

---

Spring 2017

# "Authentic Tidings": What Wordsworth Gave to William James

David E. Leary

University of Richmond, [dleary@richmond.edu](mailto:dleary@richmond.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholarship.richmond.edu/psychology-faculty-publications>

 Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#), [History Commons](#), and the [Psychology Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

Leary, David E. "Authentic Tidings': What Wordsworth Gave to William James." *William James Studies* 13, no. 1 (2017): 1-26.

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Psychology at UR Scholarship Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Psychology Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of UR Scholarship Repository. For more information, please contact [scholarshiprepository@richmond.edu](mailto:scholarshiprepository@richmond.edu).

“AUTHENTIC TIDINGS”:  
WHAT WORDSWORTH GAVE TO WILLIAM JAMES

DAVID E. LEARY



It is widely recognized that William James had a profound and pervasive impact upon literary writers, works, styles, and genres, not to mention upon the encompassing frameworks of modernism and post-modernism, throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Much less recognized is the impact of literature upon James’s life and work, whether in psychology or philosophy. This article looks at the influence of one particular author, William Wordsworth, primarily through his long 1814 poem *The Excursion*, from which James drew “authentic tidings” that helped him weather some early storms and create his distinctive way of thinking about the human mind and its place in nature.



It is widely recognized that William James (1842-1910) had a profound and pervasive impact upon literary writers, works, styles, and genres, not to mention upon the encompassing frameworks of modernism and post-modernism, throughout the 20th century. The literary scholar R.W.B. Lewis has even asserted that “William James had arguably a greater literary influence than [his novelist brother] Henry James: that is, influence upon literary practitioners, poets and novelists, rather than critics and theorists.”<sup>1</sup> Nonetheless, little has been said about the reverse effect: the impact of literature upon James’s life and work, whether in psychology or philosophy. What difference did it make that he spent so much time reading Shakespeare, Goethe, Wordsworth, Browning, and any number of other authors, both throughout his life and more particularly during the decades when his fundamental assumptions and perspectives were being formed?<sup>2</sup>

Addressing this question is timely in an age when the value of literature, and of the humanities in general, have been subjected to doubt and even overt attack, including (alas) within the halls of academe. Individual lives are assuredly enriched by literature each and every day; understandings are challenged, viewpoints shaped, emotions soothed, motivations roused: In every possible way, lives are continually being changed as the result of literary works. And even bigger differences (“bigger” in terms of scope) have been made, and can be made, in the challenging and shaping of disciplines. In this article we will consider both of these matters in relation to James and the work of one particular author, William Wordsworth (1770-1850).

How was psychology and philosophy, as well as James himself, changed as a result of his sustained encounter with the poetry of Wordsworth? The convenient thing about raising this question and similar questions regarding the impact of literature upon the life and work of James is that he left us so many resources that document what he read, when he read it, how he reacted to it, and what he did

with what he took from this or that reading. Within these materials is evidence that clarifies precisely how (for instance) Wordsworth's poetry provided a needed tonic, helped generate a renewed joy in living, and thereby contributed to James's recovery from a particularly bad period in the early 1870s (when he was in his late 20s and early 30s), while also prompting and confirming the emergence of doctrines that came to underlie his psychology and philosophy.

Although I cannot discuss everything that would be interesting and relevant to this topic within the brief compass of this article, I will show how Ralph Waldo Emerson's contention that "Wordsworth... has done more for the sanity of this generation than any other writer" was illustrated in James's life: how James's acceptance of the "authentic tidings" offered by Wordsworth, especially in his long poem *The Excursion*, put him into a better, if still tenuous frame of mind.<sup>3</sup> Beyond that, I will indicate how James's acceptance of Wordsworth's "authentic tidings" impacted in a significant way upon the vision of "mind" and "matter" that he eventually incorporated into his psychological and philosophical works; and, finally, how it contributed to his critique of contemporary materialistic science. After making these related points, I will list in necessarily rapid-fire manner a number of other points of contact between Wordsworth's poetry and James's work. Even though I will not be able to elaborate upon these points in this article, I hope that this tabulation of other links, combined with the preceding discussion, will provide sufficient validation for now of James's own self-description as "a sort of Wordsworth" and of a close friend's observation that he had "a poet's sense of the real."<sup>4</sup>

#### **PERSONAL CONTEXT**

More than 80 years ago, Ralph Barton Perry reported that James found Wordsworth's poems "edifying," but Perry failed to explain

exactly why he found them so, beyond saying that Wordsworth's "gentle mysticism" and "gospel of sympathy and love" provided a "soothing medicine" for his "despondent soul."<sup>5</sup> In addition, neither Perry nor more recent biographers (e.g., Allen, Simon, or Richardson) nor other James scholars (e.g., Feinstein or Bjork) have explored the possible significance of Wordsworth's poetry in relation to his later work.<sup>6</sup> Perhaps the most suggestive treatment has been Donna Ferrantello's discussion of the striking parallels – "uncanny resemblances" – between Wordsworth's and James's thought with regard to perception, but she attributes these similarities to James's "unconscious associations" and provides no historical evidence of the actual paths and full range of Wordsworth's influence.<sup>7</sup> Meanwhile, Amy Kittelstrom has noted the religious and moral messages that James received from Wordsworth, but not the broader psychological and philosophical significance of what he took from his work, which was not her concern.<sup>8</sup> (James himself later told a younger brother that his crisis had been "more philosophical than theological perhaps," the "perhaps" simply indicating that religious issues were encompassed within the larger philosophical ones.<sup>9</sup>) Finally, Alan Hill has provided some useful historical context regarding Wordsworth's relations with "his American friends," including Emerson, but he omitted any discussion of James, who did not have a direct personal connection to Wordsworth.<sup>10</sup> So the topic awaits fuller exploration.

