unfinish-ability” of *MwQ* echoes its essential characteristic as method or practice. The novel can only point the way, because *language* can only point the way. At any moment, Ulrich can always turn away from the possibility of action with a dismissive, “but these are just thoughts,” just as the reader can at any point put down the book with a dismissive, “but this is just a story.” Again the tension between thought as expressed in language and thought expressed in action emerges. James expresses this tension.

I am tiring myself and you, I know, by vainly seeking to describe by concepts and words what I say at the same time exceeds either conceptualization or verbalization. As long as one continues *talking*, intellectualism remains in undisturbed possession of the field. The return to life can’t come about by talking. It is an *act*; to make you return to life, I must set an example for your imitation, I must deafen you to talk, or to the importance of talk, by showing you, as Bergson does, that the concepts we talk with are made for purposes of *practice* and not for purposes of insight. Or I must point, *point* to the mere *that* of life, and you by inner sympathy must fill out the *what* for yourselves.\(^\text{65}\). (“Continuity” 297)

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\(^{65}\) Wittgenstein addresses (I am tempted to say “solves”) this problem by describing language in action-oriented terms from the very beginning of *Philosophical Investigations*. Language is a “game” or a “form of life” and not something that is ever separate from our living, choosing, and acting. For Wittgenstein, language does not record our thinking or simply lead to our acting. To talk is to make a move in a language game; to use language is to act. James is very close to this when he writes, “the concepts we talk with are made for the purposes of practice and not for the purposes of insight.” For James (at least in the quoted section) language and action are still two steps in a process with action as the result. James also does a poor job of distinguishing between language and thought, often treating them as two phases of a single entity.
The filling in of the *what* here is no small moment; it is what James later refers to as “religious experience” (“Continuity” 300). Only by suspending the veil of language and concepts and taking *action* can the religious experience be invited on stage; only then can “intellectualism’s edge [be] broken” and the abiding “pulse of inner life” be detected. The suspension of language or the loss of word in a moment is not necessarily a crisis; it can be an opening. But neither James nor Ulrich nor Musil can lead us into that opening. In a way that James recognizes but that Musil does not seem to, the reader must enter “the other condition” alone.

If we judge the novel by standards appropriate to an earlier tradition, say, the *Bildungsroman*, or even the realist novel more generally, it appears that the novel fails to deliver on its implicit promise to show the reader a new way of thinking, being, feeling, and acting. Since Ulrich and even the Ulrich-Agathe pairing fail to enter “the Other Condition,” the reader has no example to follow. But I wrote at the outset that we should see this novel as a tool or device, as Musil intended. So if we judge it in this way, just the way we may judge James’s pragmatism, then we must—appropriately—suspend our judgment. James writes, “[E]thical science is just like physical science, and instead of being deducible all at once from abstract principles, must simply bide its time and be ready to revise its conclusions from day to day” (“Moral Philosopher” 625). Note the attention to perpetual revision, an echo of Ulrich’s *possibilism* and James’s pragmatic principle of substitution. Ulrich retains this practice of perpetual revision, which entails

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Wittgenstein is much more careful to de-objectify thought and language, and avoid the “vicious abstractionism” that James warns about.
alertness to the newness of irreducible plurality of every moment. Recall his statement above: “[S]trict rules were contrary to the innermost nature of morality and that faith can never be more than an hour old” (MwQ 866). Again, what he is developing is the practice of moral judgment, rather than the refinement of moral rules. So in this sense the protagonist has shown us the way to “the Other Condition” even if he has not arrived there himself. That is left to the reader. Musil had hopes about MwQ that James had about Pragmatism—that they would be understood as tools or devices for a renewed and ever-alive engagement with truth, experience, and reality.

I hope it is clear that by comparing Essayismus and the Principle of Substitution, we see that MwQ tries to provide a method not for deferral but for engagement. The irony and suspicion—closely connected to scientific principles and practices—that each entails can make us more alive to reality and our own experiences. Each attempts to provide an escape from the hyperrationality and faith in abstraction that, according to MwQ and James, characterize their particular moment of modernity. They each draw from the empirical methods and principles of science, especially for treating “facts” as theories for action embedded in particular contexts. And each keeps in mind that the ultimate purpose is not to arrive at truth but to figure out how to live. To recall Goodstein and her nod to Benjamin, both MwQ and James attempt to give the reader a practicum in Erfahrung. Whether they have been successful is not an empirical question, but a practical question for any individual reader.
Chapter 4: *The Sun Also Rises* by Ernest Hemingway: Understanding Happens to a Person

All acting requires forgetting, as not only light but also darkness is required for life by all organisms. A man who wanted to feel everything historically would resemble someone forced to refrain from sleeping, or an animal expected to live only from ruminating and ever repeated ruminating.

--Friedrich Nietzsche

A number of critics have noted that Ernest Hemingway’s *The Sun Also Rises* (1926) has strong parallels with the grail quest. Like the Fisher King in the medieval courtly romance *Parzival*, protagonist Jake Barnes’s wound is literal and also symbolic. It is both the physical damage from the First World War, and also a psychic wound to the individual in late modernity. Jake had suffered an unspecified but very severe wound to his genitals which made him physically unable to consummate sexual desire, but did not diminish his capacity to feel or want sexual and romantic connection. By breaking the ordinary connection between action and the thinking and feeling ordinarily associated with desire in this way, the novel asks the reader to consider Jake as representative of a more general impotence in modernity, particularly for men. In the wake of the First World War, the very notion of a hero (on the battlefield and in a story) is undergoing change. In Jake’s world there are no war heroes, only survivors who seem unable to heal.

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66 *On the Advantage and Disadvantage of History for Life* (1874), p.10
As critic Peter L. Hays writes, “The characters … search nervously and desperately for the only satisfaction left them after the deracination and disillusionment—indeed, the very derangement—of war. All that seems left them are sensual pleasure … Most of the characters are chased across Europe by their own ennui” (Hays, Limping 69). In addition, women’s growing independence, sexuality, self-reliance, and self-assertion threaten inherited notions of masculinity: “Women’s greater freedoms demanded a reconfiguring of traditional roles, for them and for men, pointing to the social constructions of gender” (Hays, Critical 263). In The Sun Also Rises (SAR from here forward), all encounters between men and women are emasculating for men, precisely because of the women’s refusal to be the “passive” provocation for noble (heroic, knightly) action, while many of the men in this story operate with outmoded scripts for masculine identity. Any love and compassion we see are rendered in terms of weakness. But SAR is not a novel of defeat and failure.

The novel seems to confirm Lukács’s claim that the modern hero has no lesson to impart to the reader, but this is not to say that SAR as a whole has no positive value for a reader. In this chapter I will be comparing SAR with William James’s pragmatism and Radical Empiricism to show how this novel’s invitation to the reader to engage

67 I hesitate to use the New Woman or the Gibson Girl as symbols for the growing power, autonomy, and self-definition of women. I follow Jamie Barlowe here, who observes that scholarship, and Hemingway scholarship in particular, often reduces women characters and historical women to types or figures just as Hemingway often reduces his characters to types. “[D]espite the fact that Brett Ashley is only a metaphor of a woman created in the mind of Hemingway, she, like other female characters created by male authors, is discussed as though she is a real woman—and real women are judged similarly. In other words, social stereotypes and representations of women’s identities, sexualities, and integrity continue to be perpetuated, even at the turn of the twenty-first century, often functioning as backlash against feminism” (31).
68 “The immanence of meaning which the form of the novel requires lies in the hero’s finding out through experience that a mere glimpse of meaning is the highest that life has to offer, and that this glimpse is the only thing worth the commitment of an entire life, the only thing by which the struggle will have been justified” (Theory of the Novel 80).
pragmatically with it is connected to a deliberate and useful not-knowing. If this seems to reduce the novel to a mere instrument, I will also show how James’s pragmatism, which itself is oriented toward the “using” of ideas and experiences to further one’s progress through life, actually provides a way of respecting and engaging with the deeper philosophical stakes of the story. For both James and SAR all that we think, do, and experience is framed by seeing our life as a problem that demands our response. For James, this is the nature of human existence no matter the historical contingencies. For Hemingway, the protagonist’s life is a problem he tries to solve because of historical contingencies—war, women’s emerging power, industrialization and urbanization, increasing bureaucracy, loss of community, increasing speed of daily life, and many other developments that contributed to the sense that the lone individual man was up against an overwhelmingly alienating and dehumanizing machinery. The practical guidance that Hemingway and James try to work out in the face of such a tide has three dimensions. First is the type of action that can lead to the growth and healing that they each think is necessary for individuals, what James calls “the strenuous life” and for Hemingway what has been described as “manly adventures.” We will see how these themes play out in the fictional storyworld of the novel.

The second dimension, and where SAR echoes both Passing and The Man without Qualities, is the value of living experiments. Referring to life in general, Jake does “not care what it was all about” (152). We can think of his adventures and especially of his

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69 The gender-specific nature of the crisis is crucial. I am indebted to Nina Berman for her poignant observation that in this historical period, “the authority of men is being challenged, and whenever this happens, critics call it a ‘crisis.’ Modernity at the turn of the century is not experienced in the same way by everyone. Women and working class people had something to gain, as they were fighting for voting rights and democracy.”
attempted romance with Brett Ashley as attempts to develop practical experience without the set of abstract concepts and laws that ordinarily accompany scientific experiments. He seeks only practical know-how that will solve his immediate problems and allow him to adapt to his circumstances. But the careful narration shows us that this is not mere recklessness. Very much in line with James’s anti-foundational view of philosophy, he simply wants knowledge that is *good enough* to get by. The broader message is that, to the degree that Jake represents the sickness and impotence of the “lost generation,” practical “getting by” is a philosophically sound option. They choose this way of moving practically through life as a deliberate response to their moment of modernity.

Finally, both the novel and James depict and enact parallel interpretive practices. I am referring here to the “iceberg principle” in Hemingway’s fiction, and, in James, the suspicion of abstract concepts and of language. In each case the attention to interpretation, description, and presentation is part of a larger, modern development—the move away from the ontological questions (*what is reality?*) and the focus on epistemological questions (*what can we know and how can we know it?*). For both James and SAR, action takes a prominent place in responding to the latter questions—action that is original, and moves a person forward in a heroic encounter with life.70

70 The nature of the action—where and how it starts, what it achieves, and how it intersects with or is disconnected from thinking and deliberation—is the very issue at hand. Unless qualified, the sense in which I will use the term “action” implies not just activity, motion, or busyness. To provide a preview of what it will look like for James and SAR, I have in mind something like Hannah Arendt’s description of action. Note the priority of creativity and originality. “To act, in its most general sense, means to take an initiative, to begin…to set something into motion…It is in the nature of beginning that something new is started which cannot be expected from whatever may have happened before” (Arendt 177-8).
Review of Literature

Initial criticism regarded Hemingway’s *The Sun Also Rises* as a love story, an affirmation of the power of human desire and nobility in an age of eroded values and lost faith. “The stable values of 1900 had eroded beneath the feet of this generation: Home, family, church, and country no longer gave the moral support that Hemingway’s generation grew up with. The old values—honor, duty, love—no longer rang as true as they had in the age of Teddy Roosevelt” (Reynolds 1987, 46). But many critics were initially rather condemnatory of *The Sun Also Rises* for precisely the reasons that the novel came ultimately to be so admired. All appreciated Hemingway’s remarkable talent, especially for understatement and for depicting dialogue, but it was his cast of derelict characters lost in a world that they were incapable of redeeming that turned off many readers. And even those who appreciated the veracity of the depiction of what Gertrude Stein called the “lost generation” felt challenged by the lack of narrative guidance and moral evaluation. Pre-Modernist novels had typically featured a narrative voice that guided a reader’s moral attitude toward the characters and action. But Hemingway’s restrained, external, journalistic description was far too subtle. Those readers who were able to appreciate this novel did so because they trusted that here was something remarkable created by a superior observer, who did indeed offer “the real thing. Characters were truly the war-wounded, the spiritual bankrupts of the postwar period … The author did not tell his readers how to react or how to judge the action; they had to become involved” (Reynolds, *The Sun Also Rises: A Novel of the Twenties* 6).
James Nagel writes that despite these aesthetic challenges, most critics immediately identified *SAR* as a new and important work. Hemingway “became an international celebrity …, the most brilliant stylist of his generation, and one of the most powerful forces in literature the United States had ever seen” (Nagel 1). Though many would agree with Virginia Woolf’s assessment of the characters in *SAR* as “flat as cardboard” and “faked,” others saw the terse, surface depictions as vivid and authentic. Many praised his ability to write dialogue. “Ernest Boyd remarked that Hemingway ‘writes dialogue so effectively that he has merely to allow one to hear the sound of a character’s voice in order to plant him vividly before the reader’” (Nagel 3). Hemingway quickly became viewed as the spokesperson for what would come to be known as the “lost generation.” One critic wrote that *SAR* is “‘the story of a lost but lively generation, aimless, drunk, loyal, pathetic, cynical. The characters are the gilded waifs and broken strays expatriate in Paris’” (Nagel 4). Other critics also saw the honor and courage beneath the depravity and apparent inertia (Nagel 5).

In 1941, Edmund Wilson’s *The Wound and the Bow: Seven Studies in Literature* introduced the concept of a “code” of honor, which was to have a lasting influence on readings of *SAR* and of Hemingway’s corpus in general. Though Wilson’s analysis failed to appreciate Hemingway’s craft in rendering merely the outward behaviors of the characters, he saw nonetheless a code of ethics and honor under development. Wilson remarks that all the characters save Jake are dissolute. It is Brett’s “ruthless and uncontrollable infidelities … [that] have made any sort of security impossible for the relations between women and men” (218). It is Jake’s wound that prevents him from
“dominating and directing the woman, who otherwise, it is intimated, might love him” (218). Despite this misreading of a very complex set of relationships and roles, Wilson’s identification of the code has had staying power. From SAR Wilson derives this observation about the existential challenge facing moderns: “We suffer and we make suffer, and everybody loses out in the long run; but in the meantime we can lose with honor” (219).

