

James and Memory
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“The Politics of Jamesian Memory”

During Henry James' visit to his American “home” in 1904-5, he turned his perpetual dual vision towards his country with memories of the past and a critical look at the present, a gaze that necessitated a pragmatic gap. Likewise, two of his non-fiction works, *A Small Boy and Others*, as well as *The American Scene* – both written after this tour- are separated by a gap in lived time of perhaps fifty years. They are, however, linked by their subject matter of both being concerned with the nature of memory, American identity, and by extension, the future of America. They are also connected by the repetition of images and metaphors for the act of remembering, as well as a writing style that has fascinated many readers, but frustrated even more. The texts were, however, not written in isolation, but rather in a dialectical intellectual climate – for example Bergsonian individualism versus Durkheimian social - and between these extremes we find both William James and, surprisingly, Maurice Halbwachs, whose primary work proposed that all memory is a social construct that is formed and shaped according to the needs of present-day society.

While Halbwach's theory allows for the play of memory to take place for every generation, and every group within social frameworks, Henry James sought a way in which memory could both serve to unite the American collective conscience while simultaneously eluding and even disrupting any normative, solid boundaries of self (both individual self and collective self). The difference between Halbwachs and James, however, stands in Henry James' display of memory's constructed-ness. In this realm, the texts follow William James's

fundamental theories of memory, and, in fact, the texts put into practice William James's politics - that is, by evoking memories via narrative and thereby language, one is able to reject the simplifying, digesting, and controlling impulses of capitalism, which both James's saw as destroying America. Through the play of language, the site of synthesis and separation, Henry James both proves and models the process of memory-making as both constructed and central to nation-making. In these works, we are granted the space to hold on to our political ideas without losing the sense of the humanity of all those figures who haunt our collective memories. James reminds us (through his individual and social memories) how we can, and perhaps *must*, both create our identities, and engage with the other without losing ourselves. In doing so, our social memories become rooted in the solidarity of our (shared) humanity – and hence, become a means by which we can resist the capitalistic, Rooseveltian American machine.

This American machine is shown in *The American Scene* as having produced a nation that was for Henry James in 1904 'unidentifiable'; the nation's current trajectory was leading to "crude plasticity" of the social realm and creating an "army of puppets" of its citizens (AS 107). The nation's past, and the memories it has accumulated had not formed a sense of perpetual becoming nor a freedom in creative self-actualization as youthful James celebrated in his famous 1867 letter to T.S. Perry. What he finds, instead, is an "exquisite emptiness" (35) that worshipped the "American black ebony god of business" (222). If power relations of the present shape and reconfigure a nation's memories, then America's memories were, in 1904, according to James, at the mercy of "capitalism's desire to transform" pluralities into controllable, digestible, and profitable nuggets of singularities (Harootunian 481).

As a negation of this social framework, James's begins *A Small Boy and Others* with the claim that the text stands as an "attempt to place together some particulars of the early life of

William James and present him in his setting...so that *any future gathered memorials of him* might become the more intelligible” (SB 5 my emphasis). The text declares itself not as a personal memoir. Quite the contrary, with this first sentence, James announces the importance of his project in not only the realm of literature and art, but in the realm of social memory itself... yet to better understand the greater implications of this text, we must first look to the writings of HJ’s brother, William James.

As Francesca Bordogna explains in her study of the political philosophy of William James, the notion of “an open self surrounded by uncertain ... contours...[hence] permeable boundaries” had significant political implications and potential. In *Principles of Psychology*, James splits the self into the Ego (the principle of felt personal identity) and the Me or ‘empirical self,’ which he then split into three sub-selves: the material self, the social selves, and the spiritual self (the ‘felt centre’). The plurality of the self allows for the realization that we are a “bundle of relations” and a “plurality of things”, and as we shift our place in the social sphere, so too do our various selves shift and vary. What is central one moment becomes peripheral the next (518); yet this shifting and continually modifying self is not simply at the mercy of others or outside relations¹ – like habits that constitute conscious actions that are grooved into the brain, we, according to William James, can fashion or shape ourselves. In fact, James’s methods of self-cultivation and techniques of unifying the divided self lie at the core of political action and the initiation of effective social change.