To get a running start on this matter, we should step back to 1858, when the 16-year-old James had already come to appreciate the usefulness of literature – and poetry in particular – even as compared to the utility of seemingly more practical enterprises like engineering. As he wrote to a friend:

Poets may be laughed at for being useless,  
impractical people. But suppose the author of the  
"psalm of Life" [Henry Wadsworth Longfellow],

had attempted to invent steam engines, (for which I suppose he has no genius) in the hope of being useful, how much time would he have wasted and how much would we have lost! But no, he did better, he followed his taste, and redeemed his life, by writing the “Psalm” which is as useful a production as any I know.<sup>11</sup>

Interestingly, Longfellow’s poem addresses the same practical issue that drew James later to Wordsworth: whether “Life is but an empty dream” or “is real! ...is earnest!”; and whether “Not enjoyment, and not sorrow,” but rather “to act, that each to-morrow / Find us farther than to-day” is “our destined end.”<sup>12</sup> The poem urges that life is real and that personal action is the way to “leave behind us / Footprints on the sands of time.”<sup>13</sup> And though our belief in the significance of life may seem illusory at times, and our actions may seem futile, the poem encourages us to “Learn to labor and to wait” for better times to come.<sup>14</sup>

Unfortunately, the waiting got more and more onerous as James’s faith in the freedom of his will, his confidence that he could make a personal difference, and his desire to carry on despite severe doubts in both of these regards faltered over the next decade, as he fell into a progressively deeper and more sustained depression.<sup>15</sup> It is in this period that James turned to Wordsworth for assistance. The classic statement about his sustained encounter with Wordsworth’s works was given by his father Henry James, Sr., who wrote to James’s brother Henry in March 1873 that, contrary to his earlier condition,

Willy goes on swimmingly.... He came in here the other afternoon... and ...exclaimed “Dear me! What a difference there is between me now and me last

spring this time: then so hypochondriacal... and now feeling my mind so cleared up and restored to sanity. It is the difference between death and life."<sup>16</sup>

Despite fearing that an inopportune query might disrupt his eldest son's improved spirits, his father

ventured to ask what specifically in his opinion had promoted the change. He said several things: the reading of Renouvier (specially his vindication of the freedom of the will) and Wordsworth, whom he has been feeding upon now for a good while; but especially his having given up the notion that all mental disorder required to have a physical basis....He saw that the mind did act irrespectively of material coercion, and could be dealt with therefore at first hand.<sup>17</sup>

In light of this, "he has been shaking off his respect for men of mere science as such."<sup>18</sup>

We will set aside consideration of the influence of the philosopher Charles Renouvier, though he too (along with the poet-dramatist William Shakespeare and the religious allegorist John Bunyan, somewhat earlier, and the poet Robert Browning, around this same time) contributed to James's turn-around. Here we will focus solely upon the role that Wordsworth played in James's personal revitalization, in the establishment of his belief that physical causation is not irresistible – that it can be resisted – at least in certain situations, and in his related rejection of the way that "men of mere science" were then approaching the relation between mind and matter. All of these points, as we shall see, were intimately connected. Before discussing them, it should be added that James's intellectual and emotional recovery, so closely tied to his renewed

belief in free will and his rejection of materialistic determinism, was to be an on-and-off affair. Even after drinking plentifully from the Wordsworthian stream, he stumbled on for several years, now better and now worse, until his marriage in 1878 consolidated the gains he had made. After that time and for the rest of James's life, he suffered occasional dark periods, but never so dark and never so prolonged as before.<sup>19</sup>

### PERSONAL ENCOUNTER

In 1903, James claimed to have read all of Wordsworth's poetry.<sup>20</sup> Whether or not he had done so by the early 1870s, we know that he was at least familiar with a great deal of it, including in particular Wordsworth's *The Excursion*, which he read over and over, concentrating especially upon Book III on "Despondency" and Book IV on "Despondency Corrected."<sup>21</sup> As he wrote to his brother Henry in February 1873, "I have read hardly anything of late, some of the immortal Wordsworth's excursion having been the best."<sup>22</sup> The significance of his repeated reading of *The Excursion* is underscored when one considers that it is some 9,000 lines in length, and by any standard an intellectually challenging and provocative work.

The story conveyed by *The Excursion* is simple enough. It revolves around four persons – the Poet, the Wanderer, the Solitary, and the Pastor – who spend five days sharing their respective experiences and points of view as they are on an excursion, walking through both countryside and mountains. The point of the poem is whether – and how – it might be possible to maintain a sense of joy and hope – to overcome despondency – in the face of political upheaval, social disillusionment, natural disasters, the loss of loved ones, and all the other painful and disappointing realities of human life. Wordsworth sets the context for his answer at the start when he

writes that nature, the “living presence of the earth,” is not dark “chaos” but vivid “beauty,” if seen in the proper manner.