Wilson sees Jake Barnes and Brett Ashley attempting to “'disengage themselves from this world, or rather to arrive at some method of living in it honorably’” (Nagel 4). What makes this an interesting claim is how it echoes Lukács’s summation of the limits of the novel form. “The immanence of meaning which the form of the novel requires lies in the hero’s finding out through experience that a mere glimpse of meaning is the highest that life has to offer, and that this glimpse is the only thing worth the commitment of an entire life, the only thing by which the struggle will have been justified” (80). In light of Lukács’s analysis, it will be helpful to consider whether Wilson’s observation should be restricted to Hemingway’s fiction and how, or whether it can extend more broadly to Modernist works. One significant theme of James’s Radical Empiricism is that philosophy ought to make a “home” for the individual in a hostile world. This meets Lukács’s claim of “transcendental homelessness” directly, and connects with Wilson’s abiding attention to the “lost generation” trying to make a home in the world. Jake’s use of “the code” is a way of writing a relationship with the world through his actions.

The 1950s saw the first two major studies of Hemingway. Carlos Baker’s book-length analysis of Hemingway’s life and fiction included a full chapter on SAR that Nagel
says was marred by Baker’s “approach to literature as ‘psychological symbol-building.’”
Characters are reduced to static archetypes, which, unfortunately, endured for too long in popular and critical readings. “Baker called Brett an ‘alcoholic nymphomaniac,’ Pedro the ‘courageous man of complete integrity and self-possession,’ and Jake a person of ‘boyish innocence of spirit’” (Nagel 6). The equally prolific critic Michael Reynolds is more sympathetic toward Baker, writing that his sophisticated analyses of the novel detected “Hemingway’s mythological methods, which he compared with those of Joyce and Eliot” (Reynolds 1988, 13). And Peter L. Hays credits Baker with being “the first to assert that Hemingway’s protagonists form their codes of conduct pragmatically” (32). This last observation is quite important and will influence other critics like Colvert (see below). Robert O. Stephens also treats pragmatism not in the Jamesian, philosophical sense, but in a general sense when he writes that “Hemingway’s people live in a pragmatic world where independently existing values no longer prevail” (82). Arthur Waldhorn also references this more general sense of pragmatism when he writes, “Jake’s focus is on the temporal—people and events—not the supernatural. For Jake … redemption or damnation is the result of action, not faith, of a decision based upon pragmatic, not traditional principles” (101). In each of these latter cases, pragmatism is contrasted with tradition and faith in absolutes, and therefore connects with James’s anti-foundational philosophy of pragmatism. These critics take a rather narrow view of pragmatism, however. In The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature (1901-2), James shows how religious faith and “a feeling of something more” are pragmatically useful, and central to a moral framework for living.
In *Ernest Hemingway: A Reconsideration*, Philip Young further developed the analysis of the Hemingway Code, as it was becoming known. Like Wilson, Young thought that the wounds that Hemingway suffered in the First World War were crucial to the development of his characters. “Young’s book called attention to the psychological patterns in Hemingway’s canon, particularly the repeated use of wounded men whose external wounds run parallel to their internal and psychological problems” (Reynolds, *Novel of the Twenties* 13). Young’s critical observation is that the hero of the novel may not embody the code, but that the pieces of the code are available among other characters for the hero to identify and emulate (Hays, *Critical* 63-5). A decade earlier, Malcolm Cowley had compared Jake Barnes to the Fisher King in Eliot’s *The Wasteland* (Hays 22). Young repeats the claim (as did Baker (Hays, *Critical* 32), but insists that, unlike in Eliot’s poem, for Jake and the other characters, there is no hope, no guidance, no point (Young, 87-8). Several other critics have noted the connection between Jake and the Fisher King, and, in “Sunrise Out of the Wasteland,” Richard P. Adams even writes that Jake is both the wounded Fisher King and the questing knight who must heal himself. Jake is, of course, unable to do so.

Frederick Hoffman built upon Young’s claim of the perpetual wound and sees the bullfight scenes as “the perfect palliative to the bewilderment and terror felt by victims of the ‘unreasonable wound’” (quoted in Hays, *Critical* 35). Hoffman claims that the bullring cannot serve the necessary spiritual purposes that Jake seeks, due to its artificiality (73). I tend to agree, but I don’t see the religious or spiritual possibilities available in the *corrida* as all or none. I will refer to Hoffman’s treatment in more detail.
when I use James’s *Varieties of Religious Experience* as a lens through which to view Jake’s quest for spiritual conversion. Also relevant to the focus on wounds and healing and their connection to spiritual restoration is H.R. Stoneback’s “Pilgrimmage Variations: Hemingway’s Sacred Landscapes” (2003) and Frederick Svoboda’s “The Great Themes in Hemingway: Love, War, Wilderness, and Loss” (2000). Each sees Jake on a spiritual journey through sacred spaces in (like James) a pragmatic search for a faith that will help him live.

James B. Colvert (1955) attempted to rescue Hemingway’s stories from critics who condemned his heroes for lacking morality. The task Hemingway gave himself, according to Colvert, was to capture not just the “lost generation’s” feeling of moral homelessness in the wake of the First World War, but the “whole problem raised by the breakdown of traditional nineteenth century values under the weight of scientific discovery and the influence of the scientific attitude” (373). Hemingway’s heroes exhibit not only a “profound moral skepticism” but “a firm belief in the efficacy of a strictly empirical approach to the problem of value determination” (373). Colvert’s analysis provides a clear connection to the other novels and to James. For Hemingway’s heroes must, like Ulrich in *MwQ*, conduct experiments in value creation during a “vacation from life.” And, like Irene in *Passing*, Hemingway’s heroes must preserve their individualism and moral courage by refusing identification with any ready categories. The connection with James as pragmatic pluralist in the moral laboratory is clear as well.

Mark Spilka’s *The Death of Love in The Sun Also Rises* (1958) is one of the most foundational thematic treatments. He sees the characters of *SAR* as allegorical figures
who, through Hemingway’s masterly writing, are nonetheless concrete individuals. Their struggle is the generation’s struggle: how to find meaning in a world in which old codes of love and honor no longer hold, and in which every person is rendered emotionally impotent and incapable of love. The First World War emasculated not just Jake but a whole generation struggling to come to terms with the cultural failure implicit in so much death and destruction. The changing role of women, personified by Brett’s increased “masculinization,” further threatens the men left standing. As Spilka writes, “[W]hen men no longer command respect, and women replace their natural warmth with masculine freedom and mobility, there can be no serious love” (37). Spilka’s careful analysis of each of the characters in terms of their impossible (but not nihilistic) struggle is marred by the difficulty of determining whether he is treating the generation’s challenges as objective facts or as the unique perspectives offered by this novel. Nonetheless, he has been quite influential, and subsequent critiques must take account of the generational terms and moral codes that he outlines. Spilka (and all other writers of the time, according to Hays) failed to challenge the stereotypes of manhood and womanhood, and perhaps saw their own values portrayed in Hemingway’s characters (Hays, *Critical* 40-1). James, too, seems to rely upon stereotypically masculine characteristics in his call for a “moral equivalent of war” for character development and spiritual growth in *The Varieties*. As we saw in the previous chapter, this seems to emerge from a sense of physical vulnerability and weakness. It will be interesting to compare James and his writings on the subject to Hemingway’s characters (and perhaps to Hemingway himself) to see how this theme of masculine overcompensation plays out.
The New Criticism of the middle of the twentieth century and the George Plimpton interview of Hemingway in 1958 in which he discussed the “iceberg principle” prompted close readings that attended to Hemingway’s spare narrative style. The “iceberg principle” essentially says that most of a story does not need to be told in order to be present to the reader, like the majority of the iceberg that is invisible below the water. E.M. Halliday wrote one of the most influential formal analyses of the narrative structure of \textit{SAR} in “Hemingway’s Narrative Perspective” (1952). He writes that the first-person narration is wrought in such a way that the reader sees Jake’s progressive \textit{singularity}. Jake’s “education”—his growing understanding of the impossibility of a romantic relationship with Brett, and his lack of control over his desire for her—comes through his growing emotional insularity. This is conveyed by the narrator’s (Jake’s) selective description of external elements of his environment. As Hays points out, one striking virtue of Halliday’s analysis is that it appreciates the importance of what Jake’s narration conceals (34). The \textit{aporias} in Jake’s reported experiences imply that something is there, something that the reader has been guided to expect, but that the narrator—because he has too much feeling tied up in his experiencing—is unable to report. While Halliday’s attempt to prove the importance and quality of absences might appear at first to be an impossible task, his sensitive reading of well-chosen passages appreciate Hemingway’s mastery of allusion.

Doody’s “Hemingway’s Style and Jake’s Narration” (1974) builds on the foundational work of Halliday, who provided “the orthodox formal reading” of \textit{SAR}. The insight of Halliday, according to Doody, is Hemingway’s refusal to clearly identify the
narrator at a precise point in space and time. Doody notes, however, that this fails to respond to the fundamental questions the reader has of any narrator: “[The] real concern is epistemological: what does the narrator know, how does he know, how fully do these constitute the meaning of the novel?” (104). Jake as narrator is withholding on these counts, and that makes him both more real to the reader (because in real life we cannot read the minds of other people) but less of an authority of his own descriptions, actions, and experiences. To gloss Doody, the style of narration renders Jake a passive recipient of his experiences, and thus a less autonomous agent.

This will be a very helpful insight as we investigate the nature of action and what it means to experience one’s own activity. As James points out poetically, one’s experiences have a person at the time of experience; one has one’s experiences only in hindsight. To the degree that we are all psychologists studying our own mental processes:

[T]he psychologist must not only have his mental states in their absolute veritablenes, he must report them and write about them, name them, classify and compare them and trace their relations to other things. Whilst alive they are their own property; it is only post-mortem that they become his prey. (James, *Principles I* 189)

This suggests that the reason Jake Barnes and other Hemingway narrators feel so vivid and “alive” to the reader is precisely their lack of shared insight into their own mental experiences.

Mark Cirino’s dissertation (2007) takes aim at a long-standing image of Hemingway as a man torn between thoughtful and active pursuits, between writing and big game hunting, for example, or between serving as an ambulance driver and being a journalist-observer in WWI. Indeed, much criticism even for many decades afterward
regarded Hemingway’s works and the man himself as non-thinking brutes. See, for example, Paul Ramsey’s 1966 article “Hemingway as Moral Thinker: A Look at Two Novels.” Ramsey writes,

Hemingway was not, in one real sense, a moral thinker at all. He was a writer, a maker of books. To be sure, he thought. He thought what words to use, in what order. He was a thinker in the sense that a bricklayer is: a bricklayer thinks where to lay the bricks. But that is not what we normally mean by “thinker.” (92)

Hemingway’s supposed disparagement of thinking is based, according to Cirino, on a false dichotomy between thought and action. Cirino writes that “the physical activity in Hemingway’s fiction is only remarkable for the corresponding internal reaction of the character” (110). Cirino incorporates several voices into his analysis, including William James and Henri Bergson, to show how “Hemingway’s work constitutes a revolution in the fictional investigation of modern consciousness, not an avoidance of it. Hemingway’s focus on action incorporates consciousness into an external situation, and does not ignore it or fail to understand it” (112).

As Cirino proceeds, however, he seems to fall into the trap that he claims he is avoiding; he treats thought and action as two incompatible modes of being. For example, he writes that the novel For Whom the Bell Tolls depicts “a consciousness under pressure [that] must restrict its full rein in order to fulfill an external, physical duty” (120). He also notes that in SAR, “Jake is only able to fulfill his ambition of writing a novel after he removes himself from the distractions of the fiesta and his cadre of friends” (128). Eventually Cirino comes back around to claim that the necessary suspension or “renunciation of thought is so difficult for Hemingway’s protagonists because it is so
dearly prized, and the temporary quest to banish or control the stream of thought only
attests to its importance” (146). But here he seems to be trying to prove the importance of
something by its absence, something which, as he earlier admits, is the dilemma posed by
the “iceberg principle.”

I think his analysis can be stronger if he incorporates the reader more into the
fictional works. In other words, because the characters or narrator seem to suspend or
renounce thought, the reader is invited to ponder and invent even more. Hemingway’s
novels are not merely windows into the actions of characters, but invitations to the reader
to thoughtfully depict the part of the iceberg that lies below the surface. Wolfgang Iser’s
Reader Response theory, which in general articulates how the reader’s activity
contributes to the meaning of any text, is helpful here. Iser writes, “The unwritten aspects
of apparently trivial scenes and the unspoken dialogue within the ‘turns and twists’ not
only draw the reader into the action but also lead him to shade in the many outlines
suggested by the given situations, so that these take on a reality of their own” (276). This
suggests, incidentally, that characters become more real to a reader the more the reader
creates the characters, in a way that is justified, of course, by the guidance of the
narrative that is “above the surface.” To return briefly to Ramsey, in his otherwise rather
disparaging and superficial analysis of Hemingway, he does provide a convenient
shorthand for one dimension of Hemingway’s fiction: “He wanted his books somehow to
be action, to escape thought” (92). We might amend this slightly and point out to
Ramsey, if we could, that action and thought are not incompatible. As we will see when
we analyze SAR through the lens of James’s Radical Empiricism, Hemingway was
developing a more sophisticated philosophy of the connections between thought and action that disrupted the thought-action dichotomy, as Cirino claimed, but appreciated that thought could itself be a kind of action, as Ramsey seems to imply. *SAR* does more than depict this thought-action interdependence when it obligates the reader to do so much of the work—that is, to perform the action of creating vivid, live characters. A passive reader would reinforce the thought-action dichotomy, but more active reading suggests a blurring of the boundaries.

As seen above, early criticism did not appreciate the ways that Hemingway might have been challenging the roles and attendant moral codes attached to normative behavior. Wendy Martin provides an interesting comparison between the “grace under pressure” ethos often ascribed to Hemingway’s heroes, like Jake Barnes, and “the Victorian adage to ‘suffer and be still’ that was directed to women who felt helpless to meet the demands of their sacrificial role” (48). The gender roles were shifting, and, according to Martin, Hemingway is aware that they are not naturally tied to biology. For both men and women, conscious mastery of their emotions in their emergent roles is required. Brett struggles to define herself, for she is both “the idealized woman on the pedestal and that of the self-reliant modern women” (52). Each role is the result of hard-fought political and social changes and also an evolving economy that needed women workers, particularly during the war. According to Martin, what defines both Jake’s and Brett’s quest to forge identities is their willingness to take risks. Brett’s sexual freedom risks “disease, pregnancy, and ostracism” (58), no small concerns. But it is not clear from
Martin’s analysis what Jake is risking. Still, the analysis affords an opportunity to reconfigure the “grace under pressure” code that has clung to Hemingway and his novels.

