Henry James and the Ethics of Recollection

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Abstract

Henry James’s melancholic quality of mind enabled him to understand his relation to the past so that he could free himself of its hold without, at the same time, separating himself from it. It shaped his way of living. As James demonstrates in his notebooks, his past remains with him through his awareness and naming of it. His melancholy relation to the past enables him to use it as part of his identity and, at the same time, as part of the changes to that identity. This is James’s melancholy practice of “facing” his past. His way of using memory, engaging the past as he recalls it, the uses to which he puts the products of that engagement, establishes the ethics of recollection. To develop this study, the essay uses work on melancholy from Sigmund Freud, Jonathan Flatley, Heather Love, David McWhirter, and Lynda Zwinger.

Keywords: memory, autobiography, melancholy, mourning.

In late August 1881, towards the very end of a six-year absence from the United States, Henry James completed the serial version of The Portrait of a Lady. From that time until his departure from England on his way to the United States on 20 October, he attended to the Portrait’s book version. Finishing Portrait was a condition James set for himself in order to return to his family and homeland. It was a condition of living he established for his reunification with his family. It was also, therefore, a condition from which his sense of himself as an American and as a member of the James family depended. Following his arrival in the United States, James began in Boston on 25 November and in a never-before-used writing book he carried with him from London, what became a long, 8,300-word entry, which he finished on 20 December in New York. In that long entry, as he almost always did in his journals and notebooks, James wrote to himself. He didn’t, that is, write for himself to keep records, for example. He wrote to himself, addressed himself, as if one part of his imagination were speaking to and about and interacting with, another. Thus opens the journal entry:

If I should write here all that I might write, I should speedily fill this as yet unspotted blank-book, bought in London six months ago, but hitherto unopened. It is so long since I have kept any notes, taken any memoranda, written down my current reflections, taken a sheet of paper, as it were, into my confidence. Meanwhile so much has come and gone, so much that it is now too late to catch, to reproduce, to preserve. I have lost too much by
losing, or rather by not having acquired, the note-taking habit. It might be of great profit to me; and now that I am older, that I have more time, that the labour of writing is less onerous to me, and I can work more at my leisure, I ought to endeavour to keep, to a certain extent, a record of passing impressions, of all that comes, that goes, that I see, and feel, and observe. To catch and keep something of life—that’s what I mean. Here I am back in America, for instance, after six years of absence, and likely while here to see and learn a great deal that ought not to become mere waste material. Here I am, da vero, and here I am likely to be for the next five months. I am glad I have come—it was a wise thing to do. I needed to see again les miens, to revive my relations with them, and my sense of the consequences, are a part of one’s life, and the best life, the most complete, is the one that takes full account of such things. (*Complete Notebooks* 213-14)

The journal entry that follows this opening is important because it contains passages that many have used to characterize the novelist. These sentences, for example, could serve as an emblem of James’s immigration to England, thus to “Europe,” and his consequent success as a novelist: “I am 37 years old, I have made my choice, and God knows that I have now no time to waste. My choice is the old world—my choice, my need, my life” (*Complete Notebooks* 214). Another passage from the same entry highlights the nature of James’s commitment to England/Europe and to the life of a professional fiction writer when James declared to himself that “one must choose [either the old world or the new one]. No European writer is called upon to assume that terrible burden, and it seems hard that I should be. The burden is necessarily greater for an American—for he must deal, more or less, even if only by implication, with Europe: whereas no European is obliged to deal in the least with America” (*Complete Notebooks* 214). These communications with himself are signals of what James would seek to achieve for the rest of his life. They are James’s discussion with and about himself of how he understood his relation to his past and to his future as he wrote. They are impressions provoked by a life he was facing again in the United States, would leave behind, but would never forget. They outline the aims of his professional and personal lives.

At the same time, the long 25 November/20 December journal entry is important for James’s less-remembered “melancholy” meditation on his six-year absence from the United States (*Complete Notebooks* 223). We learn from the journal that those six years away from his home and family were important to James’s professional development and personal growth. During that time, he established himself in London and became known as a respected and sought-after professional fiction writer and critic. During those years he “became” Henry James, as James himself seems to realize in the writing of this journal entry. It is James’s “melancholy” meditation over that crucial period in his life that deserves attention because it suggests the habit of mind that enabled and facilitated James’s development and growth, the ethics of his life, and that is represented in this journal passage. James’s melancholy habit of mind enabled him to understand his relation to the past so that he could free himself of its hold without, at the same time, separating
himself from it. It shaped his way of living. James’s melancholy relation to the past, then, is different from the one Freud describes in “Mourning and Melancholia,” where through the successful process of mourning, one releases oneself from an attachment (object cathexis) to the past (248-50). As James demonstrates in the journal, his past remains with him through his awareness and naming of it. His melancholy relation to the past enables him to use it as part of his identity and, at the same time, as part of the changes to that identity. This is James’s melancholy practice of “facing” his past. His way of using memory, engaging the past as he recalls it, the uses to which he puts the products of that engagement, establishes the ethics of recollection. James’s writing to himself, engaging with himself, in the journal passage under discussion provides a written example of his melancholy facing. It also suggests James’s way of engaging the world outside of himself, his way of deploying the ethics of recollection, too.