For the discerning intellect of Man,  
 When wedded to this goodly universe  
 In love and holy passion, shall find these [natural  
 phenomena]  
 A simple produce of the common day.  
 ....My voice proclaims  
 How exquisitely the individual Mind  
 (And the progressive powers perhaps no less  
 Of the whole species) to the external World  
 Is fitted: – and how exquisitely, too –  
 Theme this but little heard of among men –  
 The external World is fitted to the Mind;  
 And the creation (by no lower name  
 Can it be called) which they with blended might  
 Accomplish: – this is our high argument.<sup>23</sup>

This is hardly a manifesto for naïve empiricism! (And perhaps you noticed the consonance of this passage with later Darwinian thought.) To express the matter differently, the human mind, in engaging the world, actively gives forms to things unknown, as Shakespeare put it.<sup>24</sup> Or, as Wordsworth argued further on in *The Excursion*:

....The mind’s repose  
 On evidence is not to be ensured  
 By act of naked reason. Moral truth  
 Is no mechanic structure, built by rule;  
 And which, once built, retains a stedfast shape  
 And undisturbed proportions; but a thing  
 Subject...to vital accidents.

...I exult,  
Casting reserve away, exult to see  
An intellectual mastery exercised  
O'er the blind elements; a purpose given,  
A perseverance fed; almost a soul  
Imparted – to brute matter.

...Science then  
Shall be a precious visitant; and then,  
And only then, be worthy of her name:  
For then her heart shall kindle; her dull eye,  
Dull and inanimate, no more shall hang  
Chained to its object in brute slavery;  
But taught with patient interest to watch  
The processes of things...[it shall] serve the cause  
Of order and distinctness.<sup>25</sup>

The mind, in short, is a creative force that confers order and distinctness on the world, and even attributes moral significance to it. Nature – reality – is thus the result of a marriage between mind and matter. It was this vision of the human mind that helped dissolve James's personal melancholy, at least for a while, in early 1873; and it was this vision, too, that became the basic creed that underlies his later psychology and philosophy. Although James sometimes justified this creed with evidence and argument drawn from other sources, typically using more scientific and philosophical modes of expression, its place and its emotional weight within his system of thought derived, in important and demonstrable ways, from his encounter with Wordsworth.

**PERSONAL BENEFITS**

With regard to James's personal revivification, it is important to remember that his depression was directly related to his reluctant, not yet fully and consistently disavowed belief in scientific (which is to say, completely deterministic) materialism.<sup>26</sup> His imbibing of contrary perspectives from Wordsworth's *Excursion*, which overlapped and reinforced insights extracted from his previous musing upon Shakespeare's Hamlet, Bunyan's Pilgrim, and Browning's Grammatian, convinced him that the human mind and its operations are not passive products of material causation, as mandated by scientific materialism.<sup>27</sup> Rather, they are active and can either divert or enhance our experience of the material world. And this belief, articulated powerfully and persuasively by Wordsworth, made a crucial difference for James, convincing him that his mind – and hence he himself – could make a personal difference, however slight, in the course of human history. (James had feared for some time that “not a wiggle of our will happens save as the result of physical laws” and hence that he would live and die “without leaving a trace,” that is, without making a personal, i.e., willful contribution that would leave a “nick, however small” in human reality.<sup>28</sup>) In particular, *The Excursion*'s sections on “Despondency” and “Despondency Corrected” helped him realize that his worries about the inevitability of his depression were unfounded: that his mental state was not entirely dependent upon its “physical basis” and that he could think and act “irrespectively of material coercion,” as he told his father. This was precisely the medicine he needed to assuage his “hypochondriacal” self: the conviction that it is not true, as the cynical, withdrawn “Solitary” in *The Excursion* put it, that one is condemned to “roaming at large,” simply “to observe, and not to feel,” and therefore “not to act,” while passively accepting this fate as a natural and necessary form of “servitude.”<sup>29</sup> Wordsworth helped James see, instead, that it is “well to trust” that “imagination's light” can help when “reason's fails.”<sup>30</sup>

With his mind thus set free to view things in a personal (yes, subjective) way rather than in an impersonal (and objectifying) way, James was able to stop “viewing all objects unremittingly” in “disconnexion” from himself and the rest of nature, which left them “dead and spiritless.”<sup>31</sup> With the wise “Wanderer” of the poem he accepted that if we are forever analyzing, forever “dividing,” we will ourselves “break down all grandeur” in human experience.<sup>32</sup> By “kindling” his heart in relation to things, by “communing with the glorious universe” instead of standing aside and rending things apart, he could achieve “passionate intuition” rather than “dull and inanimate” conclusions of the kind produced by “uninspired research.”<sup>33</sup> If there was a basis of hope for James, according to Wordsworth, it lay – as it had for the Solitary figure in *The Excursion* – in his “tenderness of heart,” whose “murmurings” conveyed “authentic tidings of invisible things” and revealed the “central peace, subsisting at the heart of endless agitation.”<sup>34</sup> These latter two phrases – often quoted by James in subsequent years when he associated “central peace” with all that is “*in posse*” and with the notion that “however disturbed the surface might be, all is well with the cosmos” – captured the additional gift that he received from Wordsworth: a gift that provided immense comfort for James.<sup>35</sup> Even beyond the recognition that the human mind is active, it was the acceptance that the mind can feel the presence – or, as James put it in a less dogmatic and assertive vein, that it can feel the *possibility* – of “invisible things,” together with the “central peace” that came from believing in this possibility, that did so much to heal his distress and amend his lack of optimism about the future. His more realistic version of Wordsworth’s views came to be expressed as a “meliorism” rather than naïve optimism: there is always something better that can be sought and brought about, he believed, even if the full reality that one sees as preferable remains only *possibly* possible. As he wrote three decades later, after discussing “the