Responding to decades of criticism that treated Hemingway as the paradigmatic macho writer, Thomas Strychacz complicates the dramatization of manhood. He focuses on the fact that such coming-of-age scenes or moments in which a character’s manhood is tested are frequently spectacles in which the audience is expected to take a critical perspective on the performance of masculinity. Sometimes the “audience” is the solitary narrator, and sometimes, as in the case of the bullfighting fiesta in SAR, it is an entire city. The role of the audience is evaluative (46). In SAR, Jake Barnes is cast in the role of perpetual director or audience member, and his apparent afición (roughly, knowledge and expertise along the lines of Erfahrung) is eventually exposed as erroneous (54).

Hemingway’s “exploration of male display challenges precisely the kind of formulations about his myth of the autonomous male that have become customary” (47). It will be helpful to read Strychacz’s critique alongside James’s call for a “moral equivalent of war,” a hypermasculine-seeming call to force upon oneself the threat of injury and death in spectacular fashion.

Strychacz’s chapter “Masculinity” in Ernest Hemingway in Context (2013) considers the changing critical and popular view of each of Hemingway’s heroes as a hypermasculine man’s man in the wake of the 1986 publication of The Garden of Eden, which featured pliable gender and sex roles (277). The anxiety experienced by men over their gender role was not just the result of the rise of the New Woman, but a feeling of
increased vulnerability to capitalistic market forces, technology, and the inability for war to satisfy a man’s quest for honor. No one could have emerged from WWI intact. Hemingway’s heroes instead exhibit “grace under pressure,” and, as Strychacz points out, these heroes seemed to define a new kind of masculinity in which injury and dignified suffering against an intractable historical fate is essential to the role. It is control, not victory or external success or even sexual conquests, that defines the masculine Code (279-80).

Other critics, such as Debra Moddelmog, have developed a much more nuanced and conflicted take on gender. She writes that “Hemingway’s texts bring traditional significations of gender and sexuality into conflict” in a way not heretofore realized (92-3). Rather than seeing Brett as an example of corrupt or failing morals reflected in gender roles, Moddelmog sees her attempting to break stereotypes and resist gendered scripts. “Brett’s alcoholism and inability to sustain a relationship might be indications not of nymphomania, with which the critics have often charged her, but of a dissatisfaction with the strictures of the male-female relationship” (95). Brett, like Jake Barnes, is on a quest, and therefore her actions have more to do with questioning established mores and her own feelings than having solid answers. According to Moddelmog, Jake, too, seems to be less a macho he-man than someone whose latent homosexuality complicates his relationships and intrudes into even the most “objective” of descriptions. It is not Hemingway’s goal, she writes, to “solve” any of the gender and identity issues, but to appreciate their flexibility and perpetual motion (99).
Such an analysis would be very helpful in two ways. First, fluid gender identities seem consonant with James’s pluralism and Principle of Substitution, two aspects of a refusal of neutral objectivity and static identity. In other words, not just people but all experiences and “objects” of experience are unstable, and depend for their identity upon an experiencer and a context. It will be interesting to see how Radical Empiricism may anticipate or confirm the epistemological challenge that Hemingway takes up in his treatment of the gender identities and performances in SAR.

Surprisingly only a few critics have identified any connection between American Pragmatism and Hemingway’s fiction. Even biographical criticism, such as Reynolds’s very detailed Hemingway: The Paris Years (1989) do not follow up on the connections between William James and his student, Gertrude Stein, who was Hemingway’s mentor during the Paris salon years when he was writing SAR. The following three critics have identified relevant parallels between SAR and James’s pragmatism, and I will be building off of their insights.

David Henry Lowenkron defines Jake Barnes as a Jamesian pragmatist in Jake Barnes—A Student of William James in “The Sun Also Rises” (1976). Lowenkron notes, “It is Jake’s concern with the ‘how’ of living rather than the ‘what’ that labels him a pragmatist rather than a metaphysician” (148). Relying on James’s 1906-07 lectures at Lowell Institute in Boston for his discussion of pragmatism, Lowenkron correctly, I think, sees in Jake a man who is trying not to define an identity for himself but to refine a method of engagement. Lowenkron identifies James’s Principle of Substitution (though he does not label it as such) at the heart of Jake’s epistemological methods, for Jake is
“looking for truths that he can live with—truths which do not contradict his store of experience” (148). He writes that Jake is confronted by four codes of behavior: Catholicism, hedonism, economics, and professionalism. In Lowenkron’s analysis, Jake tries them all out but finds each one lacking. This, he says, is consistent with James’s pragmatism, which encourages one to “shop around” (a phrase Lowenkron repeats several times), using various codes to suit one’s purposes.

While Lowenkron makes some important discoveries, his analysis of both Jake’s and James’s methods are clumsy. He remarks, for example, that pragmatism is “a method that is not fond of clashing ideas” (151), which is quite at odds with James’s pluralism. Furthermore, Lowenkron seems to regard Jake’s movement from one code to another as the result of discrete and conscious decisions. His use of the phrase “shop around” is telling: he seems to treat the choice of moral codes like off-the-shelf products that Jake selects and later discards when they are no longer useful. I intend to provide a much more nuanced analysis of the ways that Jake exemplifies the Jamesian pragmatist. And my analysis will include significant attention to the narrative style, which is crucial to analyzing SAR as a pragmatist project, as other critics (Berman and Owens-Murphy) have noted.

The first Hemingway chapter in Ronald Berman’s very interesting Fitzgerald-Wilson-Hemingway (2003) opens with a brief discussion of Bertrand Russell, Ludwig Wittgenstein, and A.N. Whitehead and their philosophies of language. Berman notes that Wittgenstein was concerned with how language not only may fail to relate accurately to facts, but might interfere with our ability to experience the world. Hemingway, says
Berman, agrees. “The novel reflects often on the inability of language to state reality, recall feeling, replicate (or even approach) experience” (76). Wittgenstein noted that “What we cannot speak about, we must pass over in silence,” but that is not to say that what cannot be captured in language is not real. Hemingway’s narrators fall silent (in terms of analysis or interior monologue) and, like the Wittgenstein of *Philosophical Investigations*, show rather than tell. For Berman this is a key concept not just for Hemingway but for Modernism in general.

Interestingly, Berman does not cite William James for his analysis of Hemingway, but does cite him in his other chapters on Edmund Wilson and F. Scott Fitzgerald. I see much here to tie James to this analysis of Hemingway’s language, particularly his diatribe against “vicious abstractionism” and his more general anti-foundationalism regarding the use of concepts to “capture” experience.

According to Katie Owens-Murphy (2009) James’s Pragmatism provides a helpful lens through which to interpret Hemingway’s fiction in general, but particularly *A Farewell to Arms*. In *Farewell*, for example, “pragmatism’s emphasis on utility also helps us understand the bizarre moments of lying and role-playing that complicate the romance between Frederic and Catherine Barkley” (87). According to Owens-Murphy, much of the conflict in Hemingway’s fiction is not among characters, but among ways of understanding experience. Characters and narrators are suspicious of abstraction, echoing a major tenet of James’s Pragmatism, especially as expressed in the lecture series of 1907. “Pragmatism’s emphasis on our experience of concrete particulars is consistent with empiricism, but its emphasis on utility gives the philosophy its humanistic slant,
because only those principles which are useful to human beings are meaningful” (Owens-Murphy 88). To illustrate her thesis, the author highlights several passages in which the hero of the novel eschews any way of understanding his own experience and of determining what course of action to take that is, in her analysis, abstract. Owens-Murphy also traces Hemingway’s connection to James through Gertrude Stein, Hemingway’s literary mentor and friend in Paris, and a prize student of James at Harvard. Though it is not known whether Hemingway ever read James, or how much he was indebted to the philosopher, clearly the threads of the intellectual genealogy are there.

Owens-Murphy provides an insightful and helpful guide to the reading of Hemingway through the lens of James’s Pragmatism, particularly in her note about the narrative style. “The narrator’s resistance to both abstraction and commentary places an interpretive burden on the reader, who must extract Frederic’s ethos from his description of particulars” (93). There is much work to be done, however. In my view, though James is suspicious of abstraction, he recognizes that one cannot do without it. It is, he says, “vicious abstractionism,” the replacement or reduction of lived experience to nothing but abstract concepts, that is to be avoided (The Meaning of Truth 249). I will build upon Owens-Murphy’s insights and analyze to what degree the narrator or characters of SAR also have a more nuanced view of the utility of abstractions.

As we move more explicitly into the analysis of the novel, we will notice that James’s contribution is less overtly “philosophical” here than in the other chapters. James wanted philosophers to be like “blazes made by the axe of the human intellect on the trees of the otherwise trackless forest of human experience” (“Philosophical
Conceptions” 347). Though capable of careful and even tedious logical analysis, as we have seen, James seems to have felt quite at home fulminating against the weakness that we are all subject to, and encouraging our better angels to rise to the challenge of living. Yet here we also see James, red in tooth in claw, the high priest of masculine domination and conquest, urging his readers (men, really) to get in touch with their inner bellicosity. He disparages comforts and ultimately seeks a “moral equivalent of war” in a battle to subdue and control nature for the betterment of the nation. This call is backed by his philosophy, and there is enough of his Pragmatism, Radical Empiricism and psychology here to take this as a call with intellectual and philosophical integrity. But it ultimately discloses more about his elite position and intellectual insularity than he might have been able to recognize himself. Before taking on the “muscular philosophy” directly, however, let us see how James’s epistemological experimentalism plays out for Jake.

**Actions Are Experiments**

In *A Moveable Feast* (1960/1964 posthumously), Ernest Hemingway relates a conversation he had had with his mentor and confidante during the Paris salon years, Gertrude Stein. Stein had overheard the owner of a garage where her Model T Ford was being fixed as he reproached the young assistant mechanic. “You are all a lost generation,” he said. As Hemingway relates, Stein embraced the condemnation. “’That’s what you all are,’ Miss Stein said. ‘All of you young people who served in the war. You are a lost generation’ … ’You have no respect for anything. You drink yourselves to death” (*Moveable Feast* 29). Stein had meant the attribution to apply to those young
Americans in Paris who were, in the 1920s, wandering and aimless because the values of their parents’ generation no longer seemed helpful or relevant. And those few who served in the war seemed to be a mass of walking wounded, unprepared to manage the world they were inheriting or even their own lives. Hemingway used Stein’s quote for the frontispiece of his 1926 novel, The Sun Also Rises, and the term, “the lost generation,” later came to stand for a group of writers active in Paris between the wars, including Ezra Pound, Sherwood Anderson, and F. Scott Fitzgerald. It eventually came also to represent a spirit of disenchantment and even cynicism ascribed to Hemingway’s generation, especially in the United States, even if it was not always clear how they were lost (Cuddon 479). But Hemingway was not convinced that the disapprobation was particularly accurate or helpful. “I thought that all generations were lost by something and always had been and always would be … But the hell with [Stein’s] lost-generation talk and all the dirty, easy labels” (Moveable Feast 30-1).

If Jake’s generation is lost (though no more lost than any generation, as Hemingway says), then what is it that they are searching for? Or, to ask a different question, what would it mean for them to be “found”? While Hemingway might have accepted that his generation behaved decadently, and that his characters—like the real life individuals they were modeled on—were dissipated and self-indulgent, they were not unredeemable, and their generation was not without a certain strength and drive. He believed that they were searching for new ways of thinking and acting, and new values, and so their quest might appear to be without direction. Ultimately the name of the novel that he chose, like the additional frontispiece inscription from the Book of Ecclesiastes,
worked against the defeatism and nihilism implied by the Stein quote. One critic writes, “All generations were ‘lost,’ Hemingway would maintain, but at least his generation was conscious of how they were lost and how they might be ‘found’” (Stoneback 5). Like Hemingway, we should be suspicious of such a “dirty, easy label.” As we ask what Jake and his generation might be seeking, we might derive some clues from how they describe their condition.

Early in the novel, Jake picks up an attractive stranger, a prostitute named Georgette, and shares a cab ride with her. She touches him in a suggestive way, and Jake, the narrator, says, “I put her hand away. / ‘Never mind,’ [said Jake.] / ‘What’s the matter? You sick?’ / ‘Yes.’ / ‘Everybody’s sick. I’m sick, too’” (SAR 23). Here the metaphor changes from lost to sick, suggesting that people do not simply need to be found, but restored to a prior state of health. The characters seem determined to medicate themselves with alcohol and licentious, itinerant adventuring, fueled by credit and the strong U.S. dollar in Europe after the war. But Jake, at least, is reflecting a bit on his peripatetic experiments to see what practical results they might yield. Midway through the novel, Jake and his friends were in Pamplona for the running of the bulls and bull-fights, and they had already enjoyed some of the fiesta’s action. In a late-night half-drunken meditation, Jake thinks, “Perhaps as you went along you did learn something. I did not care what it was all about. All I wanted to know was how to live in it. Maybe if you found out how to live in it you learned from that what it was all about” (152). So Jake seeks practical know-how, a limited, context-dependent set of skills for adapting. Perhaps, he thinks he will eventually create the map for the territory that he is lost in, or
be “cured,”—that is, “learn[] what it was all about”—but that is not his goal. He simply wants knowledge that is **good enough** to get by.

In this extraordinary moment Jake expresses the Jamesian anti-foundationalism and principle of meaning-in-action. Furthermore, like James, he reverses the fundamental philosophical questions. Rather than seeking to know reality in order to know how to engage with it, he seeks to have a wiser, more intentional engagement with reality through experience before he can know what it is, and even then, there is no certainty that reality will be comprehensible. As James expresses it, what is needed for such know-how is personal engagement with reality, and accurate or true ideas are those that are **good enough** or **true enough** to foster our adaptation to reality. 

