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Source: *The American Art Journal*, Vol. 17, No. 1 (Winter, 1985), pp. 60-67

Published by: Kennedy Galleries, Inc.

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1594413>

Accessed: 22-05-2020 19:21 UTC

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The American Art Journal

WILLIAM JAMES, HENRY JAMES, JOHN LA FARGE, AND THE FOUNDATIONS OF RADICAL EMPIRICISM

Henry Adams

IN EARLY SUMMER of 1859, Henry James was strolling along the Cliff Walk at Newport when William James came running toward him. Bursting with enthusiasm, he blurted out: "There's a new fellow come to Hunt's class. He knows everything. He has read everything. He has seen everything—paints everything. He's a marvel."¹ The newcomer was John La Farge, and the immediate admiration felt by William James was soon seconded in an equally warm, if less exaggerated fashion by his brother. Writing of this period years afterward, Henry James recalled La Farge as "quite the most interesting person we knew."² La Farge soon took on the role of intellectual mentor to the James brothers, introducing them to French literature, discoursing with them on philosophical questions, and going on painting excursions with them. Very often they visited Bishop Berkeley's rock, the subject of several of La Farge's major paintings, and a favorite spot of the famous philosopher who first denied the existence of a distinction between reality and sensation.³

What emerged from the exchanges between these three figures was a new vision of reality—one based on an awareness of the ambiguities of sensation. For William James (1842–1910), Henry James (1843–1916), and John La Farge (1835–1910) (Figs. 1–3), to a degree that has not fully been appreciated, all explored a similar philosophical viewpoint: all three shifted the focus of attention in their work from the object itself to the perception of the object in the field of consciousness. La Farge converted the painter's canvas from a representation of the external world to a depiction of visual sensations; Henry James transformed narration from a description of real events to an account of the narrator's perceptions and interpretations; and William James rejected materialism and idealism to develop radical empiricism, a philosophy founded upon the primacy of sensations and mental entities over material realities.

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While these figures have long been recognized as significant innovators in their respective fields, the underlying philosophical unity of their work has seldom been pointed out, and never closely analyzed. My goal here is to indicate some of the most striking affinities of approach that link their achievements.

It is appropriate to begin by considering the art of painting, for since the time of Bishop Berkeley, whose assault on the existence of matter began with his essay "A New Theory of Vision" (1709), the analysis of sight has played a key role in redefining our relation to the external world, and in providing a new model for the operations of thought and sensation.⁴ La Farge's paintings explore directions Berkeley had marked out, and portray not the actual world but the meeting of that world with the mind as a percept in the field of consciousness. The peculiar quality of La Farge's images is that they at once dematerialize objects and give empty space an aura of tangibility.

The novel features of La Farge's work are exemplified in his *Flowers on a Window Ledge* of 1861 (Fig. 4).⁵ The originality of La Farge's approach is quickly evident if we set this canvas beside a typical American still-life painting of this period, such as a work by Severin Roesen (Fig. 5). Immediately, one is struck by the relative modesty of La Farge's subject. In this period, most American still-life paintings, like the Roesen, were cluttered arrangements of silver, glass, flowers, fruit, and other valuables and edibles, which were arranged to look as sumptuous and costly as possible. By contrast, La Farge's presentation of the flowers is markedly restrained. The subject is simple, almost sparse, a single bowl of fragile roses casually placed on a window ledge within an enormous, white expanse.

Coupled with this simplicity of subject, however, is a new emphasis on the complexity of sensations. Rather than presenting the image as fixed in a sharp focus that does not vary with distance or light, as was customary in American painting at this time, La Farge presents optical vibrations, a sea of different luminosities, colorations, and degrees of focus. The flowers and curtain are struck by a variety of cross-lights, coming from both inside and out-of-doors. Light never seems to come from a single source, or to cast the pictorial elements in sharp relief, but at one moment seems to

Adams/James, James, and La Farge

Fig. 1. William James. SELF PORTRAIT. c. 1866. Pencil on blue-lined writing paper, 8 x 6". Collection, Houghton Library, Harvard University.



emanate from within an object, and at another to be hovering above or outside it.

The sharpness of visual resolution varies according to both the focal distance and the degree of interest. Thus, the flowers are most sharply presented, while the landscape, with the curving road, building, and distant trees, is blurred. The image also grows ever less distinct as we approach its edges, as we can observe, for example, in the loose treatment of the lower left. In sum, the viewer should attend not so much to the solid,

substantive qualities of form, as to feelings of transition and relation.

Significantly, this emphasis on sensation entailed eliminating traditional distinctions between subject and object. The outer world and the inner experience of that world are presented as one. The boldness and freedom of the brushwork—which contrasts with the oleographic smoothness favored by other American painters of this period—openly declares the subjectivity of the painter's personal response, and incorporates

Fig. 2. *John La Farge*. HENRY JAMES. c. 1863. Oil on canvas, 20½ x 13½". Collection, The Century Association, New York.



this response into the very fabric of the image.