reality of the unseen,” one can live on “chance” and “hope” much better than “necessity” and “resignation.”<sup>36</sup> In contrasting these two modes of living, the latter equivalent to not really living at all, he often personified the distinction by referring to the hopeful Wordsworth versus the resigned Arthur Schopenhauer.<sup>37</sup>

### **PSYCHOLOGICAL AND PHILOSOPHICAL BENEFITS**

As regards James’s later psychological and philosophical work, the critical insights that distinguished his way of thinking revolved around the Wordsworthian convictions that the human mind is active; that it has its own interests; and that its feelings are as significant – perhaps even more significant – than its thoughts. This set of assumptions, innovative in relation to the psychology and philosophy of the time, received its first sustained expression just five years after James’s father reported his (somewhat temporary) personal improvement. In his highly original “Remarks on Spencer’s Definition of Mind as Correspondence,” James gave expression to “the mind’s excursive power,” as Wordsworth put it.<sup>38</sup> (Wordsworth’s use of this phrase underscored that his poetically described excursion through countryside and mountains was an allegory for the mind’s ability to wander, in imagination, around objects, assuming different perspectives, seeing reality now from this and now from that point of view. This multiplying of perspectives was the substantive consequence of the extended conversation among the four different personified perspectives in *The Excursion*.) Giving a clear nod to Wordsworth, James related this “excursive power” of the human imagination to what he called his own “ambulatory” approach to human knowledge: we gain knowledge “*ambulando*,” he argued, that is, by gathering “the general consensus of experience” as we go along, rather than achieving knowledge once-and-for-all by a single act of cognition, much less by some “*a priori* definition.”<sup>39</sup> The roots of James’s philosophical pragmatism can be seen here, as they can also be seen

later in this same essay when he echoed Wordsworth's "high argument" about the marriage of mind and matter:

The knower is not simply a mirror floating with no foot-hold anywhere, and passively reflecting an order that he comes upon and finds simply existing. The knower is an actor, and co-efficient of the truth on one side, whilst on the other he registers the truth which he helps to create. Mental interests, hypotheses, postulates, so far as they are bases for human action – action which to a great extent transforms the world – help to make the truth which they declare. In other words, there belongs to mind, from its birth upward, a spontaneity, a vote. It is in the game, and not a mere looker-on.<sup>40</sup>

Our interests, James argued, direct our attention to aspects of reality that matter to us, but since those interests are both limited and various, no one observation from any single position can possibly give us a completely final view of anything.<sup>41</sup> (James's sensitivity to the role of "interest" in mental life was also spurred by Shadworth Hodgson and Chauncey Wright, but Wordsworth's vision of active mentality clearly encouraged him to amplify its importance.<sup>42</sup>)

Active rather than passive perception, the kind that makes our experience "orderly," demands the kind of focused ("loving" or "rapt") attention that Wordsworth described.<sup>43</sup> With such attention, there are always new ways that something – some quality, event, person, situation – can be seen. As a result of this insight, in addition to insisting that the human mind is an actor, James's later psychology and philosophy emphasized the ever-changing, ever-developing, ever-growing nature of human perception, conception,

knowledge, and action. All of this is encapsulated in this early Wordsworth-inspired article.

One year after this article appeared, James elaborated upon central Wordsworthian insights in another important publication, entitled “The Sentiment of Rationality,” which contains the seeds of his mature philosophy. In this widely noticed piece, he argued that the “rationality” (he could have said the “persuasiveness”) of a philosophical position can be recognized only by “certain subjective marks.” Building upon Wordsworth’s “high argument,” he noted that these marks include the “strong feeling of ease, peace, rest” that results when one achieves “the transition from a state of puzzle and perplexity” to one of “relief and pleasure.”<sup>44</sup> An idea or conclusion that is rationally compelling *feels* a certain way, illustrating “the aesthetic Principle of Ease” that comes into play when one finds that “a chaos of facts is at bottom the expression of a single underlying fact.”<sup>45</sup> This feeling is analogous, James wrote, to “the relief of the musician at resolving a confused mass of sound into melodic or harmonic order.”<sup>46</sup> It involves the collaboration of both mind and matter; it depends, as Wordsworth put it, on the “mind’s repose” upon “the processes of things” that confers “order and distinctness” to what might otherwise be experienced as disparate “elements” of some “mechanic structure.”<sup>47</sup>

James went on in this article to discuss additional “passions” that underlie “the sentiment of rationality” – for instance, the “craving” for simplification and the complementary “craving” for distinguishing, which must be satisfied, together, in a balanced way. And acknowledging that “a single explanation of a fact only explains it from a single point of view,” he suggested that “the entire fact is not accounted for until each and all of its characters have been identified with their likes elsewhere.”<sup>48</sup> This is, of course, a reference to the kind of metaphorical thinking achieved by the excursive mind, the absolute end of which is only heuristically possible since novel characters (i.e., characteristics) can come to

light whenever objects are viewed from novel perspectives with novel interests in mind.