Any idea that helps us to deal, whether practically or intellectually, with either the reality or its belongings, that doesn’t entangle our progress in frustrations, that fits, in fact, and adapts our life to the reality’s whole setting, will agree sufficiently to meet the requirement. It will be true of that reality. (Meaning of Truth vi-vii)

These ideas cannot be created simply out of other ideas or learned by rote by other experts, for there is no other expert but us for the totality of our experiences. I agree with Lowenkron that Jake exhibits this kind of Jamesian pragmatic approach. Jake does not seek comprehensive knowledge, the “principles of explanations that underlie all things … the first whence and the last whither of the whole cosmic procession, the conditions of all

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71 This defines a contrast to an Enlightenment characterization of rationality. Jake wants to conduct experiments, but without a prior theory about what his actions might mean in any deep sense. He simply wants the wisdom to learn from experience reflectively, after the fact. This is more “practical” and less rigorous and intentional than the method Kant would recommend, for example. In an essay from 1793 he states that only “[the ignoramus] believes that he can go further by stumbling about in experiments and experience—without putting together certain principles (which properly make up what one calls theory) and without having an overview of his business (which, when pursued methodically, is called a system)—than theory will allow him to go” (Kant, “On the Proverb: That May be True in Theory, But Is of No Practical Use” 61).
knowing and the most general rules of human action….” the interests and aims, writes James, of his contemporary philosophers (James, “Philosophy and Its Critics” 474). Yet Jake does seem to investigate somewhat like a scientist, at least as James disparagingly describes the scientist of his era: “Give us measurable facts only, phenomena, without the mind’s additions, without entities or principles that pretend to explain” (“Philosophy and Its Critics” 480). Positivism replaces entities with lawful regularities, but Jake is not seeking these generalizations, either. And he lacks the kind of objectivity from his own experiences that would allow him to make judgments about how well his various experiments were working. Let us see what this know-how consists in and what is meant by saying that Jake is conducting experiments to develop that know-how.

Above I agreed with Lowenkron that Jake is a Jamesian pragmatist, because Jake is focused not on discovering essential truths about himself or reality, but refining a method of engaging with reality. The examples that Lowenkron cites are Jake’s four possible codes of behavior: Catholicism, hedonism, economics, and professionalism. I want to add another fundamental endeavor to this list, and that is, Jake’s attempt to work out a relationship with Brett that he can live with. As Jake says later, he is not interested in a deeper understanding of who Brett is or even who he is, but only in how to live with the reality of their attraction to and desire for one another. So, rather than seeking a code, I suggest that learning to live with Brett Ashley is a long term experiment. When they are still in Paris, Jake tries to negotiate a more satisfying living arrangement with Brett.

Couldn’t we just live together, Brett? Couldn’t we just live together? I don’t think so. I’d just tromper you with everybody. You couldn’t stand it. I stand it now.
That would be different. It’s my fault, Jake. It’s the way I’m made (62).

When Brett says that she would just “tromper” Jake, she means that she would make a fool of him by dating and sleeping with other men. And she describes her predilection in essentialist terms. Jake, on the other hand, is, perhaps too optimistically, imagining that he could adapt and “stand it” enough to make their living together worthwhile. He admits that he is already the fool, meaning that he is already acting against his own apparent interests or irrationally. And clearly he is feeling quite frustrated and often unhappy, yet he continues to be in her company and offer possibilities for their being together longer term.

The experiments that Jake is conducting in his relationship with Brett are not binary. In other words, he is not simply trying things out to see whether something will work or not. Rather, he is trying to develop a scientific-type method in which he can be objective about his experiences while he is also the test subject. Speaking more generally about Hemingway’s fiction, Colvert describes the hero’s quest.

[T]he Hemingway hero appears in desperate struggle with the awful problem of finding a new value orientation … He seeks to find a new morality in action. The principle governing his new approach is psychological, for he sees himself frankly as a creature of impulses, desires, and preferences, and he sees value only in that which satisfies feelings and desires in various intricate ways. (376)

This is not to say that Jake is a hedonist. Rather, the hero engenders emotional and moral responses by putting himself into new situations, and then those feelings and moral responses are the data that he analyzes to see what they tell him about himself and this new experience. A kind of empiricist, he is a test subject conducting in vivo experiments
on his own psyche. And those experiments are often most useful when they have the most painful or unpleasant effects on us.

As James says, it is the data of feelings that are most significant when attending to one’s own attempt to grow in a new direction. “When an idea stings us in a certain way, makes as it were a certain electric connection with our self, we believe that it is a reality. When it stings us in another way, makes another connection with our self, we say, let it be a reality” (Principles II 568). Earlier in this same chapter on Will, James was concerned with the “hopeless failures, the sentimentalists, the drunkards,” etc. and all those who fail to enact their nobler visions for their own lives, or even act on “their moral knowledge, [which is] always there mumbling and grumbling in the background” (Principles II 547). Their inaction is because “[t]hose ideas, objects, considerations, which (in these lethargic states) fail to get to the will, fail to draw blood, seem, in so far forth, distant and unreal” (547). We should note the imagery of pain and injury—“stings” and “draws blood”—and recall James’s call for the “strenuous life” as a call for voluntary struggle, suffering, and the risk of death. Perhaps we should consider Jake’s attempted but hopeless romantic relationship with Brett as not only an extended experiment, but also a version of the “strenuous life.” What makes combat or other versions of the “moral equivalent of war” the tests that they are is the lack of certainty and a good chance of injury, suffering, and sometimes death. In the space of the novel, even if the relationship is unlikely to result in Jake’s death, it presents the only real danger to him, and he therefore is experiencing that wordless but meaningful “return to life” in James’s words. According to James, “No class of [men] have better sentiments or feel more constantly
the difference between the higher and lower path in life than the hopeless failures, the
sentimentalists, the drunkards, the schemers, the ‘dead-beats,’ whose life is one long
contradiction between knowledge and action” (James, *Principles II* 547).

Characteristically, James’s privilege blinds him to any but a psychological explanation
for such “failures,” as he attributes their inaction to a lack of internal stimulation. These
men are not stung. And while Jake fits this description superficially, he is also working
against it. He attempts to change his relationship with Brett not by thinking, planning, or
“working on” himself in her absence, but simply by being in relationship with her. This
is, therefore, an experiment in which certain data points can potentially terminate the
experiment. However, as long as the experiment goes on, Jake continues to be “stung,”
and that means that he continues to gather data that can help him adjust his tactics and
discover new ways of being with Brett.72

Through the next two-thirds of the novel, Jake and Brett spend a lot of time
together, and Jake seems always ready to reconsider his relationship with her, to make it
work for him despite his physical limitations. At the end of the novel, Brett is resigned to
the impossibility of a romantic relationship. Jake, however, is still speculating, but this
does not suggest that he is denying reality. “‘Oh, Jake,’ Brett said, ‘we could have had
such a damned good time together’ … ’Yes,’ I said. ‘Isn’t it pretty to think so?”’ (251).
This can read as more resilient than tragic for Jake. Jake and Brett have been each other’s
most intimate partners throughout the story, and they have, in many senses, already had

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72 This all makes it seem as if Jake (and, by extension, James) is interested only in what he can learn, or
only in his own development. It is very self-centered and insular. Even James recommends war equivalents
primarily as means of self-enhancement.
“a damned good time together.” The reader is left to wonder, how might this have been
different if Jake had been able to consummate their love physically? The narrative
encourages the reader to doubt that because Brett is just made that way, she could she
have left other men alone. Jake is aware that his real impotence is in his being unable to
affect Brett’s habitual promiscuity no matter his physical incapacity. This is, again, a
“crisis” for men because they are struggling to adjust to women’s self-assertion and
sexual freedom. Jake, like all of the other men in the novel, struggles here, but he
conducts new experiments. More than the other characters, Jake is able to affect his own
orientation to this obstinate reality, which illustrates his interest with, as Lowenkron
writes, the “‘how’ of living [with Brett] rather than the ‘what’ [of his physical condition]”
(148). All of the “lost generation” may be sick, as Georgette says, but not all of them
accept that diagnosis as essential.

Risk, Pain, and Suffering Are Remedial

Violence is ever-present in this novel, even if it is not always referenced directly.
The First World War casts its dark shadow over all of the characters, and several “war
substitutes” are significant features of the action. As for James’s recommendation of the
“strenuous life,” the war substitutes of boxing and bull-fighting, appear to be tools to
manipulate one’s interior, an interior paradoxically not as easily accessible from “the
inside” or directly. For both SAR and James, these extreme physical measures are used as
responses to the crisis of meaning and action that not only this generation but, the entire
modern era is facing. War, boxing, bull-fighting, and conflict in general appear in the novel as potential answers, but less so in SAR than for James.

In his 1910 essay, “The Moral Equivalent of War,” and in “The Value of Saintliness” chapter of *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1901-2), James lays out a case for voluntary privation and hardship as a means of recovering the heroism of living that seemed to be lost in his era of modernity. James is sympathetic to the perspective of what he calls “reflective apologists for war” when he writes the following:

> [War] is an absolute good, we are told, for it is human nature at its highest dynamic. It’s “horrors” are a cheap price to pay for rescue from the only alternative supposed, of a world of clerks and teachers, of coeducation and zo-ophily, of “consumer’s leagues” and “associated charities,” of industrialism unlimited, and feminism unabashed. No scorn, no hardness, no valor any more! Fie upon such a cattleyard of a planet! (“The Moral Equivalent of War” 664)

The warrior type of any “race” exhibits a certain perfection of humanity, which, he says, must “never cease to breed, for every one is sensitive to its superiority” (664). While James goes on to develop the thesis that war itself is not an *absolute* good, and that less violent and destructive means must be sought for restoring the heroism of life, the nationalistic, racist, and even eugenic overtones are clear. “The best thing about our ‘inferiors’ to-day,” he later writes, “is that they are as tough as nails, and physically and

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73 In *Poetry and Pragmatism*, Richard Poirier finds a number of reasons to be critical of James’s proposal. Regarding James’s observation that inbred pugnacity starts wars, Poirier writes that James seems to ignore the role of national leaders and corporate war profiteers in instigating and managing wars for their own ends. James does not see war as, in Clausewitz’s terms, “a continuation of political intercourse, with the addition of other means.” Rather, writes Poirier, James “refuses any such acknowledgement of politics,” and therefore “must find his causes for bellicosity elsewhere, in something called ‘nature’ and in something called ‘life’” (117). Poirier is correct, I think, to observe that for James, the biological inheritance and individual psychology outweighs all other consideration. But James was quite aware of the political dimensions of war, as we can see in his extended arguments with Roosevelt over American empire. Additionally, we must see James’s “nostalgia” for war in the context of a gendered insecurity, both personal and societal. My analysis of the relationship to fears of degeneration and masculine insecurity will provide the necessary context.
morally almost as insensitive” (667). This nostalgia for a supposedly lost pugnacity would not outlast the First World War. However, in SAR the reader is presented with a number of war substitutes as if they might offer men, particularly, compensatory opportunities for affirming their physical and moral toughness. But, in contrast to James’s “moral equivalent of war,” none purports to address the fundamental insecurity on an individual or societal level. Indeed, in SAR it is not ever clear exactly what the insecurity might be, only that it has something to do with a sense of having lost some vitality or capacity for effective action. A comparison of the function of war substitutes in SAR and James will help reveal the nature of the insecurity and its relationship to the larger dilemma of modernity that they have in common.

First, the violence provides the feeling that despite the advances of rationality and science, social organization, human rights, and technology, civilization is in crisis. The Enlightenment project of rational control of nature and human beings for the benefit of humanity seemed to be in ruins. There were significant critiques of the project all through the nineteenth and into the twentieth century, but the First World War brought these critiques home, literally, from the battlefield. The “lost generation” looks longingly back, as if by searching the past they could change the present. SAR is a reflection on this legacy, like Benjamin’s “Angel of History.”

His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before
him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress. ("Theses on the Philosophy of History" 257-8)

The wreckage is in the bodies and spirits of the survivors, as Jake’s wound makes clear. Damage to the corporeal body can happen easily, and have profound effects on many lives, so that even as Jake tries to move forward, his damaged body links him to lost possibilities. It can even symbolize the loss of vitality associated with fears of degeneration and decline. As I discuss in the Introduction, scientists and social theorists from Beard to Freud diagnosed a pathological depletion of “nerve force” at both the individual and societal level. The pseudo-science that supported these diagnoses was quite implicitly (and sometimes explicitly) class-, sex-, and race-based. The condemnation of “inferiors” from the intellectually and financially elite, white males in Europe and North America merged with a Romanticist idealization of and longing for the “state of nature.” It was the advances of civilization, these scientists and cultural critics claimed, that were literally weakening human beings in both mind and body. The fear seemed largely to grip men, as they described their weakness as “feminization.” But women, too, could be victims of the comforts and stresses of modernity: witness the creation of “hysteria” and the rest cure.

That the gendered critique of modernity was written into the bodies of the “civilized” is partly due to the social changes in sex and sexuality at this time. “Between 1880 and 1910, working-class, immigrant, and African American men as well as middle-class white women challenged middle-class white men’s belief that they should control the nation’s destiny” (Moddelmog, “Sex, Sexuality, and Marriage” 357). A parallel step toward having a greater say in society and a greater role in work outside the home was
having control over one’s body. Margaret Sanger’s open fight against the Comstock Act of 1873, which forbade the sending of lewd or obscene materials through the mail, including contraceptive devices and information, generated support for women’s control of their sexual activity.74 Such autonomy could not be realized without concomitant political power. The women’s suffrage movement of 1890-1920 eventually won the right to vote in 1920, capping the “era of the New Woman … a period that ‘defined women as independent, physically adept, and mentally acute; and able to work, study and socialize on a par with men’” (Comley 410). The sexual revolution also made women’s promiscuity more socially acceptable, but this was just one dimension of women’s refusal to be seen as passive and dependent. “Women were no longer seen as passionless or helpless, and were asserting their independence and right to smoke, drink, get an education, hold important jobs, and even, in some cases, engage in premarital sex” (Moddelmog, “Sex, Sexuality, and Marriage” 357). Many men felt threatened by this bolder, more assertive woman. In seeking ways to affirm their value as men, many focused on their physicality.