So what does this model of the self and political engagement have to do with memory? If we look at the chapters dedicated to Memory and Association in *Principles*, key expressions

¹ As Halbwachs conclusion has a tendency to be understood. Here Ricoeur reminds us that a theory’s conclusion is not necessarily its strongpoint.

regarding the life of the individual mind point to the interconnectedness of the single mind and the collective. Like habit, which is the model for the ability of the self to create and recreate paths of behavior, thought, and hence identity, memory creates vestiges or traces in the brain. The more traces, or the more associations one creates for that particular event to others, the stronger the memory. Hence, “[t]he one who thinks over his experiences most, and weaves them into systemic relations with each other, will be the one with the best memory” (662). James explains this phenomenon with the metaphor of the “hook”. These ‘hooks’ “form a network of attachments by which it is woven into the entire tissue of our thought” (662). For HJ we know of these as Types, and we’ll look at this in a moment.

Memories, or ‘revivals in the mind’ are ‘copies’ not revivals of actual original events = hence, a memory is a ghost, an ‘evocation,’ or a hint at the original experience, but not the full, actualized thing itself. This seems obvious enough, but unlike Platonic wax prints, or imprints of the ‘thing’ itself, William calls a memory both a ‘duplicate’ and a ‘second event’ (649). He describes the process of remembering, or recanting, as a “saddleback” – so the “hook” is established, but once along its trajectory we never fully return to it. We are perpetually gazing upon it with a gap, a distance from our own present-day perspective and, according to Halbwachs, to our present-day needs.

But according to William, associations, or “hooks” are in and of themselves not sufficient for the past to remain in our memories – memories “must have that warmth and intimacy...[and they must be] appropriated by the thinker as his own” (650). And in his chapter entitled “Associations” in *Principles*, William James stresses how *analysis and synthesis, separation and amalgamation* is a continual process in all mental activities (550) – and, most significantly for the younger James, the singular sphere where synthesis takes place is language (556). The

pivotal role of language in the creation of not only memories as facts but as lived, felt, intimate parts of the self can be seen played out in Henry James's autobiographical works.

The seeming project of conveying Henry's childhood memories of his brother never really comes to pass. William remains a ghostly, always-receding figure in this text. Therefore, James only nominally conveys memories that can become meaningful within the social realm (i.e. a traditional sense of memories of times, places, & people), since his primary focus seems to revolve around the *system* by which these memories can be understood – that system posited in the very theories his brother spent a lifetime creating. What is more commemorative of William than to commemorate, via memories, his theory of memory, the mind, and the social?

Aside from the obvious metaphors for memories and remembering, one of James's thematic stresses throughout the text is the importance of “possibilities rather than actualities” (166). Like William's self-cultivation and self-fashioning, *Small Boy* repeatedly stresses the realization of the power of choice, and how the power to choose leaves open a cornucopia of possibilities of cultivation and fashioning for oneself and for others. We see this in the scene of his cousin's reprimand for raising objection to her bedtime.

“Come now, my dear; don't make a scene – I *insist* on your not making a scene!” That was all the witchcraft the occasion used, but the note was none the less epoch-making. The expression, so vivid, so portentous, was one I had never heard – it had never been addressed to us at home...it told me so much about life. Life at these intensities clearly became “scenes”; but the great thing, the immense illumination, was that we could make them or not as we chose.” (115-6)

While this certainly alludes to James's own writing, it also alludes to the necessity of the freedom to make and unmake the self, and the central element of choice in the making of the self. The memories James offers, then, are a means by which we, via James, are able to explore

such a practice. Through stories partly told, (there are hints, ghosts, and vibrations) James the writer, the conjurer, and the gaping boy offers us space to “make scenes” alongside our narrator or guide, and this James encourages simply by suggesting possibilities.

But along with the plethora of ghosts, vestiges, and possibilities, he also offers us recognizable *types* (albeit elusive) that allow us to make associations with his memories. More importantly, he gives us the language for establishing types that exist in order to create a common cultural, social memory, yet which resists stagnation, as we saw with William James’s “hooks.” For example, various scenes and characters are designated as Dickensian or Thackerian. While the use of the one-character trait adjective locates our vision in something common to many, it also leaves the particulars up to us. We know what he means by Dickensian, we can all agree, but we may, each of us, have a slightly different vision of its manifestation. It is a type, but it is also free for the play of individual imagination. Hence, we relate to each other according to a point of similarity while maintaining individual differences – hence, William’s model of sympathy and individualism.

But *Small Boy* may be best understood and appreciated as one part of a body of work, particularly *The American Scene*, and I will now point out just a few examples that may help illuminate the need for us to read these works as a body and a system that aims to shape, influence, and instruct the social consciousness by way of memory and narrative.