I use “melancholy” not as the medicalized term, “melancholia.” Nor do I use “melancholy” in relation to mourning. I use it the way James and others used it as a term related to “pensiveness,” “introspection,” “self-objectification,” and “meditation.” As Robert Burton noted so long ago in The Anatomy of Melancholy, fear and grief are not necessarily components of melancholy (170). Instead, melancholy can be a way of knowing, as Burton wrote, for “they get their knowledge by books, I mine by melancholizing” (22). Jonathan Flatley offers a conceptualization of melancholy that seems close to James’s as well as to Burton’s own “melancholizing,” when Flatley observes that “some melancholias are the opposite of depressing, functioning as the very mechanism through which one may be interested in the world” (2). Thus Flatley further conceptualizes how melancholy functions for some:

In the melancholic state, the world becomes a set of objects with no necessary function or meaning, the object world has been emptied of significance, and in this sense it has also been prepared for allegorical transformation. The melancholic state of mind, then, even as it dwells on ruins and loss, is at the same time liberated to imagine how the world might be transformed, how things might be entirely different from the way they are. (37)

Melancholy, then, serves as a mechanism of self-estrangement and “self-distancing … [that] allows one to see oneself as if from outside” (Flatley 80). In this way, melancholic self-evaluation enables James to inspect his memories. It provides a means for James to recognize and name memories, and then to change parts of himself related to those memories, without abandoning them, abandoning important parts of his past, abandoning himself. Finally, by putting the feelings of loss into language, making “conscious the unconscious” (Flatley 62), the melancholy person may so nearly effect his or her own therapy. Such therapeutic self-evaluation is Jamesian “facing.”

A number of the impressions James recalled, named, considered, and wrote about in the journal while in his “melancholy mood” are surprising and remarkable. And they seem to have surprised James too as he remembered them. For example, he recalled that
his decision to live in Paris rather than London in 1875 and 1876 was due to “all sorts of obstacles” in London that had discouraged him from living there (Complete Notebooks 215). At the same time, he seems to have realized as he wrote to himself about facing that recollection that “I wonder greatly now, in the light of my present knowledge of England, that these obstacles should have seemed so large, so overwhelming and depressing as they did at that time. When a year later I came really to look them in the face, they absolutely melted away” (Complete Notebooks 215). Crucial here is that James’s “facing” what was “overarching and depressing” about his past resulted in the “melt[ing] away” of those obstacles. Also crucial is that though what threatened is gone, the experiences remain with James in another state, no longer threats, as he recollects, names, and then records in writing a memory both of what he feared and also overcame. The naming of those memories and his overcoming now remain in the journal as writing. Once-threatening aspects of life have become part of him, his identity, and how he represented himself to himself. The particular status of that memory now recalled and re-remembered depends on James’s melancholy, through which he recalls and remembers.

Writing in his Boston hotel room and from East 25th Street in New York, in a “melancholy mood” that recognizes the past not as experience lost but as memory that was yet present as recollection, James preserved what he had examined, considered, and remade in that mood. Through that recollection, examination, and its consequent record in writing, the long journal entry serves as a way James can name and thus accept, “face,” even embrace, his life, including the shameful, the feared, and the unsuccessful as preparation for completing the process of change. The seeing and naming, the overall process of facing, enable him to have a sense of control over the past, over even his secrets, at least as a function of memory and language. Remembering, recording, and keeping his own past in his own terms provides a way to move beyond what he has been and offers a way to become. This is the same naming and facing, controlling and becoming, he would represent in his 21 July 1910 notebook entry. That entry is one that he probably elaborated for the important Dream of the Louvre section in one of his autobiographical volumes, A Small Boy and Others.