Ironically, as James indicated in this article, Schopenhauer's reflections upon the psychology of philosophizing paralleled Wordsworth's views in these regards, so it is not surprising that in this philosophical article aimed at a philosophical audience James cited Schopenhauer and other philosophers (including Renouvier) for the most part. Yet he turned to Wordsworth in the article's vital concluding section – a denouement meant to instill a sentiment of the article's rationality within the reader. Having admitted that the ultimate reconciliation between mind and matter (between conscious "experience" and "brute fact") had been rejected by some philosophers (whether they favored a materialist or idealist reduction of the duality) and that it was simply accepted by others (such as Renouvier) in a "willful" way, James asserted that "the peace of rationality," that soothing sense of the apt conjunction of mind and matter, may be achieved through "ecstasy," which is to say, through the establishment of the mind's "loving" or "rapt" union with reality, as Wordsworth had put it.<sup>49</sup> For whereas "logic fails" when it tries to confirm this conjunction, the ecstatic wedding of consciousness and facts creates an "ontological emotion" that "so fills the soul that ontological speculation can no longer...put her girdle of interrogation-marks around existence."<sup>50</sup> At that point, James said, "thought is not, in enjoyment it expires."<sup>51</sup>

James granted that philosophers might well reject the "mystical" form of Wordsworth's argument, but even so, he maintained that the kind of respectful empiricism that Wordsworth represented should remain "the ultimate philosophy," and a palpable awareness of the existence of facts apart from the mind should continue to prompt "ontological wonder," even if the significance of that wonder must remain "mysterious" in the absence of Wordsworth's "mystical" intuitions of the divine.<sup>52</sup> In sum, besides

emphasizing the active nature of mental life and the role of interest within it, this important article developed the Wordsworthian tenet that emotions – felt responses to facts – play crucial roles in mental life. They are, in fact, as actual and consequential as those facts themselves.

### **LIBERATION FROM SCIENTISM**

As for his “shaking off” of “respect for men of mere science as such,” i.e., for those who approached mind and matter in a scientifically reductive manner, as he had reported to his father, James wasted little time in excoriating the current trend away from the view that he and Wordsworth advocated.<sup>53</sup> Just two years after his acknowledgement of Wordsworth’s assistance, he was arguing against “the method of patience, starving out, and harassing to death” that was being implemented, especially in Germany.<sup>54</sup> The blunt instruments of experimentation, applied without sufficient thoughtfulness and care, were subjecting the human mind to “a regular *siege*” in which “the forces that hem her in” were threatening “her overthrow” rather than elucidation.<sup>55</sup> Clearly, these words resonated with Wordsworth’s well-known claim that “Our meddling intellect / Mis-shapes the beauteous forms of things, – / We murder to dissect.”<sup>56</sup> (“Intellect,” of course, was the word that Wordsworth used for rationalizing, analytic reasoning in contrast to the sympathetic and synthetic grasp of “imagination.”<sup>57</sup>)

Clearly, this critique of “brass instrument experimentalists” and impersonal reasoning was aimed not at scientific research as a whole, but toward those experimentalists who failed to observe mental life with respect before “attacking” it with implements that often marred more than they illuminated mental phenomena.<sup>58</sup> Well aware of the possible advantages and insights to be gained from scientific research, James argued for careful preliminary descriptive work that captured the lived experience of mental life and its phenomena before proceeding to experimental research aimed at

explaining them. Such phenomenologically sensitive work was a prerequisite to useful experimentation and other forms of empirical research, according to James. Time has shown the virtues of his more tempered and thoughtful approach.<sup>59</sup> The same can be said about his reservations regarding the imposition of traditional philosophical categories and means of analysis upon mental experience. They should not take priority over the integrity of the phenomena themselves.<sup>60</sup> Together with Wordsworth, then, James accorded preeminence to close and respectful encounters with natural phenomena over the routinized brandishing of intrusive tools of instrumental or rationalized technique.

#### **OTHER POINTS OF CONTACT AND FINAL BENEFIT**

Wordsworth's thoughts and words echo – and more than echo – in James's later work: for instance, in his description of “felt relations” among mental phenomena and his assertion that “whilst part of what we perceive comes through our senses from the object before us, another part (and it may be the larger part) always comes...out of our own head” in *Principles of Psychology*;<sup>61</sup> in his reference to the vital role of “unconquerable subjectivity” in “Is Life Worth Living?”;<sup>62</sup> in his emphasis upon the import of Wordsworth's “authentic tidings” regarding the “limitless significance in natural things” in “On a Certain Blindness in Human Beings”;<sup>63</sup> in his recognition of “the reality of the unseen,” the sense of “the more,” and “prayerful communion” as essential aspects of religious experience and his belief that “a *full* fact” includes “a conscious field *plus* its object as felt or thought of *plus* an attitude towards the object *plus* the sense of a self to whom the attitude belongs” in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*;<sup>64</sup> in his personal testimony to “the extraordinary tonic and consoling power” of Wordsworth's poetry and of Wordsworth's conviction that there is “central peace subsisting at the heart of endless agitation” as well as his discussion

of how “in our cognitive as well as in our active life we are creative. We add, both to the subject and to the predicate part of reality. The world stands really malleable, waiting to receive its final touches at our hands...Man engenders truths upon it” in *Pragmatism*;<sup>65</sup> and in his similarly summary assertion that “truth we conceive to mean everywhere, not duplication, but addition; not the constructing of inner copies of already complete realities, but rather the collaborating with realities so as to bring about a clearer result” in *The Meaning of Truth*.<sup>66</sup>