James revisits a seminal crisis of America’s history in *A Small Boy* which haunts *The American Scene*, propels the narrative of *Notes of a Son and Brother* – slavery, the Civil War, the seemingly irreparable divide between North & South. In *The American Scene*, James meets a “very handsome, young Virginian. A farmer by occupation” (5149; 5145-5147), who recounts a

“paternal adventure” during the war (5157-5158). James does not reveal the exact details of the story the young man shared with him, only the possible conclusion of it, which entailed, possibly, “the lucky smashing of the skull of a Union soldier,” which leads James to “complimen[t] the young man on his exact knowledge of these old, unhappy, far-off things.” Gert Buelens illuminates this scene via James’s politics, his method of “translation and negotiation” where each individual “leave[s] with their own version of the past,” intact and yet aware. This aligns with both Halbwachs concept of social memory functioning for each social group according to their needs, and it aligns with William James’s concept of exchange and sympathy via individuality. But Henry James does not end there. Their pleasant exchange concludes with the final sentiment of the chapter: “So I wondered till it came to me that, though he wouldn't have hurt a Northern fly, there were things (ah, we had touched on some of these!) that, all fair, engaging, smiling, as he stood there, he would have done to a Southern negro” (5158-5166). James reminds us of the dual nature of southern charm while also reminding us the war, and acts such as “the lucky smashing of the skull of a Union soldier” (5158), was fought for or against the sins committed against the “Southern negro.” These sins are only alluded to, and they leave us readers with the ghostly presence of a history, event, and memory with which we must each contend.

In a very similar vein, James repeats this critical and cautionary tone in *A Small Boy* when he describes his encounter with similarly charming southerners, the Norcom family and their “two pieces of precious property,” mother and son, the family’s African-American slaves, who flee “in the dead of night” (153). The event leads to young Henry “taking a vague little inward Northern comfort in their [the Norcom family’s] inability...to raise the hue and cry” (153-4), and this informs us readers that the censure James expresses in *The American Scene* for

what the young Virginian “would have done to a Southern negro” had its earlier beginnings in New York. But our memory of James’s own text and hints of opinions (again) does not end there. Just as his treatment of the south and the war is repeatedly alluded to in the *American Scene*, and never with quite the clear censure we may expect or desire, his union of memories disrupts, once again, the image we may have constructed up to this point in the narrative.

Just as the scene described in *The American Scene* begins with at least partial sympathy for the young Virginian and ends with a reminder of the horrors experienced by the African-American slaves, so this section, a celebration of the freedom of the mother and son, ends with a reminder of the horrors of the war. The text practices the “saddleback” motion and nature of memory, as described by William James. The impression that concludes this section is not a ‘real’ memory, only a supposition, but it attains its potentialities as a “real event” through an image (or rather several images) to which it alludes. An older sibling of the children with whom James played, “[t]he slim, the sallow, the straight-haired and dark-eyed Eugene in particular haunted [James’s] imagination” (154), and it is through this figure that James ends his story of the Kentucky family: “I cherished the thought of the fine fearless young fire-eater he would have become and, when the War had broken out, I know not what dark but pitying vision of him stretched stark after a battle” (5224-5225). While this would have been a powerful statement of the brutalities of the American Civil War and a reminder that tragedies existed on both “sides,” readers are not simply invited to imagine a young man, one to whom James has just endeared us in a few brief lines; we are reminded of memories of the war that all shared, those who partook and were present, and those who were not – the photos of fallen soldiers by Matthew Brady. No direct mention is made, no explicit reference, save the earlier chapter’s mention of Brady’s studio and young James’s first daguerreotype – yet what is accomplished is the provocation of

individual memory of the War photos, images that had become part of the collective conscience of the war – individual stirrings, vibrations, that are part of a social network of meaning and identity.

Most importantly, the memory of the image is linked to a possible event, a tragedy on the “side” of the south. Hence, America’s past, and its collective memory, must include the loss of the young Eugenes who fell fighting for a cause that ended in a “pitying vision.” We are not instructed as to what we might, should, nor must feel towards Eugene’s cause. Hence, this is William’s Pragmatism put into action: we are granted the space to hold on to our political ideas without losing the sense of Eugene’s humanity and the humanity of all those figures who haunt our memories via Brady’s photos. By offering us a mirror image of his encounter with the young Virginian, James reminds us (through personal and social memories) how we can, and perhaps *must*, engage with the other without losing ourselves. In doing so, our social memories become rooted in the solidarity of our humanity.

James sought a way in which memory could serve to both bind the American collective conscience while simultaneously eluding and even disrupting any normative, solid boundaries of self (both individual self and collective self). Hence, unlike Roosevelt’s clearly demarcated American, James ends his memories with a dramatic and “considerable gap” (250). Like William’s “open self...and permeable boundaries” (Bordogna 509), the text as a whole offers possibilities and potentialities, and it leaves us, with the conclusion that concludes nothing in particular, simply gaping.

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