In his notebook entry for 21 July 1910, written immediately after the dream, James wrote that he “Woke up in great relief” (Complete Notebooks 318) from what had been a prolonged depression. In fact, James’s apprehension of the dream seems to have broken the depression. The dream as James rendered it later in A Small Boy and Others, is important because its location, “the wondrous Galerie d’Apollon,” constituted “Style” for James (346). That such a life-changing event occurred in the place that defines style for James is important because during the dream James wrote that he came face to face with “the awful agent, creature or presence” that challenged his dream self for possession of the gallery. The face-to-face confrontation caused the “awful agent, creature or presence” to run away, empowering the Jamesian self in the dream to control the threat, secure the room, and feel consequent calm, confidence, and control. James’s detailed recollection
and analysis of the dream is a result of his way of understanding himself. Not only does James’s melancholic naming and recording of the confrontation with “the awful agent” supply him with a therapeutic way to represent his dream, which he named “the most appalling yet most admirable nightmare of my life” (Small Boy 347). The notebook entry that announces James’s consciousness of the dream and then the more detailed account in *A Small Boy and Others* offer relief because in recalling the dream, James, typically melancholic, articulates it to himself. The articulation then enables James to identify, confront, and overcome his anxieties and fears. That process is important not only for James’s stylizing of those anxieties and fears in the threatening figure he remembers, names, and chases away. It is important for James’s objectification—even ironization—of himself, the source of the dream and its subject, and thus for the way in which he engages the world. The resolution of the “admirable” “nightmare” in the notebook entry and then in its elaboration in *A Small Boy and Others* produces a clear vision of his “imaginative life” “of long before.” That life, developed after the dream, then serves as a point of continuity and thus confidence with the place in life James understands for himself following the dream. James’s facing, his melancholizing, in and through the dream enables him to identify his problems, think about, and work to solve them. Facing brings coherence and meaning to his life. The dream is an example of the way that melancholized memory stylized in writing enabled James to imagine and “face” representations of himself.

James’s melancholy stylizing of memory through facing his consciousness of the past extends William Righter’s point about James that memory recalled in melancholy stands as part of his aim “to turn the moment, the fact of process, into a form of intelligible community” (6). Such an effort, Righter continues, addresses “the late Jamesian sense of loss of context, the half-articulated crisis with its conversion of historical sense into things and place, talismanic objects” (7). Yet James’s facing, naming, and stylizing of memory to narrate his own biography, which stands as his way of representing himself, also happened before the “late James.” It happened in the long 1881 journal entry.

It might seem that the record of a dream and the articulation of his past while in a “melancholy mood” would be two different situations. Yet both depend on James’s recognition and then record of experience. They both depend on his ethical sensibility. Like the novelist from “The Art of Fiction” to whom James recommends, “‘Try to be one of the people on whom nothing is lost!’” (53), James’s consciousness catches everything. Once caught, his melancholy habit of mind impels him to investigate and understand what had been captured. In both the remembering and recording of memories of six years abroad and the dream, what is caught and reported is also memorialized, preserved, and commemorated in writing, not discarded and forgotten. As Lynda Zwinger explains in *Telling in Henry James*, commemoration entails a re-experiencing of the events recalled, but a re-experiencing under new conditions of their having been revised and
commemorated, of their having been restyled some time after their occurrence (e.g. 85-113, 129-30).

James’s particular preservation and reexamination of memory overlaps with two points that David McWhirter made recently on James, memory, and melancholia (close to but different from melancholy). The first point is that:

James … clings less to what has been lost, the lost object, than to the experience of loss itself, whether it be personal or historical; he does not mourn his dead so much as he strives to keep his loss of them alive. And it is this determined, melancholic embrace of loss … that Maisie [who is the central character in James’s novel What Maisie Knew] figures in her knowing act of “looking back,” and that connects her, her fictional peers and James himself to the value and necessity of “Feeling Backward” identified and explored by Heather Love in her 2007 book of the same name [Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History].

“Feeling backward” and James’s embrace of loss as features of his own ongoing sense of himself, at least of his writing and at most of his entire history, are both important because both the “feeling backward” and the “embrace of loss” are components of Jamesian “facing,” through which he understands himself and works to determine his life. In the long journal entry, he “feels backwards,” faces, rewrites, and embraces the first part of his professional career as a way to use it in order to pass on to the next part of his career, his life.

In addition, McWhirter offers a second point that is relevant to thinking about the journal entry and thus to Jamesian melancholy, memory, and the ethics of his recollection:

James aims at what Bahun calls a “practice of countermourning,” a “memorial articulation of the loss that is at the same time expressive and critical,” that responds to a specific “climate of loss” … by “utiliz[ing] the symptomatology of melancholia, thereby retaining” (rather than, as in mourning, “recalling”) “the lost object, in all of its uncognizability” (8-9).