These and other points of contact between Wordsworth and James expand upon the connections we have already treated, such as James’s commitment to a “selectionist” framework, a “collaborative” approach to knowing, and an “ambulatory” view of truth. In light of these connections and the special relevance of Wordsworth’s *Excursion*, it seems all the more appropriate that James concluded his *Principles of Psychology* with an acknowledgement that “even in the clearest parts” of this masterpiece “our insight is insignificant enough.”<sup>67</sup> Indeed, “the more sincerely one seeks to trace the actual course of psychogenesis...the more clearly one perceives ‘the slowly gathering twilight close in utter night.’”<sup>68</sup> This final eight-word quotation, previously unidentified (even by the astute editors of the 1981 definitive edition of this work), comes from *Excursion*.<sup>69</sup> How fitting that the person and poem that helped James see more clearly also helped him see clearly how little he actually saw: helped him appreciate how much more remained to be discovered. That self-awareness and humility has endeared James to many readers, who have benefited from the insights he garnered from his encounters with Wordsworth.

University of Richmond  
[dleary@richmond.edu](mailto:dleary@richmond.edu)

## REFERENCES

- Allen, Gay Wilson. *William James*. New York: The Viking Press, 1967.
- Bjork, Daniel W. *William James: The Center of His Vision*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1988.
- Boodin, John Elof. "William James as I Knew Him." In *William James Remembered*, edited by Linda Simon, 207-232. Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1996.
- Browning, Robert. "The Grammarian's Funeral." In *Selected Poems*, edited by Daniel Karlin, 139-143. New York: Penguin Books, 1989. First published 1855 by Chapman and Hall.
- Bunyan, John. *The Pilgrim's Progress from This World to That Which is to Come*, revised by Mrs. Edward Ashley Walker. New York: Geo. A. Leavitt, 1869. First published 1678-1684 by Nathaniel Ponder.
- Darwin, Charles. "Autobiography." In *The Autobiography of Charles Darwin and Selected Letters*, edited by Francis Darwin, 5-58. New York: Dover, 1958. First published 1892 by D. Appleton and Company.
- . *On the Origin of Species*. London: John Murray, 1859.
- Emerson, Ralph Waldo. "Europe and European Books." In *Essays and Lectures*, edited by Joel Porte, 1250-1260. New York: The Library of America, 1983. First published 1843 in *The Dial*.
- Feinstein, Howard M. *Becoming William James*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1984.
- Ferrantello, Donna. "'The Picture of The Mind Revives Again': Perception in William James's Psychology and 'Tintern Abbey.'" *Wordsworth Circle* 22, no. 2 (1991): 131-135.
- Herzog, Max. "William James and the Development of Phenomenological Psychology in Europe." *History of the Human Sciences* 8, no. 1 (1995): 29-46.
- Hill, Alan G. "Wordsworth and His American Friends." *Bulletin of Research in the Humanities* 81, no. 2 (1978): 146-160.

- James, William. *Pragmatism*, edited by Frederick H. Burkhardt. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1975. First published 1907 by Longmans, Green and Company.
- . *The Meaning of Truth*, edited by Frederick H. Burkhardt. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1975. First published 1909 by Longmans, Green and Company.
- . *A Pluralistic Universe*, edited by Frederick H. Burkhardt. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1977. First published 1909 by Longmans, Green and Company.
- . “Remarks on Spencer’s Definition of Mind as Correspondence,” in *Essays in Psychology*, edited by Frederick H. Burkhardt, 7-22. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978. First published 1878 in *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy*.
- . “The Sentiment of Rationality.” In *Essays in Psychology*, edited by Frederick H. Burkhardt, 32-64. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978. First published 1879 in *Mind*.
- . “Is Life Worth Living?.” In *The Will to Believe*, edited by Frederick H. Burkhardt, 34-56. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979. First published 1897 by Longmans, Green, and Company.
- . *The Principles of Psychology*, edited by Frederick H. Burkhardt, 3 vols. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981. First published 1890 by Henry Holt and Company.
- . “On a Certain Blindness in Human Beings.” In *Talks to Teachers on Psychology and to Students on Some of Life’s Ideals*, edited by Frederick H. Burkhardt, 132-149. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983. First published 1899 by Henry Holt and Company.
- . *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, edited by Frederick H. Burkhardt. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985. First published 1902 by Longmans, Green and Company.
- . “Review of *Grundzüge der physiologischen Psychologie*, by Wilhelm Wundt.” In *Essays, Comments, and Reviews*, edited by Frederick H. Burkhardt, 296-303. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987. First published 1875 in *North American Review*.