74 Sanger founded organizations that eventually evolved into the Planned Parenthood Organization, but her support for women’s procreative rights and birth control was linked to fears of degeneration and supported eugenics. In racist and classist language, she wrote that the march of civilization, was threatened by the growing numbers of “inferiors,” and that birth control was the surest method to arrest this development. In a 1921 speech she said, “We desire to stop at its source the disease, poverty and feeble-mindedness and insanity which exist today, for these lower the standards of civilization and make for race deterioration.” The following is from a 1921 article she wrote for the journal, Birth Control Review, entitled, “The Eugenic Value of Birth Control Propaganda.” “As an advocate of Birth Control, I wish to take advantage of the present opportunity to point out that the unbalance between the birth rate of the ‘unfit’ and the ‘fit’, admittedly the greatest present menace to civilization, can never be rectified by the inauguration of a cradle competition between these two classes. In this matter, the example of the inferior classes, the fertility of the feeble-minded, the mentally defective, the poverty-stricken classes, should not be held up for emulation to the mentally and physically fit though less fertile parents of the educated and well-to-do classes. On the contrary, the most urgent problem today is how to limit and discourage the over-fertility of the mentally and physically defective.” (http://www.nyu.edu/projects/sanger/webedition/app/documents/show.php?bakerDoc=238946.xml)
In both *SAR* and James the body is a point of access, or a lever, to effect change in one’s outlook, character, and total perspective, and also to secure a place of value in social space. This is in part because of the social discourses around sex. “Sexologists such as Sigmund Freud and Havelock Ellis promoted sexuality as the key to the formation of human identities” (Strychacz 278). Yet even earlier, the body was the tool men used to assert a place of importance in society. Prior to the First World War, Theodore Roosevelt could serve as a model of masculine assertiveness, toughness, bravery, and efficacy, whether taming the wilderness or extending American empire. “But the individual feats of military derring-do that Roosevelt capitalized on during the Spanish-American War seemed positively archaic by the time the slaughterhouse of the First World War came to an end in 1918 … [M]illions died anonymously in battles whose objectives no one fighting in them could grasp” (Strychacz 278-9). Men were still searching for ways that the body could reinscribe “cultural roles focused on reclaiming the authentic masculinity men were once supposed to possess” (Strychacz 278). James recommendation of a “moral equivalent of war” was an attempt to channel this desire into something more personally and socially productive. *SAR*, however, insists on calling this desire and the putatively formative value of physicality and risk of injury or death into question to begin with.

The very first sentence of the novel introduces the reader to the significance of violence and combat to this story.

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75 The first of Ellis’s six-part series, *Studies in the Psychology of Sex*, was published in 1897. Freud’s *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* was published in 1905.
Robert Cohn was once middleweight boxing champion of Princeton. Do not think that I am much impressed by that as a boxing title, but it meant a lot to Cohn. He cared nothing for boxing, in fact he disliked it, but he learned it painfully and thoroughly to counteract the feeling of inferiority and shyness he had felt on being treated as a Jew at Princeton. (11)

This pregnant passage asks the reader to accept that habits of body—the martial abilities of boxing—can affect one’s sense of worth and importance, even if one dislikes the sport. The compensatory value of this martial endeavor is particularly telling.

Jake goes on to say that Cohn was quite a good boxer, but that his trainer overmatched him in an early bout and Cohn “got his nose permanently flattened. This increased Cohn’s distaste for boxing, but it gave him a certain satisfaction of some strange sort” (11). To be a good boxer, it is not enough to be able to deliver punches effectively and in a sustained way. One must also be able to endure the punches of an opponent without weakening too much or losing the ability to respond. This makes boxing an effective metaphor for the kind of life training that Jake seems to be after, and is perhaps why he introduces us to the story this way. I speculate that Cohn’s sense of satisfaction on getting his nose flattened is related to one of the larger themes of *S.4R*. For ultimately the novel affirms the value of endurance through pain, injury, and suffering, and regards our modern challenge as a quest to live with grace and dignity, and somehow learn and grow, though we are damaged, or, perhaps stated more strongly, to learn and

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76 In the Plimpton interview, Hemingway says the following: “On the question you raised, the effects of wounds vary greatly. Simple wounds which do not break bone are of little account. They sometimes give confidence. Wounds which do extensive bone and nerve damage are not good for writers, nor anybody else” (20). We should note that Jake’s wound, which is not a bone break, is one that does not give confidence, and certainly has profound consequences. Being tested in war or any other combat situation is potentially formative, but only if the damage is not too deep.
grow because of damage. Indeed, suffering, pain, and injury have a functional value, but so far, only for Robert Cohn.

There is no doubt that Hemingway’s choice of a flattened nose having improved Robert Cohn’s appearance is meant to reinforce the significance of his Jewish identity. But it is not clear exactly what points this serves in the novel. Robert Pearsall, for example, notes that the characters of Robert Cohn and Lady Brett Ashley are not simply modeled upon Hemingway’s friends, Harold Loeb and Lady Duff Twysden, but that Hemingway used the novel as a way of acting out his sexual jealousy over the affair between the two friends. “The attack on Lady Duff Twysden and Harold Loeb, called Lady Brett Ashley and Robert Cohn in the book, developed from ordinary sexual jealousy, to which was added tourist-versus-jingoist contempt for fellow expatriates, plus clubhouse jingoism and anti-Semitism” (72). Though SAR is in some senses a roman a clef, other critics see the antisemitism as much more central to the character of the narrator and to the story itself. Ernest Lockridge writes, “Anti-Semitism is not a flaw in the novel; it is the deepest flaw in the novel’s narrator, the flaw upon which his jealous hatred is predicated” (50). But this lets Hemingway and the novel off the hook, for it ignores the antisemitic remarks by several of the other characters, and words from the author’s mouth: “I’m putting everyone in it, and that kike Loeb is the villain” (Carlos Baker, 154). Gay Wilentz discusses the enduring trope of the Jew as scapegoat by seeing Robert as a reminder of Jake’s failed masculinity (and by extension, the threat of the “immigrant” Jew to Hemingway and early twentieth-century white, male Americans). “I expand the discussion to Hemingway’s concerns about the loss of the wilderness and the
issue of what constitutes man’s power in a post-industrial world—a world which would base success on business know-how and newly acquired wealth, rather than on pre-industrial traits such as physical strength, manliness, and a sense of natural order” (187). This critique seems helpful as it applies to Hemingway, but perhaps less so for understanding SAR. As Colvert points out, Robert is actually the “man of tradition” who becomes the prototypical outcast precisely because he cannot adjust to a changing world that no longer values certain scripts for manly behavior (380-1). It seems impossible to settle on a simple interpretation of the thread of antisemitism in the novel. It will be most helpful for this project to see this theme in relation to the questions of action, efficacy, and identity formation as related to the moral and spiritual quest implicit in the novel, and to remember that it is the reader’s quest, not Jake’s or Robert’s, that is at stake here.

To make the point that courage and endurance rather than efficacy of action is the higher virtue, we later see Robert and the 19-year-old bull-fighter Romero in a fight. Jake had help set up Romero and Brett, and the two became romantically involved. Robert had previously been romantically involved with Brett, and became quite jealous of Romero. He confronted Romero and beat him up quite badly, as one might imagine an expert boxer would. Jake’s friend Mike tells him about the fight. “The bull-fighter fellow was rather good. He didn’t say much, but he kept getting up and getting knocked down again. Cohn couldn’t knock him out” (205). Eventually Robert Cohn quit, out of a sense of pity or honor—it is not clear. And even though Romero had “been knocked down about fifteen times … he wanted to fight some more.” Robert would not hit him, so Romero “hit him just as hard as he could in the face, and then sat down on the floor” (SAR 206).
Robert cries and apologizes, and pledges his love to Brett. By this time the reader is well aware that Brett does not love but only pities Robert, and so he is seen as quite desperate and out of touch with reality. Some critics regard him as a naïve knight errant along the lines of Don Quixote, because he is operating with a long-outdated and highly gendered chivalric code. Brett is, however, far from the “damsel in distress” that Robert would need her to be for his fairytale to come out right. It is Romero the young bull-fighter who Brett is quite taken with.

Consistent with my thesis, the fight between Robert and Romero shows that expertise and knowledge (Robert’s ability as a boxer) cannot overcome the higher virtue of endurance and willingness to suffer. Romero is already a proven expert bull-fighter, but here we see that his worth as a man, and in accord with the Hemingway Code, is connected not to his efficacy (he is clearly no match for Robert) but to his ability to willingly abide pain and suffering, especially from violence. He enjoys moral superiority, if not physical, in SAR’s terms. Also, as Martin suggests, this is one part of SAR’s experiment in gender fluidity, and not a superficial recapitulation of gender norms, not even through their reversal. Brett takes on masculine characteristics and inhabits traditionally male roles. “Entering the public sphere without apology, she dares to frequent places and events previously off limits to her, such as the bar and the bullfight” (Martin 50). She wears her hair short and if often the sexual pursuer rather than the pursued. But “she still plays the redemptive role of trying to save men through her sexuality—the modern counterpart of Victorian feminine spirituality” (Martin 52). So she is not simply supplanting the role of men, but moving across a larger gender spectrum.
The other expression of gender fluidity or evolution is the Hemingway Code, expressed as “grace under pressure.” This characteristically masculine attitude is feminine in origin. It is a reprise of “the Victorian adage [to women] to ‘suffer and be still,’ … the ideal man of Hemingway’s world consciously suppressed his feelings, thereby … conceal[ing] masculine vulnerability and a loss of certainty” (Martin 48-9). Jake, for example, deals with his insecurity as a man by appropriating a characteristically feminine attitude toward his situation: he suffers and is still.

SAR goes beyond this willingness to endure. Though Jake seeks only a spectatorial relationship to physical risk and pain, some of the other characters, like Romero and Robert, actively seek out physical pain and suffering. In James we also see the recommendation to both willingly endure pain and suffering, and to actively seek out physical tests, though in both cases it is connected to attempts to stimulate an individual man’s latent heroism. For James, the highest pitch of the virtues of manliness and the warrior spirit is not the ability to conquer other men, but the capacity to endure pain, suffering, and privation. War insists on a kind of asceticism. “War and adventure assuredly keep all who engage in them from treating themselves too tenderly” (Varieties 365). What is at stake is spiritual and character development “Each of us in his own person feels that a high-hearted indifference to life would expiate all his shortcomings” (Varieties 364), and such disregard for one’s own safety and even life provides the access to one’s higher, spiritual powers. James notes that only in the last hundred or so years has pain and suffering acquired an almost thoroughly negative connotation. “[A]ny deliberate tendency to pursue the hard and painful as such and for their own sakes might well strike...
one as purely abnormal” (Varieties 298). Against this he identifies pain, specifically, as one essential and natural component in a complex world of experiences. “[O]ur ancestors looked upon pain as an eternal ingredient of the world’s order” (Varieties 298). The ascetic confronts the moral facts of human experience as they are, which brings with it a kind of purification.

[Asceticism] symbolizes lamely enough, no doubt, but sincerely, the belief that there is an element of real wrongness in this world, which is neither to be ignored nor evaded, but which must be squarely met and overcome by an appeal to the soul’s heroic resources, and neutralized and cleansed away by suffering. (Varieties 363)

Those who do not suffer deeply, or who are not physically tested at this level, writes James, lack the “great initiation” into the grand and tragic story of the world (363). What is, perhaps, “lame” about this attitude is how little it accomplishes for the greater good. That does not diminish its appeal to those who want to cast off the false comforts concealing the “tragic mystery” of life (363). We see the same wish for the “great initiation” expressed in SAR when Jake, continuing his conversation with Robert Cohn, remarks, “Nobody ever lives their life all the way up except bull-fighters.” Robert replies, “I’m not interested in bull-fighters. That’s an abnormal life” (18). Jake and James would both agree with Robert that risking one’s life in spectacular form is abnormal, but they also recognize that one does not progress spiritually or morally by living a “normal” life.

James explains that when one subjects oneself to the possibility of dying or severe injury, “[d]eath turns into a commonplace matter, and its usual power to check our action vanishes. It is this sense of emergency that overcomes any inhibition against acting, and which therefore makes war substitutes appropriate remedies for an age suffering a certain
degenerative impotence. With the annulling of these customary inhibitions, ranges of new
ergy are set free, and life seems cast upon a higher plane of power” (*Varieties* 366). As
Jake and Robert continue, we discover that Jake has already developed hardness toward
death, and it no longer “checks his action,” to paraphrase James. Robert says:

> “Do you know that in about thirty-five years more we’ll be dead?”
> “What the hell, Robert,” I said. “What the hell.”
> “I’m serious.”
> “It’s one thing I don’t worry about,” I said.
> “You ought to.”
> “I’ve had plenty to worry about one time or other. I’m through worrying.” (19)

Jake is here referring to his service in the war as that time of “worrying.” Throughout
*SAR* he provides no details of his war experiences, only of their effect on him. “I got hurt
in the war,” he simply says to a woman he has just met at a café (24). Through other
clues the reader can infer that there is a debilitating injury to Jake’s genitals, which makes
it impossible for him to have sex. As Hemingway explains in his Plimpton interview, this
means that Jake is only physically impotent. Referring to a common misinterpretation of
the story, Hemingway replies:

> Who ever said Jake was “emasculated precisely as a steer”? Actually he
> had been wounded in quite a different way and his testicles were intact
> and not damaged. Thus he was capable of all normal feelings as a *man* but
> incapable of consummating them. The important distinction is that his
> wound was physical and not psychological and that he was not
> emasculated. (Plimpton 25)

Clearly Hemingway cannot mean that the physical and the psychological are completely
independent, for Jake’s injury obviously has an effect on his outlook on life and his
diminished expectation for a romantic relationship with Brett. There is, however, an
impairment in Jake’s ability to take action despite his will, feelings, and thoughts, and
this is meant to represent the deeper shift in modernity where people—men, particularly—experienced a rift between their ability to conceive of deliberate, productive action and their ability to fulfill that conception. War provided a kind of guidance and meaning because it entailed a simple demand: take action in order to survive. And survival often meant, as James says, operating on a “higher plane of power” (*Varieties* 366).