James’s and his characters’ refusals to simply “get over it” or “move on” are not signs of morbidity or depression, but a powerful means of capturing the texture of modern experience and of representing and critiquing modern history, a history (to borrow Jameson’s famous phrase) that consists of what hurts.

McWhirter’s point that James’s melancholy captures and critiques—especially that which hurts—is relevant in a discussion of James’s long journal passage and the autobiographies, at least. To McWhirter’s analysis of James’s representation of memory and melancholy, however, it is worth adding that James’s memorialization of the experience enables him to gain agency over it and thus to become from it.
The long November/December 1881 journal entry assists, even enables, James in becoming the Henry James many recall when they hear or read his name. The circumstances of his return to the United States play an important role in James’s facing, his coming to terms with who he was when he left the United States some six years earlier and also with who he was becoming during those six years abroad. For Henry James had changed since he left for Paris in 1875 and then relocated to London late in 1876. When he departed for Paris, James was a minor fiction writer. By November 1881, he was a celebrated international figure. In 1875, more than thirty years old, he still relied on his father to supplement his income. By November 1881, he was fully independent and in control of his professional life. In 1875 he was decidedly his family’s second son. By November 1881, his parents had given him the role of the eldest. In a little more than a year after writing the long journal entry, he, not William James, who was the family’s eldest child, carried out their father’s last will. There were other important changes during those six years in Europe. In 1875 his parents were relatively healthy. By late 1881, both were failing. In less than a year both were dead. James’s announcement to himself in the journal entry that he would live the rest of his life away from the United States in order to achieve professional success and personal growth underscores his facing the possibility that he would never reside in the United States again. It was professional relationships during his six years’ absence, after all, that he was afraid he couldn’t cultivate and finally did, despite his refusal to name it or to memorialize what fears kept him back other than to say that they were “large,” “overwhelming,” and “depressing” “obstacles.” James’s “feeling backward” to face that experience is interesting not only for the way it shows James’s relation to and use of memory, but also for a question it raises: what was it about these particular moments in the Brunswick Hotel in Boston and East 25th Street in New York that produced the memories and the melancholy analysis of them?

The beginning of the answer might have to do with James’s finishing of The Portrait of a Lady. His completion of the novel had delayed his return to the United States and his family by more than a year (he began to delay his voyage as early as 21 August 1880, and finally departed England 20 October 1881). The delay emphasizes his need to finish the serial and supervise the plan for the novel before and above reuniting with his parents and brothers, with whom he hadn’t been together in “fifteen years” ([letter to Thomas Sargeant Perry, 3 Feb 1882]). James’s promotion of Portrait in his letters establishes a memorial of his intentions and helps to define the value James saw and worked to secure in the completion of the novel, even as it forced him to delay a reunion with his parents and the return to his home country. Richard Brodhead wrote that Portrait was the beginning of “the stage of full-fledged mastery in … [James’s] career” (139). But James’s motives for making the novel his final literary performance before his return to the United States should mark the time as the end of a period when James was driven by desire for fame and fortune as a professional writer and popular public figure. It is the
end of a period when he sought to be a “hit” in London, where, as he confesses to himself in the journal, he could, and did, revel in “complete liberty, and the prospect of profitable work” (Complete Notebooks 218). James didn’t keep this goal or this sense of himself a secret during those six years of professional and personal achievement preceding his return and the writing of the long journal entry. For example, to his mother, having just negotiated the terms of Portrait with Houghton and Osgood and also with Macmillan, he boasted, “I am to receive for the production in question upwards of 700 £.” And so his mother didn’t miss the significance of his contracts and expected income, or maybe to double their importance, James followed the numeric “700” and the pound symbol, immediately, with a spelled-out equivalent in parentheses “(seven hundred pounds)” (CLHJ 1878-1880, 2: 43). But that emphasis wasn’t enough. He expanded it to boast that the gains of “complete liberty” and “profitable work” would influence the lives of others too. Turning to his eighteen-month old nephew (born 18 May 1879) and also to his sister, he wrote, “At this rate I shall probably soon be able to send to little Henry III a golden pap-mug, + to doter richement Alice.” To William James about a month later he wrote, “I am determined that the novel I write this next year shall be ‘big’ (16 December [1879]; CLHJ 1878-1880, 2: 59). To Sarah Butler Wister three days later: “I wish to concentrate myself upon an ‘important’, as they say in Paris, work of fiction” (19 December [1879], CLHJ 1878-1880, 2: 62). Here “important, as they say in Paris” carries the force of “serious” and “far reaching.” A month later to Isabella Stewart Gardner: “Look out for my next big novel; it will immortalize me” (29 January [1880], CLHJ 1878-1880, 2: 105). Thus the novel was to be a monument to himself and a way to display his progress as a person through fame and income. He needed to construct that monument before he could return to his family and native country. And, as we know, The Portrait of a Lady was a success. And the nature of that success is what James faces in the journal entry.