- . *The Correspondence of William James*, 12 vols., edited by Ignas K. Skrupskelis and Elizabeth M. Berkeley. Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 1992-2004.
- Johnston, Kenneth R. *Wordsworth and "The Recluse."* New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1984.
- Kittelstrom, Amy. *The Religion of Democracy: Seven Liberals and the American Moral Tradition.* New York: Penguin Press, 2015.
- Leary, David E. "Psyche's Muse: The Role of Metaphor in the History of Psychology." In *Metaphors in the History of Psychology*, edited by David E. Leary, 357-367. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990.
- . "William James and the Art of Human Understanding." *American Psychologist* 47, no. 2 (1992): 152-160.
- . "Naming and Knowing: Giving Forms to Things Unknown." *Social Research* 62, no. 2 (1995): 267-298.
- . "A Moralism in an Age of Scientific Analysis and Skepticism: Habit in the Life and Work of William James." In *A History of Habit: From Aristotle to Bourdieu*, edited by Tom Sparrow and Adam Hutchinson, 177-208. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2013.
- . "Overcoming Blindness: Some Historical Reflections on Qualitative Psychology." *Qualitative Psychology* 1, no. 1 (2014): 17-33.
- . "New Insights into William James's Personal Crisis in the Early 1870s: Part I. Arthur Schopenhauer and the Origin & Nature of the Crisis." *William James Studies* 11, no. 1 (2016): 1-27.
- . "New Insights into William James's Personal Crisis in the Early 1870s: Part II. John Bunyan and the Resolution & Consequences of the Crisis." *William James Studies* 11, no. 1 (2016): 28-45.
- Lewis, R.W.B. *The Jameses: A Family Narrative.* New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1991.
- Linschoten, Hans. *On the Way Toward a Phenomenological Psychology: The Psychology of William James.* Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1968.

- Longfellow, Henry Wadsworth. "A Psalm of Life." In *Poems and Other Writings*, edited by J. D. McClatchy, 3-4. New York: The Library of America, 2000. First published 1839 by John Owen.
- Manier, Edward. *The Young Darwin and His Cultural Circle*. Boston, MA: D. Reidel Publishing Co., 1978.
- Mill, John Stuart. *Autobiography*. Indianapolis, IN: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1957. First published 1873 by Longmans, Green, Reader, and Dyer.
- Perry, Ralph Barton. *The Thought and Character of William James*, 2 vols. Boston, MA: Little, Brown and Company, 1935.
- Richardson, Robert D. *William James: In the Maelstrom of American Modernism*. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2006.
- Shakespeare, William. "A Midsummer Night's Dream." In *The Norton Shakespeare*, 2d ed., edited by Stephen Greenblatt, 839-896. New York: W. W. Norton, 2008. First published 1595 by Thomas Fisher.
- . "Hamlet." In *The Norton Shakespeare*, 2d ed., edited by Stephen Greenblatt, 1683-1784. New York: W. W. Norton, 2008. First published 1604 by Nicholas Ling.
- Simon, Linda. *Genuine Reality: A Life of William James*. New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1998.
- Wilshire, Bruce. *William James and Phenomenology: A Study of "The Principles of Psychology"*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1968.
- Wordsworth, William. "The Tables Turned." In *The Poems*, 2 vols., edited by John O. Hayden, Vol. 1, 356-357. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1977. First published 1798 by Longman.
- . *The Excursion*. In *The Poems*, 2 vols., edited by John O. Hayden, Vol. 2, 35-289. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1977. First published 1814 by Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme, and Brown.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Lewis, *The Jameses*, 442.

<sup>2</sup> This article draws upon a chapter from a larger work, under development, on the influence of five writers (Shakespeare, Goethe, Wordsworth, Browning, and Emerson) upon James and his work in psychology and philosophy.

<sup>3</sup> Emerson, "Europe and European Books," 1254. Wordsworth, *The Excursion*, 35-289.

<sup>4</sup> James, *Correspondence*, vol. 7, 395. His friend's observation is quoted in Perry, *Thought and Character*, vol. 1, 749.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. 1, 339.

<sup>6</sup> Allen, *William James*. Simon, *Genuine Reality*. Richardson, *William James*. Feinstein, *Becoming William James*. Bjork, *William James*.

<sup>7</sup> Ferrantello, "The Picture of The Mind Revives Again," 133.

<sup>8</sup> Kittelstrom, *The Religion of Democracy*, ch. 4.

<sup>9</sup> James, *Correspondence*, vol. 4, 489.

<sup>10</sup> Hill, "Wordsworth and His American Friends." Since Emerson was James's virtual godfather and demonstrated an affinity with many of Wordsworth's views, it is apt to note that, however much Emerson prepared James to appreciate Wordsworth, James took his Wordsworthian draught directly from the source.

<sup>11</sup> James, *Correspondence*, vol. 4, 13-14.

<sup>12</sup> Longfellow, "A Psalm of Life," 3.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> This became the "period of personal crisis" that James scholars know so well. For new perspectives on it, see Leary, "New Insights: Part I" and "New Insights: Part II."

<sup>16</sup> Quoted in Perry, *Thought and Character*, vol. 1, 339.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 339-340.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 340.

<sup>19</sup> For background on James's lingering and then sporadic bedevilment, see Leary, "New Insights: Part I," 4-5 and 23n9.