For James, in this phase of modernity civilization has advanced to the point that nature is so much less threatening than it used to be, or than it *ought* to be for the sake of personal development, so there are few or no opportunities to engage in life as a heroic battle, or to live “cast upon a higher plane of power.” In his view technologies and economic and societal organization have buffered many Westerners from the contingencies of material existence, and this has meant not only the “feminizing” of men but also the loss of connection with life’s innately heroic dimension. It is danger, strife, and contingency, not rationalized, programmatic, comfortable, and planned living that are formatively the most beneficial to individual human beings. The strenuous life, and war in particular, subject a man to demands that elicit his original capacity for heroic action.

The beauty of war in this respect is that it is so congruous with ordinary human nature. Ancestral evolution has made us all potential warriors; so the most insignificant individual, when thrown into an army in the field, is weaned from whatever excess of tenderness towards his precious person  

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77 It is not always clear whether James is referring to Westerners in general or only the elite social and economic classes of which he is a member. In much of “The Moral Equivalent of War” he seems to recognize that his ethos would only resonate with members of the leisure class (read: white, European or North American) but who, like him, are concerned with the weakening of the race (white race or human race—it is not always obvious). “Meanwhile men at large still live as they have always lived, under a pain-and-fear economy—for those of us who live in an ease-economy are but an island in the stormy ocean—and the whole atmosphere of present-day utopian literature tastes mawkish and dishwatery to people who still keep a sense for life’s more bitter flavors” (“Moral Equivalent” 667).
he may bring with him, and may easily develop into a monster of insensibility. (*Varieties* 366)

Though it is difficult to read the word “monster” in a positive light, James seems to have a certain admiration for the putatively amoral behavior that war and strife engender from even “the most insignificant individual.” War is so necessary and such a part of what it means to be human that we cannot do without it, or its equivalent. “If war had ever stopped, we should have to reinvent it, on this view, to redeem life from flat degeneration” (“Moral Equivalent” 663). In *SAR*, boxing and bull-fighting are the “reinventions” of war. Crucially, they provide the stimuli and as well as a reference point that war used to provide.

Jake’s friend, Mike, who is Brett’s fiancé, also reflects fondly on the war. He had earned a number of medals, though he cannot recall what they are or precisely why he was awarded them. In another conversation among the friends Mike remarks, “What times we had. How I wish those dear days were back.” And then Brett says, “Don’t be an ass” (139). None of the characters who had participated in the war speak directly about any of their actions or experiences, the closest being a story that Mike is asked to tell about losing control of his horse in Piccadilly Square—clearly not a battle story. And Brett’s remark suggests that Mike may be selectively remembering what was good about his war experiences. Certainly they do not regard war as an unalloyed good. Indeed, as I will discuss below, it may be precisely their avoidance of war talk that indicates its importance. To understand its deeper significance we need to examine how it is compared to bull-fighting, and how *SAR* portrays bull-fighting.
Bull-fighting, like war, is “the strenuous life,” in James’s terms, at least for the bull-fighter. Like soldiers, bull-fighters court danger and death, and for Jake, this is the path to spiritual development. The festival of San Fermin in Pamplona is a pilgrimage destination and spiritual festival as well as a bull-fight, and the possibility of death for all combatants—bull-fighters, spectators, steers, horses, and, of course, the bulls, is not only accepted but is the main point. This is not mere sport. In both war and bull-fighting, the “ignored tension, and a feeling of things coming that you could not prevent happening” were mastered only through a certain focus. In Chapter XV Jake, Brett, Bill, Robert, and Mike attend a bull-fight, and Jake explains what to look for in terms of technique and style, of both bull-fighters and animals.

I sat beside Brett and explained to Brett what it was all about. I told her about watching the bull, not the horse, when the bulls charged the picadors, and got her to watching the picador place the point of his pic so that she saw what it was all about, so that it became more something that was going on with a definite end, and less of a spectacle with unexplained horrors. (171)

The threat of death is enhanced because the focus moves to the beautiful, technical mastery exhibited by both horse and rider, though each one often gets hurt. The horse, especially, is frequently gored, and this is the “unexplained horror” that so upset Brett when she watched. In admiration of a 19-year-old expert named Romero, Brett says, “I’ve never seen him do an awkward thing” (SAR 172). Romero was by far the best matador not because he killed the bull the quickest or the slowest or with the best technique, but because he worked so elegantly and close to the bull, thereby risking injury or death with every pass while making it a beautiful dance. “‘You won’t until he gets frightened,’ [Jake] said. ‘He’ll never be frightened,’ Mike said. ‘He knows too
damned much” (SAR 172). The very real possibility of injury or death has heightened Romero’s expertise and knowledge. The reader is not privy to what Romero is thinking or feeling, but the characters’ responses above show that they understand that what they are witnessing is his knowledge in action. As Cirino argues, there is not an opposition between thinking and action, but an appreciation of the sophistication of the interconnection between thinking and acting. Indeed, even to speak of the two as separate activities is a false distinction, for they are rather two aspects of experience. And while the kind of knowledge-in-action is very specific here, it serves as a model for the kinds of knowledge-in-action that we see highlighted, especially in the character of Jake, throughout the novel.

Interestingly, in other parts of SAR, the war is identified as precisely the experience that makes certain kinds of feelings and actions possible. During a dinner among Jake, Robert, Brett, and several of their friends, Jake reflects, “It was like certain dinners I remember from the war. There was much wine, an ignored tension, and a feeling of things coming that you could not prevent happening. Under the wine I lost the disgusted feeling and was happy”(150). This feeling of inevitability, of anticipation of having to act, is pleasant for Jake because it means that there will be a return to moments of intense crisis and threat of death. For Jake the war provided psychological certainty, but, paradoxically, only because it necessitated a constant readiness to deal with what could not be predicted. War, like bull-fighting, requires a person to act decisively. It insists on an absolute identification between one’s thoughts and one’s actions in a time of
crisis. To hesitate is to risk death. And for both James and SAR, this is worth all of the risk.

Though neither SAR nor James might put it this way, what both seem to value here is the ability to commit to action, and how that commitment provides a kind of retroactive certainty. In “The Will to Believe,” James describes two possible and interdependent positions one can take with regard to certainty and action, both for crucially important, life-changing options, and for ordinary. The *empiricist* gathers data and seeks to be convinced of the truth of his or her own understanding of reality. The “empiricists think that although we may attain [truth], we cannot infallibly know when” (James, “Will to Believe” 723). So the empiricist is often in a state of (sometimes) productive doubt about what he or she might know, and this leads to the extension of the “research.” The empiricist waits for certainty before acting, a certainty that never comes. The *absolutist*, on the other hand, makes a commitment to a certain version of events or description of reality. Believing that “we not only can attain to knowing truth, but we can *know when* we have attained to knowing it” (James, “Will to Believe” 723). These are not two fixed types of people, but two psychological states that any one can inhabit. What SAR seems to be providing, in these war equivalents, are arenas in which a person must cease being an empiricist and be an absolutist. Perhaps the “sickness” or the state of being “lost” that Jake and his friends experience as a steady state is this sense of uncertainty. These war equivalents or the “moral equivalent of war” require the commitment to some simple act, even if it is for the sake of survival. The emergency creates the necessity for action, and it is action that is prized.
As James lays out the grand scheme for the “moral equivalent of war,” we see
that, interestingly, the attempt to generate a person’s natural, instinctive responses is
through a war against nature. James describes labor as a “blood tax” in a war against
nature for the benefit of society as a whole, as well as for one’s own development.

If now—and this is my idea—there were, instead of military conscription
a conscription of the whole youthful population to form for a certain
number of years a part of the army enlisted against Nature, the injustice
would tend to be evened out, and numerous other goods to the
commonwealth would follow. The military ideals of hardihood and
discipline would be wrought into the growing fibre of the people; no one
would remain blind as the luxurious classes now are blind, to man’s
relations to the globe he lives on, and to the permanently sour and hard
foundations of his higher life. To coal and iron mines, to freight trains, to
fishing fleets in December, to dishwashing, clothes-washing, and window-
washing, to road-building and tunnel-making, to foundries and stoke-
holes, and to the frames of sky-scrapers, would our gilded youths be
drafted off, according to their choice, to the childishness knocked out of
them, and to come back into society with healthier sympathies and soberer
ideas. They would have paid their blood-tax, done their own part in the
immemorial human warfare against nature; they would tread the earth
more proudly, the women would value them more highly, they would be
better fathers and teachers of the following generation. (“Moral Equivalent
of War” 669)

Analysis of this density can begin with the observation that for James, only the men need
go to war, and their martial spirit will be sufficient to save “the people” from the
feminizing, infantilizing depredations of the ease of the “luxurious classes.” Above we
noted the racist, eugenicist, and sexist overtones of some of James’s cultural and
psychological analysis. Here we see the classist condescension come to the fore. In such
moments, it is hard to take him seriously as a philosopher. Yet there is a deeper
connection between these bombastic offenses and James’s larger project. James seems to
be mesmerized by power and the conquest of nature, and sees it in religious terms. His

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1902 proposal for the “moral equivalent of war” he articulates, after all, in the chapter “The Value of Saintliness” in the Varieties. His valorization of physical labor and appeal to national pride can be seen as tactics to redirect the spirit of American empire, if it could not be countenanced directly. James’s interest as a scientist and philosopher is with the private individual, and not as much with the fate of the nation or any institution. In the Varieties he reminds the reader, “it is very important to insist on the distinction between religion as an individual personal function, and religion as an institutional, corporate, or tribal product” (334). The “institutional, corporate, or tribal products” are merely the manifestations of a much more interesting set of questions and responses for any individual. “The religious experience which we are studying is that which lives itself out within the private breast” (Varieties 335). Even with this clarification, it may be impossible to take James’s call in a very positive light, since the moral equivalent of war that he proposes is nearly as suspect in some ways as a call for actual war might be. Having registering that criticism, there is a further issue with James’s call, which is, after all, aimed to create the demand for heroic action.

There is no guarantee that by putting oneself in mortal danger the right response will be elicited. Demanding labor can do much damage to bodies and spirits, even if it ultimately does not break a person. James seems not to recognize that in war or in the war substitutes that he recommends, voluntary poverty and demanding physical labor, even when operating at a high pitch, people will make poor judgments. Emergencies do not always stimulate people to action at all, let alone the right action. And even if those subject to mortal danger do become “absolutists,” they may still be severely injured or
killed. Not everyone survives combat, after all. We see in _SAR_ that war inflicts a permanent and severe wound, not just on the bodies of the survivors, but on their deeper selves. And that is only if they survive. We must see James’s call for even a moral equivalent of this carnage as suspect, yet perhaps in line with the fascination for expressions of power in the age of the dynamo. American historian and cultural critic Henry Adams wrote (in the third person) of his own fascination with the spirituality of power upon visiting the Great Exposition of 1900.

[T]o Adams the dynamo became a symbol of infinity. As he grew accustomed to the great gallery of machines, he began to feel the forty-foot dynamos as a moral force, much as the early Christians felt the Cross … Before the end one began to pray to it; inherited instinct taught the natural expression of man before silent and infinite force. (380)

It is power for power’s sake, and how it engenders awe and commitment—the certainty of the absolutist—in the battle to dominate nature, by hand or by machine made by hand, that fascinates Adams, and that James most values.

By 1926 the “lost generation” may not have chosen the dynamo as a symbol for their spiritual longing, but in _SAR_ the bull-fight, at least, symbolized that they still saw the battle against nature as a religious one. As in James, this a gendered battle, as only men are active participants in any of the attempts to dominate “brute” nature in the bullring or the streets of Pamplona. As the central part of a religious festival, the battle between bull-fighter and bull is the particular event which serves synecdochally for the general religious spirit of the townspeople and spectators. Just as priests in this Catholic region of Spain are both representatives of God and conduits to the divine for parishioners, the toreadors engaged in their blood-sport provide access to the divine, and
anyone can participate in this experience simply by being present. The narrator, Jake, describes the whole event as a kind of Dionysian festival. “The fiesta … kept up day and night for seven days. The dancing kept up, the drinking kept up, the noise went on. The things that happened could only have happened during a fiesta. Everything became quite unreal finally and it seemed as though nothing could have any consequences. It seemed out of place to think of consequences during a fiesta” (*SAR* 158). The religious fervor of this week-long bacchanalia seemed to suspend even the fundamental laws of causation and time. The festival is also a proxy for war. “The fiesta exploded” (156). “The café was like a battleship stripped for action” (157). “The ball of smoke hung in the sky like a shrapnel burst” (157). Battle turns any empiricist into an absolutist. As in James, it is commitment and certainty that is the goal.

We may or may not sympathize with James’s lament about the lost heroism of life in late modernity and the desire for action to provide a sense of certainty and the thrill of engagement. But even *SAR* shows that war substitutes like boxing and bull-fighting often fail to stimulate combatants to act with more than a pure, animal-like will to survive and dominate, even kill. Or the demands may engender cowardly action. There are a number of other bull-fighters, for example, who have learned how to provide the appearance of danger, but who do not actually work close enough to the bull to risk injury. Comparing some of the other bull-fighters to Romero’s expertise, Jake says, “The others twisted themselves like cork-screws, their elbows raised, and leaned against the flanks of the bull after his horns had passed, to give a faked look of danger. Afterward, all that was faked turned bad and gave an unpleasant feeling” (171). The narration also asks the reader to
regard Robert Cohn as in some sense artificial. Though he is a technically proficient boxer, he lacks the grit and nerve and certainly the “grace under pressure” that the reader admires in Romero and, to some degree, Jake. Ultimately, no character lives up to the heroic standards that James lays out. James did not even take the vow of poverty, as he recommends in the first proposal for the “moral equivalent of war,” and nor does he take on hard physical labor as in the second. He remains on the sidelines ready to send other men to the battles against nature. Jake, too, is merely a spectator of various forms of combat. As we saw, his “participation” in the bull-fights is vicarious at best, or perhaps even distanced and objective. In the next section we will, perhaps, discover how Jake’s spectatorship draws the reader in to preside with him over the violence, and what this means for an making empathic connection with his suffering.