So why the melancholy recollection in Boston and New York? It might have been a product of James’s facing who he had become. The consequent self-examination by “feeling backward” enabled him to adjust his life and make the declarations that help us understand him now. But to adjust he didn’t abandon what happened before. For James, there was no loss to mourn. In the journal entry there is little regret. The stylized memories and his explanation of them to himself constitute a memorial to a past he has left but also still embraces as the basis or background of his identity. It was, returning to David McWhirter’s point from Bahun, “a memorial articulation of the loss that is at the same time expressive and critical.” Thus it was James’s particular melancholic mourning, his own “feeling backwards,” that enabled him to “retain the lost object, in all of its uncognizability.”

If James had been satisfied with who he had become when he opened the new English writing journal for the first time in a room at the Boston Brunswick hotel in 1881 and composed and inscribed his pensive thoughts about six years in Britain and on the continent, one might expect him to celebrate what he recalled rather than, like the dream
figure in the Louvre or Spencer Brydon facing a version of what-he-might-have-been in “The Jolly Corner,” to stare down the other of himself and cause it to run away. But for James, the melancholy facing stands as a celebration of consciousness.

James’s effort to recall the past that he now knows he must leave even after he commits to its commemoration is significant because it marks an ethical principle that organizes his way of living. After first doubting that he can find the memories of impressions of the past six years because “they are buried deep in my mind,” he acknowledges that “they have become part of my life, of my nature” (214). James continues: “At the same time, if I had nothing better to do, I might indulge in a retrospect that would be interesting and even fruitful—look back over all that has befallen me since last I left my native shores. I could remember vividly, and I have little doubt I could express happily enough, if I made the effort” (214). Immediately, with no apparent effort and the process fostered by melancholy having begun, the memories return. He then faces them, and records both those memories and the use he will make of them. James explains that use to himself as “the maturing of my little plan to get abroad again and remain for years” (215). That melancholy journal entry, itself an expression of James’s melancholic imagination, was crucial in the growth of “that little plan.”

It makes sense that this discussion of James’s melancholy mind should lead to the question: “what does this have to do with his fiction?” After all, many, if not most readers are more interested in, at least familiar with, James’s fiction than his biography. The first point to make about the relation between James’s melancholizing and his fiction is this: James’s melancholizing, that is his inclination to remember and regard and analyze his past as if he were analyzing the past of someone else, finds its representation in a number of his central characters. Just as it is a principal of James’s way of living, so is it articulated in the way some of his characters engage their fictive worlds as well. One of the best examples is Isabel Archer of The Portrait of a Lady. The novel’s important and well-known chapter 42, whose action, as it were, is wholly Isabel Archer’s dialogue with herself about herself, so much like James’s writing about himself to himself in the journal entry, stages Jamesian melancholizing in fiction. And just as James’s own melancholizing in the journal passage I mentioned above is an important point in James’s becoming, so does it mark an important point in his character’s becoming.

There is, of course, very little conventional action in chapter 42 of The Portrait. Instead, James offers his character’s meditation over the state of her life, chiefly her poisoned marriage to Gilbert Osmond, through the quiet hours of the night. Crucial to representing the self-knowledge that that meditation produces, and then how that self-knowledge can propel the plot through the rest of the novel, is the nature of Isabel’s meditation. The nature of the mediation is Isabel’s facing her past.

Chapter 42 of The Portrait of a Lady opens following another of Gilbert Osmond’s humiliating insults of Isabel. This insult is especially cutting, since it involves his bullying her to persuade one of her former admirers to marry Osmond’s daughter,
Isabel’s stepdaughter, whom Isabel seeks to protect from Osmond. If Osmond’s daughter Pansy should marry Isabel’s former beau, Lord Warburton, Osmond would, as the bride’s father, accrue political, social, and economic power. His daughter and her marriage, then, is the means to that end. Osmond hopes to convince his wife to ignore the fact that the girl, Pansy Osmond, not only doesn’t love Warburton, but that she loves another. In addition, if Isabel allows herself to be coopted into her husband’s plan, she would compel her step-daughter to repeat Isabel’s miserable, loveless marriage in her step-daughter’s life.