<sup>20</sup> Boodin, "William James as I Knew Him," 217. James added that he had done so because he "enjoyed Wordsworth's purity of style and intimacy with nature." Ibid. Both style and content help account for the fact that James could and did quote from Wordsworth's poems, by heart, throughout the rest of his life.

<sup>21</sup> Wordsworth, *Excursion*, 93-120 and 120-157.

<sup>22</sup> James, *Correspondence*, vol. 1, 192. It merits mention that Wordsworth's poetry and *The Excursion*, in particular, were also significant for other nineteenth-century philosophers and scientists such as John Stuart Mill and Charles Darwin, and for reasons not unrelated to James's. See Mill's *Autobiography*, 96-98, and Darwin's "Autobiography," 33. Wordsworth implicitly encouraged Darwin's tendency to think metaphorically about nature, as Darwin did in developing the notion of natural selection from the established practice of artificial selection. See Darwin, *On the Origin of Species*, chs. 1 and 4. Manier, in *The Young Darwin and His Cultural Circle*, has discussed Wordsworth as a vital part of young Darwin's 'cultural circle' (see 89-96, 166-169, 186, and 196).

<sup>23</sup> Wordsworth, *Excursion*, Preface: 36-71.

<sup>24</sup> Shakespeare, "A Midsummer Night's Dream," 5.1: 15.

<sup>25</sup> Wordsworth, *Excursion*, V: 560-566, VIII: 199-204, and IV: 1251-1256.

<sup>26</sup> See Leary, "A Moralism," 178-181.

<sup>27</sup> Shakespeare, "Hamlet"; Bunyan, *Pilgrim's Progress*; and, Browning, "The Grammarian's Funeral." As previously noted, I will discuss the influence of Shakespeare and Browning on James elsewhere. For Bunyan's influence, see Leary, "New Insights: Part II," 29-35.

<sup>28</sup> James, *Correspondence*, vol. 4, 370, 12, and 250.

<sup>29</sup> Wordsworth, *Excursion*, III: 893-896.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., IV: 772-773.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., IV: 962-963.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., IV: 964-965.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., IV: 1296, 1255, and 626.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., IV: 1144 and 1146-1147.

<sup>35</sup> James, *Pragmatism*, 125-126. James, *A Pluralistic Universe*, 55.

<sup>36</sup> James, *Varieties of Religious Experience*, 414.

<sup>37</sup> On Schopenhauer and James, see Leary, "New Insights: Part I."

<sup>38</sup> James, "Remarks." Wordsworth, *Excursion*, IV: 1263.

<sup>39</sup> James, "Remarks," 17.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 21.

<sup>41</sup> For a classic statement of this position, see James, *Principles of Psychology*, vol. 1, 273-276.

<sup>42</sup> The influence of Hodgson and Wright as well as Wordsworth was apparent as early as 1875, two years after James's intense reading of Wordsworth, when he wrote against the "*a posteriori* school" of empirical psychologists (people like Spencer) who considered "experience" the direct result of the inward impress of (or "correspondence" with) environmental stimuli. To the contrary, James argued, experience is not the automatic registering of every passing bit of stimulation: "My experience is only what I agree to attend to." James, "Review of *Grundzüge*," 300.

<sup>43</sup> Wordsworth, *Excursion*, Preface: 54 and 215.

<sup>44</sup> James, "Sentiment of Rationality," 32.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 35.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> See quotation cited in note 25.

<sup>48</sup> James, "Sentiment of Rationality," 37-38 and 52.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 35 and 62. Wordsworth, *Excursion*, Preface: 54 and 215.

<sup>50</sup> James, "Sentiment of Rationality," 62.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid. "Thought is not..." is a quotation from Wordsworth's *Excursion*, I: 213, with past tense changed to present tense by James.

<sup>52</sup> James, "Sentiment of Rationality," 61-64.

<sup>53</sup> See quotation cited in note 18.

<sup>54</sup> James, "Review," 297.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>56</sup> Wordsworth, "The Tables Turned," 357.

<sup>57</sup> See Johnston, "Wordsworth," xiv-xv, and 352-360.

<sup>58</sup> James, "Review," 297 and 302-303.

<sup>59</sup> James is widely recognized as a precursor of later phenomenological philosophy and psychology. See Herzog, "Development of Phenomenological Psychology"; Linschoten, *On the Way*; and Wilshire, *William James and Phenomenology*.

<sup>60</sup> On James's views regarding the qualitative research that should take place before scientific or philosophical analysis, see Leary, "Overcoming Blindness," 25-31.

<sup>61</sup> James, *Principles*, vol. 1, 240-250 and vol. 2, 747.

<sup>62</sup> James, "Is Life Worth Living," 54.

<sup>63</sup> James, "On a Certain Blindness in Human Beings," 139.

<sup>64</sup> James, *Varieties*, 55, 401-402, 411-412, and 393.

<sup>65</sup> James, *Pragmatism*, 55, 126, and 123.

<sup>66</sup> James, *The Meaning of Truth*, 41. Many additional passages reflecting Wordsworthian insights and themes can be culled from Leary, "Psyche's Muse"; "William James and the Art of Human Understanding"; and "Naming and Knowing." Of course, there were relative differences as well as close affinities between James and Wordsworth, but these will be treated in another place.

<sup>67</sup> James, *Principles*, 1280.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>69</sup> Wordsworth, *Excursion*, VII: 356-357.