Sympathy and Understanding Elude Language

A number of critics have noted the deliberate similarities between SAR and the grail quest. The grail stories that Hemingway most likely would have been familiar with is Jessie L. Weston’s From Ritual to Romance (1920), a study of Arthurian legends from a variety of traditions, and James Frazer’s The Golden Bough (1890). T.S. Eliot references the former in his notes on his poem The Waste Land (1922), which Hemingway certainly read. Hemingway was also acquainted with F. Scott Fitzgerald and his novel The Great Gatsby, which similarly draws on the above sources and came out in 1925. Each work is “an elegy on Western civilization, only instead of rejoicing at the end for the rebirth or metamorphosis of a demigod, [it] remained uncertain whether any
renewal or cultural fertility or creative power was possible” (Adams 246). The actual grail legends that these writers would have encountered in Weston and Frazer vary, but they have in common a Fisher King whose genitals are wounded, rendering him sterile or impotent, it is not clear, and whose lands are concomitantly barren. Weston writes, “[T]he story postulates a close connection between the vitality of a certain King, and the prosperity of his kingdom; the forces of the ruler being weakened or destroyed, by wound, sickness, old age, or death, the land becomes Waste, and the task of the hero is that of restoration” (Weston 23). The king can neither fully recover nor die, and the lands cannot recover, unless and until a worthy knight asks the question that will heal all. The legends vary, but the question is either, “Whom does the grail serve?” (the French Perceval), “Uncle, what is the trouble?” (the German Parzival), or some variation that makes clear that the questing hero must exhibit interest in the suffering of the Fisher King and his domain (Weston 20). Significantly, when the questing knight comes to the Fisher King’s court, no one provides any explanation, interpretation, or guidance of any kind that might help Parzival in his quest, a quest in which the king and his court clearly want him to succeed. This last point is important, I think, but it has thus far not received any deep critical attention.

There is a crucial wordlessness in the Fisher King scene that is paralleled in both SAR and James, and it is, in all three I think, related to a hope for sympathetic connections between people. In other words, when one falls silent at critical points, it is in order to create a space for another person to make a connection, and this connection is through sympathy rather than through linguistically mediated understanding. I will begin
with a comparison of this “wordlessness” in both James and SAR and then draw the Fisher King episodes again into the investigation.

Both Hemingway and James have their suspicions about language. In different but related ways, they each understand how deceptive language can be, both when we use it to understand our own thoughts and experiences, and when we try to communicate those thoughts and experiences to others. Writing about “The Methods and Snares of Psychology” in *Principles I*, James describes a more general “snare” of language.

The absence of a special vocabulary for subjective facts hinders the study of all but the very coarsest of them … Whenever we have made a word, [empiricists writers] say, to denote a certain group of phenomena, we are prone to suppose a substantive entity existing beyond the phenomena, of which the word shall be the name.

James goes on to describe the reverse error—the lack of a word suggesting that “no entity can be there; and so we come to overlook phenomena whose existence would be patent to us all” (195). This suspicion of language is perhaps what contributes to Hemingway’s “iceberg principle.” Neither James nor Hemingway dispense with language, of course. But they are quite cautious in its use. Where James would write about the “same” thing in multiple ways and from multiple angles, Hemingway would point to something through very pared down description and no analysis. These diametrically opposed strategies are meant to achieve the same effect on the reader: to create in the reader the experience of the thing pointed at—the scene to witness or the argument to consider. Wolfgang Iser’s critique of Ivy Compton-Burnett’s *A Heritage and Its History*, a critically acclaimed 1959 novel written entirely in character dialogue with “only the occasional, neutral observation” (237) will be helpful here. Like *SAR*, the reader is given almost no direct
interpretation of the actions or interactions among characters. “[V]ery often there is no indication at all as to who is speaking” (Iser 237). According to Iser, the lack of an authorial or narrative voice to interpret the characters and events requires a more active role for the reader.

[T]he dialogue technique and the extreme sparsity and neutrality of the author’s interpolations reduce narrative to a bare minimum. In this way, we are confronted directly by the actual ‘reality’ of the characters, instead of by an edited version of that reality, so that both author and reader appear to stand at an almost identical distance from the people they are observing … [T]he greater [the author’s] reserve, the more acute will be our attention. Thus the very passiveness of the author’s presentation acts as a stimulus to activate the reader. (Iser 239)

Because the reader is at the same “distance” from the action as the narrator, the reader is invited to feel like a nearly equal experiencer of the action. SAR differs from A Heritage and Its History in that it does have a good deal of action, and the narrator, Jake, certainly provides some access to his unspoken and private thoughts. But they are similar in the narrator’s reticence about anything but what is happening, and therefore engender a similarly “activated” reader. In Chapter XIV Jake’s introspective monologue contains an interesting clue that guides the reading experience. “I turned on the light again and read. I read the Turgnieff. I knew that now, reading it in the oversensitized state of my mind after much too much brandy, I would remember it somewhere, and afterward it would seem as though it had really happened to me. I would always have it” (SAR 153). This idea that a reader can or ought to feel as if the events of the novel are part of his or her lived experience is one of Hemingway’s goals, and very much connected with the

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78 Iser writes “author’s” but must mean “narrator’s” here.
“iceberg principle.” In the Plimpton interview, Hemingway says, “First I have tried to eliminate everything unnecessary to conveying experience to the reader so that after he or she has read something it will become a part of his or her experience and seem actually to have happened” (29). As I note above in my review of the criticism of Ramsey and Cirino, the SAR narrator’s spare reporting and lack of interpretation of the meaning of events invites the reader to provide much of the interpretation. In this way, the “witnessing” (through reading) of the events and the interactions among characters in the fictional world of the story become experiences for the reader.

Ramsey wrote, “[Hemingway] wanted his books somehow to be action, to escape thought” (92). This is stated too strongly, though, and we might better say that understanding the story is not an act of mere thought, but involves engagement, or a kind of creative activity. Too much talk, to paraphrase James, inhibits that interdependence between thinking and acting and keeps us from the “return to life.” James also characterizes his suspicion of thinking and language in terms of abstract concepts. While “too much talking” interferes with authentic communication of experience and understanding, abstractions interfere with engaging with reality. While abstract concepts are certainly necessary for experience to be something more than raw sensations to an experiencer, and for our actions to be legible in some sense, James cautioned that abstractions and concepts could overwhelm and distort experience.

79 In this section I rely more on Hemingway’s intentions as an author, but I am not identifying what the novel actually does with what Hemingway intends it to do. As in other sections, and as I state in the Introduction, I accept the spirit of Wimsatt and Beardsley’s “The Intentional Fallacy” (1966), which is that the text has an ontological status independent of the author’s intentions. And like them I treat the author’s stated intentions as relevant clues in searching out the meaning of the work.
Let me give the name of ‘vicious abstractionism’ to the way of using concepts which may be thus described: We conceive a concrete situation by singling out some salient or important feature in it, and classing it under that; then, instead of adding to its previous characters all the positive consequences which the new way of conceiving it may bring, we proceed to use our concept privatively; reducing the originally rich phenomenon to the naked suggestions of that name abstractly taken, treating it as a case of ‘nothing but’ that concept and acting as if all the other characters from out of which the concept is abstracted were expunged. (James, Meaning 249)

Note that James here does not employ a definition of truth or write about how abstraction leads to error. For James truth is a way of describing the ability to interact with the world. He goes on, “Abstraction, functioning in this way, becomes a means of arrest far more than a means of advance in thought” (James, Meaning 249). For James concepts are true to the degree that they are useful in fostering our individual and temporal engagement with reality. “[M]y thinking is first and last and always for the sake of my doing, and I can only do one thing at a time” (Principles II 333). For Jake Barnes too, the capacity to act is most prized. Concepts may help, but too much time spent in the abstract, too much time thinking, may impair the capacity for action.

While still in Paris, Jake and his friend Harvey were talking with Robert Cohn about the difficulty Cohn seemed to have getting his life out of the subjunctive and into the imperative, as James might say. Harvey asks Robert,

“Tell us right off. Don’t think. What would you rather do if you could do anything you wanted?”

Cohn started to consider.

“Don’t think. Bring it right out.”

“I don’t know,” Cohn said. “What’s it all about, anyway?”

The intimation of this exchange is that Robert is not able to have authentic feeling responses or desires because he is too concerned with analyzing the meaning of the
question and his own response. When Robert asks, “What’s it all about, anyway?” he is referring to the context of the conversation: why are Harvey and Jake interested? But the reader is invited to compare this statement to Jake’s rumination, referenced in my argument above. “Perhaps as you went along you did learn something. I did not care what it was all about. All I wanted to know was how to live in it. Maybe if you found out how to live in it you learned from that what it was all about” (SAR 152, emphasis mine). What this suggests is that Jake’s learning “what it was all about” is emergent; it develops out of lived experiences as part of his journey. And this journey can only happen if one does not get in the way of one’s own action with too much talking or too much interpretation of what it all means.

Hemingway’s literary style makes implicit claims about what a person can know, what is worth knowing, and how the limits and possibilities of knowledge are intimately connected to stylistic concerns. In an interview with George Plimpton (1958), Hemingway describes his aim to resist interpretation as much as possible, but does not fully explain why:

I always try to write on the principle of the iceberg. There is seven eighths of it under water for every part that shows. Anything you know you can eliminate and it only strengthens your iceberg. It is the part that doesn’t show. If a writer omits something because he does not know it then there is a hole in the story. (Plimpton 29)

Notice that Hemingway provides a negative definition for his style. His task is to strip away all the interpretation that he more naturally would include in rendering the characters and the action. He simply reports what happens. This principle is reinforced by
Jake. For him it is not helpful to have try to fix reality in some formulaic way (“what’s it all about”).

I suggest that what Hemingway means when he says, “Anything you know you can eliminate,” is that “you can eliminate anything that provides the meaning of those actions.” Hemingway the writer is not being obtuse or deliberately obstructing the reader’s access to the characters and their actions. He is simply refusing to provide interpretations of those actions, or explain what they mean—in abstract moral, psychological, or any other terms—because he cannot say for sure what they mean. And he certainly cannot anticipate what they mean to an individual reader. As James expresses it in *The Meaning of Truth*, language and concepts are deceptively fixing and finalizing, and this distorts experience. James writes, “Experience, as we know, has ways of boiling over, and making us correct our present formulas” (vii). Put differently, reality is pluralistic, and can never be portrayed in any single formulation. We remain able to comprehend experience as long as our disposition toward it is questioning and open rather than dependent upon neat propositions to sum it up, to interpret it and “finalize” it.

Hemingway’s style similarly refuses finalizing. The things he does not know are worth writing because they are still alive for him, and will be alive for the reader, too. Again we can recall James when he writes, “I must deafen you to talk, by showing” rather than telling in order to stimulate your “return to life.” Hemingway “did not tell his readers how to react or how to judge the action; they had to become involved.” (Reynolds, *Novel of the Twenties* 6). He invites the reader to interpret the characters and events just as he is interpreting them. The rest of the iceberg must be inferred. We might
say, paradoxically, that both the writer and the reader deal in uncertainties in order to convey the fullness of an experience. According to Iser, the uncertainty lasts even after a reader has arrived at an interpretation. For there are always reasons to believe that there is, literally and figuratively, more to the story. The questions that the story raises are never fully answered inside the story.

Expectations are scarcely ever fulfilled in truly literary texts. If they were, then such texts would be confined to the individualization of a given expectation, and one would inevitably ask what such an intention was supposed to achieve. Strangely enough, we feel that any confirmative effect—such as we implicitly demand of expository texts—is a defect in a literary text. For the more a text individualizes or confirms an expectation it has initially aroused, the more aware we become of its didactic purpose, so that at best we can only accept or reject the thesis forced upon us. More often than not, the very clarity of such texts will make us want to free ourselves from their clutches. (Iser 278)

The gaps that remain open are not simply cognitive gaps, but, on my reading, invitations to care. Hemingway’s iceberg principle is not merely a stylistic or aesthetic choice, but a tactic for interpersonal connection. By refusing to close off interpretation of characters and events with his own interpretation, he allows the story to meet the reader as an invitation to question. In this way I think style intersects with and supports one of the novel’s mythic allusions—Jake Barnes as the Fisher King. The parallels include the genital wound, the sense of a world laid waste (in some version of the myth as a result of uniquely male hubris), and the “lost generation” that can neither fully live nor die. And there have been several studies attempting to align the characters in the grail legend with those in *SAR* (see Adams et al). Richard P. Adams sees Jake in the role of Parzival, as well. “Jake Barnes is a Fisher King and also the questing knight seeking to heal the
king—in this case himself; healing the land is beyond him” (125). I suggest an alternative interpretation: the questing knight who must ask the healing question is the reader.

If “quest” is the right terms to apply to deeper currents in the entire generation, then any reader is potentially on that quest, too. There are several places where Jake references his injury, but provides no details, and does not say exactly what the physical problem is. Even when Georgette asks directly, “What’s the matter with you, anyway?” Jake simply replies, “I got hurt in the war” (24). The reader can guess well enough what the physical injury is, but this deliberate vagueness and lack of explanation represents that larger mystery of the story. The narration guides the reader to sustain an implied question, which is not simply about Jake’s physical wound but his and the “lost generation’s” entire orientation to life: “What ails you all?” This question, when asked from a place of compassion, is not simply a request for information, but is indicative of a desire to comprehend in concept and feeling, another’s painful reality.

Empathy may be a goal of much fiction, but not all fiction succeeds. Indeed, James points out that fiction can even enable the disconnection from others and a refusal to “return to life.” Here he is discussing habit in the chapter by that name, and is describing a person’s “aggregate of tendencies to act” when subject to a feeling.