Thus begins chapter 42, which depends so fundamentally on the language of facing and Isabel’s melancholy mind, so close to her author’s:

She had answered nothing [in response to Osmond] because his words had put the situation before her and she was absorbed in looking at it. There was something in them that suddenly made vibrations deep, so that she had been afraid to trust herself to speak. After [Osmond] had gone she leaned back in her chair and closed her eyes; and for a long time, far into the night and still further, she sat in the still drawing-room, given up to her meditation. (454)

Here James establishes the scene by reiterating Isabel’s melancholizing habit, which had been named earlier in the novel as Isabel’s “theorizing,” but also as “meditation,” as it is here. Both terms characterize (at least for the narrator) her way of living for better or for worse. She had, for example, meditated in almost this same melancholic way about her relation to Warburton, after which she rejected him for Osmond. Now, however, her meditation produces not, as before, a way to avoid confronting her past. It produces a direct recognition of it. The chief element of the past she faces is her relationship with her husband, who, as Isabel examines it, has darkened her life.

Thus she melancholizes, seeing herself as a character in the drama of her life as James did in the journal entry written just after the completion of this novel:

These shadows were not an emanation from her own mind: she was very sure of that; she had done her best to be just and temperate, to see only the truth. They were a part, they were a kind of creation and consequence, of her husband’s very presence. They were not his misdeeds, his turpitudes; she accused him of nothing—that is but of one thing, which was not a crime. She knew of no wrong he had done; he was not violent, he was not cruel: she simply believed he hated her. (457)

Isabel’s realization not only of her husband’s nature, but of her relation to it through the facing, the feeling backward, does not force her to seek to punish him or even to punish herself and by inflicting such punishment attempt to reject a part of who she has become. Nor does it occur to her to try to “get over” what has happened to her, to minimize it and in so minimizing to accept it as a part of life she cannot change. Instead, her confrontation with Osmond’s hatred of her and her position as the hated provokes deeper
consideration of the place of that ruined relationship in her future. Her confrontation produces, that is, knowledge not only of him but also of herself.

The knowledge is, of course, embarrassing. Its truth forces a blush. The blush marks self-consciousness, self-awareness. It flags the self speaking to and about and interacting with, another part of the self just as James does in the long notebook entry he wrote in November and December 1881 just after his return to the United States:

Isabel’s cheek burned when she asked herself if she had really married on a factitious theory, in order to do something fine appreciable with her money. [...] He said to her one day that she had too many ideas and that she must get rid of them. He had told her that already, before their marriage; but then she had not noticed it: it had come back to her only afterwards. This time she might well have noticed it, because he had really meant it. The words had been nothing superficially; but when in the light of deepening experience she had looked into them they had then appeared portentous. He had really meant it—he would have liked her to have nothing of her own but her pretty appearance. She had known she had too many ideas; she had more even than he had supposed, many more than she had expressed to him when he had asked her to marry him. Yes, she had been hypocritical; she had liked him so much. She had too many ideas for herself; but that was just what one married for, to share them with some one else. One couldn’t pluck them up by the roots, though of course one might suppress them, be careful not to utter them. (459-60)

Important here is the way that Isabel’s melancholizing takes her from a critique of Osmond’s hatred of her to a prolonged meditation on her own nature, her past, and the opening to a new future. Her facing never dislodges her sense of herself. She never condemns herself or works to ignore her hurtful situation. She accepts it, and in that recognition and acceptance she finds a way to take what has been done, think about it differently, and, without forgetting it, to chart a new course for herself from it. It’s a kind of Jamesian revision, a re-seeing of self, that faces what has been done and uses it to produce a better version. James’s remarks on his revision of the novel for his New York Edition version, in fact, map the melancholizing process that he shows in the journal entry and through Isabel Archer’s chapter 42. Thus James wrote, “Quite as interesting as the young woman herself, at her best, do I find, I must again repeat, this projection of memory upon the whole matter of the growth, in ones imagination, of some such apology for motive” (xxvii). Here, then, is James’s concise summary of melancholizing: the relation of retrospection, meditation, self-analysis, and growth or development through a deliberate and considered re-reading of one’s past that can then enable revision and redirection of the subject. Such revision and redirection, then, enables agency. For it is, really, a matter of reading and rereading. James figures Isabel’s melancholizing—or, better, James’s narrator conveys Isabel’s sense of her own melancholizing—as reading: “Isabel read all this as she would have read the hour on the clock-face” (471). So much like a similar moment when Shakespeare’s Richard II realizes his place in time, the
moment in James’s novel relies for its meaning on metaphors of seeing, watching, time, and clocks. For melancholy thinkers Richard and Isabel, both alone in their respective scenes, the recognition of their relation to time, to the past and present and thus to the future, signals their understanding of themselves. And Richard, like Isabel, learns by facing what he understands about his relation to his past, about his place in time, about himself and his memories and his thoughts. Thus:

I wasted time, and now doth time waste me;  
For now hath time made me his numb’ring clock:  
My thoughts are minutes; and with sighs they jar  
Their watches on unto mine eyes, the outward watch,  
Whereto my finger, like a dial’s point,  
Is pointing still, in cleansing them from tears. (Richard II, V.v. 49-54)

But unlike Richard’s facing and melancholizing, Isabel’s re-seeing of the past produces a richer future.

As I noted earlier in his representation of the Dream of the Louvre in A Small Boy and Others, James also melancholizes in the autobiographies. In fact, the so-called late or fourth phase of James’s style is enabled and distinguished by melancholizing. Let me offer one other example from James’s autobiographical writing.

Looking from maturity at his youthful self and his first professional success, the first tangible apprehension of the possibility that he could pursue the path to liberal heroism, realize full agency, and achieve the status of the “disrupter,” brings James in direct confrontation with the problem of the liberal hero’s independence and self-determination. James wrote:

I had earned [my first twelve dollars], I couldn’t but feel, with fabulous felicity: a circumstance so strangely mixed with the fact that literary composition of a high order had … [taken place] at that very table where the green backs were spread out, … and sordid gain thereby never again to seem so easy as in that prime handling of my fee. Other ... [rewards], of the same queer, the same often rather greasy, complexion followed .... (Notes of a Son and Brother 377)

James’s attention to his first paycheck and the “fabulous felicity” with which he earned it from his writing indicates his awareness of his culture’s advantages for the would-be professional. That “gain” is “sordid” because it was earned easily through writing that was not his best. The description of gain as “sordid” and of success as having a “greasy” “complexion” in turn highlights James’s attention to the personal problems encountered by the publically successful professional. James identifies the professional/personal contradiction in the narrative of the passage above, moreover, when he shows the sordid public gain itself, the money, spread out on the very table used to do his most personal work, his writing. Talent could produce income. But for those working to realize agency
and selfhood via the marketplace, the lure of financial rewards displaces literary value and one’s own aesthetic sensibilities. Eventually the need to earn would disturb not only James’s sense of himself as a writer, but also James’s friendships. For James, the commemoration of the event in the autobiography through melancholy marks his ability to reconcile the tensions in it. That he faced and exposed the contradiction he lived marks his path to resolving that contradiction by, finally, privileging the private over the professional.

James’s prefaces to the New York Edition, the final edition of his collected works, are acts of melancholizing through which both James and James’s novels come to terms with themselves and their pasts. Thus the prefaces serve to demonstrate the close relation between James’s melancholizing and his strategies for revising his fiction. Both processes, like Isabel Archer’s vigil in chapter 42 of *The Portrait of a Lady*, entail an intimate and detailed reacquaintance with the past, an acceptance of it as something that continues to part of one’s identity, and a commitment to continue the project under examination—whether one’s life or one’s novel—without renouncing what came before, but instead by acknowledging what came before as the basis of the continuation. Like the long journal entry from 1881, like all of James’s melancholizing, the prefaces are James’s conversations with himself as much as they are expositions about his novels. James’s opening words about the prefaces in his opening preface to the New York Edition’s first volume, *Roderick Hudson*, are relevant for marking the similarities between his melancholizing in the long journal entry, the melancholizing he projects through characterization, and the representation of the melancholy mind in his late writing in the autobiographies and now in the prefaces to the New York Edition. In the opening sentences, James’s references to memory and how he uses memory after the remembering, as well as his use of this preface as a model for other ones, are significant.

James opens the preface to *Roderick Hudson* and to the edition itself by reorienting himself to the novel’s birth. The aim of the melancholizing mind is to understand and to know:

“The *Roderick Hudson*” was begun in Florence in the spring of 1874, designed from the first for serial publication in “The Atlantic Monthly,” where it opened in January 1875 and persisted through the year. I yield to the pleasure of placing these circumstances on record, as I shall place others, and as I have yielded to the need of renewing acquaintance with the book after a quarter of a century. This revival of an all but extinct relation with an early work may often produce for an artist, I think, more kinds of interest and emotion than he shall find it easy to express, and yet will light not a little, to his eyes, that veiled face of his Muse which he is condemned forever and all anxiously to study. (“Preface” to *Roderick Hudson* v)

Here James begins to transition from a relocation to the novel’s birth in Florence some thirty years earlier to how that act of reconsideration—not only of the novel itself but, by implication, of himself as novelist—casts light on his own changes over that time. For
just as his rereading of the novel, produced by “the need of renewing acquaintance with the book,” will guide his revision of the novel, so must the awareness that the novel that began “from the first as a serial production” requires revision also signal that changes in himself over that time have produced the conditions for both his need to “renew acquaintance” with his earlier self as well as to revise that self so that the novel that follows the preface we are reading now matches more closely the writer who explains its origins in this very preface. In that double investigation into both the novel and himself, he admits, is the nature of his need “to study” “the veiled face of his Muse.” The following lines map further the pathway of that “study,” that melancholic process that always inquires, always observes, always accepts, always adjusts when possible, never denies, and always learns from what it has seen and has come to know. In that learning, then, is change and progress in figurative or in actual “reseeing,” revision. Note, then, the language of investigation, of measurement, of determination, of acceptance, and of the inability, finally, to make ultimate determinations that would stop further investigation.

Crucial too in light of my attention to the long notes in James’s journal, is his attention to the utility of the “explorer’s notebook” because the “explorer’s notebook” serves the same function metaphorically as the journal does in fact:

The art of representation bristles with questions the very terms of which are difficult to apply and to appreciate; but whatever makes it arduous makes it, for our refreshment, infinite, causes the practice of it, with experience, to spread round us in a widening, not in a narrowing circle. Therefore it is that experience has to organize, for convenience and cheer, some system of observation—for fear, in the admirable immensity, of losing its way. We see it as pausing from time to time to consult its notes, to measure, for guidance, as many aspects and distances as possible, as many steps taken and obstacles mastered and fruits gathered and beauties enjoyed. Everything counts, nothing is superfluous in such a survey; the explorer’s note-book strikes me here as endlessly receptive. This accordingly is what I mean by contributive value—or put it simply as, to one’s own sense, the beguiling charm—of the accessory facts in a given artistic case. This is why, as one looks back, the private history of any sincere work, however modest its pretensions, looms with its own completeness in the rich, ambiguous aesthetic air, and seems at once to borrow a dignity and to mark, so to say, a station. This is why, reading over, for revision, correction and republication, the volumes here in hand, I find myself, all attentively, in presence of some recording scroll or engraved commemorative table—from which the “private” character, moreover, quite insists on dropping out. These notes represent, over a considerable course, the continuity of an artist’s endeavor, the growth of his whole operative consciousness and, best of all, perhaps, their own tendency to multiply, with the implication, thereby, of a memory much enriched. (“Preface to Roderick Hudson v-vi)

This long passage stands not only as the introduction to the New York Edition. It stands too as a model for James’s melancholy style of representation. As a model for James’s melancholy model for representation, it describes his method for fiction writing and also for thinking about himself and the world around him. For as James strives to represent the
consciousness of characters, so he strives to represent his own. The passage above makes no distinction between the two. More, the motive for “the art of representation,” a phrase that appears just thirteen lines into the edition’s opening preface, has to do with “questions” and therefore has to do with learning. That awareness of the experience and learning (the chief strengths, as we have seen, of the melancholy mind), finds the figurative record of its action and achievement in the “endlessly receptive” “explorer’s notebook.” James represents Isabel Archer’s figurative notebook, her own melancholy mind, in chapter 42 of The Portrait of a Lady, for example. His own awareness finds its place in his actual notebooks. Both kinds of notebooks, by definition, carry experiences of the past to the melancholic’s mind, which re-sees, literally revises, the past experience, from a number of “aspects,” as James describes the process in the long passage I just quoted. That process of re-seeing, of “feeling backward,” to return to Heather Love’s term, and of working to find meaning in that “feeling,” is not debilitating, is not wounding, is not shameful. Instead, for the melancholy mind like James’s, the revision of the past and record of that revision are the consequence of and a contribution to, as James wrote, “the whole operative consciousness and, best of all, … a memory much enriched.”

Works Cited


___, Letter to Thomas Sergeant Perry, 3 February 1882. Colby College Special Collections, Waterville, Maine.

___. *A Small Boy and Others*. Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1913.