All goods are disguised by the vulgarity of their concomitants, in this work-a-day world; but woe to him who can only recognize them when he thinks them in their pure and abstract form! The habit of excessive novel reading and theatre-going will produce true monsters in this line. The weeping of a Russian lady over the fictitious personages in the play, while her coachman is freezing to death on his seat outside, is the sort of thing that everywhere happens on a less glaring scale … One becomes filled with emotions which habitually pass without prompting to any deed, and so the inertly sentimental condition is kept up. (Principles I 125-6)
The Russian lady’s “failure” to act in a sympathetic way is the result of habituation to act in an unsympathetic way toward others, including her freezing coachman.\textsuperscript{80} James does not describe how she developed this habit, but it seems consistent with his observations about the narcotizing effects of language or abstract concepts. That is, even a work of fiction can fail to stimulate the reader or viewer to a sympathetic response. Indeed, this is more the case than not, according to James. The reader (or viewer, in this case) may have an adequate intellectual understanding of the story and “the fictitious personages in the play,” but still not care about the suffering of another human being. Such sentimentality is not about extending care to another, but rather following the programmatic signals of the play, a learned response to the conveyance of certain formulas.\textsuperscript{81} We must look elsewhere to see what is required for the reader to ask the healing question of Jake or other characters.

Susan Sontag makes the point that merely showing or describing suffering is insufficient to engender a compassionate response. In \textit{Regarding the Pain of Others}, she is mostly interested in what photographs of war and other horrific events and conditions mean to the photographer, the consuming public, and other political stakeholders. “Photographs of an atrocity may give rise to opposing responses. A call for peace. A cry for revenge. Or simply the bemused awareness, continually restocked by photographic information, that terrible things happen” (Sontag 13). Simply presenting or representing human suffering has no particular, automatic effect on any viewer. Sontag’s overall

\textsuperscript{80} There are, of course, issues of class at work here, which James implies through the use of these particular figures. But even an analysis of the class issues and material conditions would have to account for the mechanisms (concepts, language, and story) by which class-based prejudices are perpetuated and continue to operate.
project is a response to Virginia Woolf’s 1938 *Three Guineas*, which is itself a response
to a friend’s question, “How in your opinion are we to prevent war?” (Woolf 3). Part of
Woolf’s response is that the costs of war in human pain and suffering must be made
visible and vivid to those who might have a say in war’s prosecution. “Those
photographs are not an argument; they are simply a crude statement of fact addressed to
the eye … [However, w]hen we look at these photographs some fusion takes place within
us; however different the education, the traditions behind us, our sensation are the same;
and they are violent” (Woolf 11). Such visceral reactions will, Woolf writes, tend to
prompt action—viewers will call for an end to the abomination. Sontag notes, though,
that this is in striking contradiction to the facts. War photography is used as much to
justify war as to militate against it. We become consuming spectators of horror, voyeurs
of the lurid suffering and destruction of others. In short, mere representation does not
result in a compassionate response or even disgust or outrage, as Woolf expects.

Would Hemingway be in agreement with Sontag’s claim? In *SAR* there is very
little gore, so he is clearly not intending to shock the reader into an emotional response
through imagery. The violence of the bullfights or the fistfights, and even of the war is
merely reported as events. Perhaps, as William James’s brother Henry wrote, “The war
has used up words; they have weakened, they have deteriorated” (quoted in Sontag 25).
We may wonder whether Hemingway felt similarly about words, and felt that their
economy would better convey experience. But we may also surmise that Hemingway

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82 In *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*, philosopher Elaine Scarry offers another
avenue of investigation. She writes that bodily pain offers the most vibrant, incontrovertible kind of
certainty. When one is in pain, there is no way to doubt it. Interestingly, pain and this certainty is
incommunicable. Pain is not easily capturable and sharable in language (4). “Physical pain does not simply
was careful not to create a spectacle of the violence suffered by Jake, especially, but other characters, too. Perhaps he did not want to create “weeping Russian ladies” among the readership of *SAR*. The reader does at least see how the characters, directly witnessing the gore of the bull-fights, for example, or even the bloody encounter between Robert and Romero, lack sympathy for the victims. Jake coaches Brett about how to watch the blood and death of the bullfight. “’Don’t look at the horses, after the bull hits them,’ I said to Brett. ‘Watch the charge and see the picador try and keep the bull off, but then don’t look again until the horse is dead if it’s been hit’” (*SAR* 166). Jake is recommending the kind of distanced, objective viewing of the gore, and the reader must wonder whether this is the kind of viewing that the reader ought to have of *SAR*, of Jake’s suffering. These characters are not ones we would want to emulate, after all. James’s conception of empathy is less distanced, as he recommends having experiences of want and suffering in order to generate in ourselves the capacity for caring about others.

According to James, “we of the highly educated classes (so called) have most of us got far, far from Nature … We are stuffed with abstract conceptions” (“On a Certain Blindness” 642). The remedy is, he says, “[t]o be imprisoned or shipwrecked or forced into the army” in order to comprehend, directly, the “good life” (642). In the follow-up essay, “What Makes a Life Significant,” he similarly romanticizes the “natural man”
(650), the laborer or the one who lives a hard-scrabble life close to desperation and perpetual want. What he is aiming at is a kind of non-cognitive (or not only cognitive) understanding.

There lies more than a curious speculation in understanding this. It has the most tremendous practical importance … It is the basis of all our tolerance, social, religious, and political. The forgetting of it lies at the root of every stupid and sanguinary mistake that rulers over subject-peoples make.” (“What Makes a Life Significant” 645)

His condescending and romanticized view from above can at best engender only a practical interest in the lives and suffering and even in the happiness of others. He approvingly quotes Tolstoy, who also assumes that “subject-peoples” live happier, more dignified lives and bear their suffering with tranquility and joy (“What Makes a Life Significant” 651). This is as close as James gets to the healing question, “What is the matter?” But it may be worthwhile to reflect upon how tied to pragmatic interest is anyone’s empathy. We may resist such a bloodless, distanced attempt at human connection as in James, and may look for a more emotional or even spiritual explanation for feelings of empathy and a desire to move toward the suffering of another. But we must also recognize that in fact, suffering in another does not always or perhaps even often engender a compassionate response. This is why, perhaps, Parzival’s quest is so significant. Perhaps the task of asking the healing question really is left to those who can access what James calls their “higher powers.”

Neither James nor SAR can force a sympathetic response. Let us return to the epigraph with which I open this entire investigation. James writes, “The return to life can’t come about by talking. It is an act … I must point, point to the mere that of life, and
you by inner sympathy must fill out the *what for yourselves*” (“The Continuity of Experience” 297). Similarly, the Fisher King cannot force Parzival (or Gawain, in some versions) to ask the healing question. All that he, SAR, or James can do is make the invitation. This reinforces the importance of contingency. The person asking the question has to be the right person, or the question will not heal. The reader has to already be the kind who will wonder, and not in a sentimental, Russian lady way, “What is the matter?”

More generally, sympathy cannot be engendered on a program, forced from a reader, or done through rational planning or by understanding the natural laws governing human activity. A prerequisite of sympathy is indeterminacy in setting up the context, providing an opening to the person on the quest, and in communicating the invitation. The likelihood of it not coming off is high, but providing too much rationality and guidance will vitiate the caring and healing response. To return to some of the earlier strategies in this chapter, we might ask how much healing can be done through war or war equivalents. It is worth noting that the various versions of the grail story were very bloody affairs. Parzival’s itinerant quest was essentially to wander and look for injustices that he would rectify by battling other knights, usually to the death. Yet amidst all of that killing, it is the compassionate question that stands out as the act that not only heals the Fisher King and restores his lands and people to health, but provides the indication that Parzival has become the worthy and chosen knight that had been foretold.
Chapter 5: Epilogue

Throughout this project I have often been provoked by a set of gnawing questions. James writes that the point of his work is to leave off talking and intellectualizing and “return to life,” to the unspeakable, incomprehensible what of life. Much of his larger project also attests to this desire. So is it strange that it takes him millions of words to say it? And if one goal of this project is to understand what he means with this sentiment, have I truly understood it if I have spent my own tens of thousands of words?

Accepting the ham-fisted way that these questions are phrased, the questions and the underlying unease are quite serious. Indeed, part of the point of asking such provocative questions is to engender a variety of responses, thereby keeping the questions and this project alive. One simple response, though, is that, as we have seen, thinking, writing, and acting are not neatly bounded activities, and nor are they naturally opposed. Thinking and speaking are actions, and actions are ways of thinking and of communicating. There are other responses to these clumsy questions, including the following. The “return to life” is only part of his project, and of mine. We also want to know what this project is, in language and concepts. And we want to play with our ideas in order to discover what we could not have anticipated. And, speaking for myself, I want my own words to stimulate that “return to life” in a reader. To that end, I present a brief essayistic discussion in the spirit of the long tradition of the “defense of poetry.” It is not
intended to “sum up” this project, but it is quite consonant with what the voices in this study have said about the relationship between thinking and acting. It is meant only to provide additional responses to those abiding questions above.

*Enstrangement*

In 1925 Russian Formalist literary critic Viktor Shklovsky invented a term, *ostraniene*, meaning roughly “enstrangement.” He wanted to identify how figurative language (genres such as poetry or the novel) worked, and what distinguished it from communicative prose language. Communicative prose conveys things in as economical a way as possible, they wrote. Only the barest hints of the underlying idea need be transferred through spoken or written symbols that function like tags on packages, quickly and partially heard or read. “[O]bjects are grasped spatially, in the blink of an eye.” Ideally, communication happens automatically, with little expenditure of thoughtful effort. “We do not see them, we merely recognize them by their primary characteristics. The object passes before us, as if it were prepackaged. Gradually, under the influence of this generalizing perception, the object fades away” (Shklovsky 5). Communicating in this way becomes reduced to formula that provides for efficiency of information transference. Figurative language, on the other hand, does not derive its value and interest from communicative efficiency. It makes things *strange*. It arrests habitual thinking and forces us, both speaker/writer and listener/reader, to focus on the language itself and the mode of conveying ideas and experiences. The effect is more than superficial and aesthetic; it can affect our reality.
And so, in order to return sensation to our limbs, in order to make us feel objects, to make a stone feel stony, man has been given the tool of art. The purpose of art, then, is to lead us to a knowledge of a thing through the organ of sight instead of recognition. By “enstranging” objects and complicating form, the device of art makes perception long and “laborious.” The perpetual process in art has a purpose all its own and ought to be extended to the fullest. *Art is a means of experiencing the process of creativity. The artifact itself is quite unimportant.* (Shklovsky 6)

By forcing attention on the sights and sounds—the medium of the expression—we experience the *new* being born, “the process of creativity.” At stake for Shklovsky is not simply an aesthetic principle or a stylistic tactic but our relationship to reality and our own experiences. The literary device is the surface presentation of something going on more deeply.

Habitual ways of seeing, hearing, and ultimately thinking and acting deaden us to our very existence and the life around us. Even our own experiences and actions pass before us without our noticing, as if we are in a daze while our unconscious performs routines that fail to awaken us from our walking slumber. “And so, held accountable for nothing, life fades into nothingness. Automatization eats away at things, at clothes, at furniture, at our wives, and at our fear of war” (Shklovsky 5). Shklovsky is here remarking on an entry in Tolstoy’s diary in which he recounts such somnambulant “activity.” “[I]f the complex life of many people takes place entirely on the level of the unconscious, then it’s as if this life had never been” (Tolstoy, quoted by Shklovsky 5). Even our own experiences and activities are mechanical and formulaic, and seem not to require our participation, and we hesitate to intrude on this smoothly functioning system even to vote *yes* or *no* from one moment to the next.
Shklovsky’s response to this automatic living? Be thwarted! Be disturbed! Defy your habitual thinking! Use—as both writer and reader—language that does not package and travel well, but takes some work. Describing Tolstoy’s devices, Shklovsky writes:

[H]e does not call a thing by its name, that is, he describes it as if it were perceived for the first time, while an incident is described as if it were happening for the first time. In addition, he foregoes the conventional names of the various parts of a thing, replacing them instead with the names of corresponding parts of other things. (6)

Figurative language is “impeded, distorted speech.” It requires decoding. It is, as Musil wrote, an irritant necessary for the creation of beauty. “Writing, like the pearl, is a disease” (MwQ 692) That disturbance, that enstrangement experience, is beauty. Making the stone stony again is only instrumental to making the perceiver alive again to experience. But it is not only the purview of the figurative writer, the professional novelist or poet. Enstrangement is also a term that fits what the philosopher does.

In Plato’s cave allegory, the prisoners see only the shadows of their own movements, hear only their own voices reflected back to them. Plato assumes that the subject of their conversation would be propositional: “the naming of what was actually before them” (Plato 547), mistaking this identification of shadows for knowledge of things. And when one of them is disturbed, thwarted in his role as passive spectator and forced into the light, he resists. He cannot see, so blinded is he by the sun, the original fire. But as he adjusts, he is able to make sense of the objects around him, and “sees” for the first time the false experience and knowledge of the cave for the canard that it is. In Shklovsky’s terms again,

The purpose of the [figurative] image is not to draw our attention closer to that which this image stands for, but rather to allow us to perceive the
object in a special way, in short, to lead us to a “vision” of this object rather than mere “recognition.” (Shklovsky 10)

His temporary blindness on emerging from the cave has been for the sake of a deeper vision. But Plato cannot let him linger in that place of light and true vision. “[T]hey must be made to descend again among the prisoners in the den, and partake of their labour and honours” for the sake of the happiness of the whole State (Plato 553). Attaining clarity of vision is a political act. To “return to life” threatens those who never questioned the veracity of their shadows, who never wondered at their situation, who never felt antagonistically curious. How else would a prisoner’s curiosity be registered by his jailers, except as antagonistic?

Shklovsky thought that it was the special tool of figurative writers, but neither he nor his followers were able to articulate the set of criteria that demarcated figurative language from “ordinary” language. Context, genre, and communicative purpose are all qualities of any particular text, as well. Yet his fundamental point about the experience of enstrangement still holds, no matter what particular linguistic devices are used to foster that experience. Enstrangement is, in short, the creation of a disturbance in the given narrative of reality. The need for it will never be exhausted, because the given narrative continues to arrogate last week’s original insights, and we become habituated to them. The rebellion against our own comfortable ideas is ceaseless. Perhaps my own tens of thousands of words should be considered just an episode in this perpetual rebellion against complacency.