The novel attributes of La Farge's canvases at times bring to mind the work of the French Impressionists, as well as that of James McNeill Whistler and Henri Fantin-Latour. La Farge's paintings, however, both predated and developed independently from the compositions of these European figures. Although La Farge had some acquaintance with both French criticism and French painting of the Barbizon school, to a large degree his artistic development was a solitary and

isolated phenomenon, little known even in the United States except to figures such as Henry and William James who formed part of his most intimate circle.⁶

How did paintings such as *Flowers on a Window Ledge* affect Henry James, we may ask?⁷ Certainly Henry James's novels, like La Farge's paintings, also concentrate their emphasis on sensation and consciousness. Indeed, to view these writings as deeply affected by the methods of the painter is merely to follow up a hint from the author himself, for in his essay "The Art

Fig. 3. William James. Detail of JOHN LA FARGE. c. 1866. Pencil on paper, 3 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 6 $\frac{1}{4}$ ". Collection, Houghton Library, Harvard University.



of Fiction” Henry James declared that:

The analogy between the art of the painter and the art of the novelist is, so far as I am able to see, complete. Their inspiration is the same, their process (allowing for the different quality of the vehicle) is the same, their success is the same. They may learn from each other, they may explain and sustain each other.⁸

What is more, La Farge’s influence on Henry James, which has been discussed in detail by Leon Edel, is well established. La Farge was the first to take Henry James’s work seriously, to encourage him in his pursuits, and, at one point, to advise him that his talents lay in the direction of literature rather than painting. In addition, La Farge, himself an avid reader of French periodicals, first introduced Henry James to contemporary French novelists, in particular to Balzac, the single most significant influence on Henry James’s work. Finally, though this has not been stated before, I believe that La Farge played a significant role in shaping Henry James’s literary style.⁹ For La Farge was a famous conversationalist, who was noted for the complexity of the ideas that he could suspend in a single sentence, the virtuosity with which he could hold

his collateral lines of thought without quite dropping or forsaking his initial meaning. Just such a tendency towards elaboration, intricacy, and the quite tireless pursuit of nuance, distinguishes the prose of Henry James. In its most attenuated form this complexity provided a technique for using language not simply to express an idea but also to explore a thought in the very process of its formation.¹⁰

Like La Farge, Henry James de-emphasizes the external subject—the actual events that take place. In his hands action dwindles to almost nothing, and characters and places melt into subjective psychological impressions. His protagonists are invariably inexperienced children, helpless women, or indecisive men. Life exists for them, as his most famous heroine Isabel Archer puts it in *Portrait of a Lady* (1881), almost entirely as a matter of “seeing and being.” These characters observe, they watch, they feel with intensity, they are puzzled and often distraught by the march of events, but they do not act.

While he reduces external subject matter, however, Henry James, like La Farge, replaces it with a



Fig. 4. John La Farge. FLOWERS ON A WINDOW LEDGE. 1861. Oil on canvas, 24 x 20". Collection, The Corcoran Gallery of Art, Anna E. Clark Fund.



Fig. 5. Severin Roesen. STILL LIFE WITH VISTA. c. 1865. Oil on canvas, 29 x 36 $\frac{1}{2}$ ". Private collection. Photograph, Kennedy Galleries, Inc.

new attention to the activities of consciousness. Once again, this process necessarily involves a redefinition of subject and object, of the relationship between the narrator and the world that he describes. In Henry James's late works, such as *The Golden Bowl* (1904), the narrative no longer progresses by means of the forward movement of events: rather it advances by means of successive acts of interpretation. The characters exist only in the minds of other characters, having no objective life, while the setting also exists in the same way. The subject becomes experience itself, that experience of which Henry James once wrote:

Experience is never limited and it is never complete: it is an immense sensibility, a kind of spider-web of the finest silken threads suspended in the chamber of consciousness, and catching every air-borne particle in its tissue. It is

the very atmosphere of mind; and when the mind is imaginative—much more when it happens to be that of a man of genius—it takes to itself the faintest hints of life. it converts the very pulses of the air into revelations.¹¹

Thus, in two different art forms, La Farge and Henry James explored very similar fundamental issues of the subjectivity of consciousness and sensation. In the writings of William James we find the philosophical implications of these concerns very clearly articulated.

F. O. Matthiessen has commented on the lasting impact of William James's training as a painter, noting that "one of his greatest assets as a psychologist was that he had mastered the artist's skill of grasping concretely the evanescent moment of experience."¹² In describing the nature of thought, William James constantly compared it with the process of vision, and his

key contribution, both to psychology and to philosophy, was to recognize that thoughts are no more discrete than visual sensations, but are apprehended contextually, with varying degrees of clarity and focus, within an ever-changing mental field.

Ideas are not discrete, unchanging entities, he demonstrated, but are always in a state of transition, and these transitory relations are as much an intrinsic part of thought as substantive qualities. The smallest retrievable particle of thought—that is to say, the smallest conceivable subject—is nonetheless astonishingly intricate and elusive. “Inside of the minimal pulses of experience,” William James once observed, “is realized that very inner complexity which the transcendentalists say only the absolute can genuinely possess.”¹³

If this much seems straightforward, its implications are nonetheless revolutionary. René Descartes had pushed our knowledge of existence back to the Cartesian ego; William James pushed it back still further to the fact of consciousness itself, eliminating the ego, and denying the distinctions, which hitherto had been regarded as fundamental, between thing and idea, and between subject and object.

In so doing, not unlike La Farge, William James seems to have taken several hints from Bishop Berkeley.¹⁴ All objects, facts, and experiences, Berkeley had demonstrated, can be known only through sensations or ideas, that is, through purely mental entities. As there is no objective way of defining sensation other than through sensation itself, sensation exists independently from objective verification. Sensation, not the real world, is the fundamental ontological fact.

William James directly lifted his belief in the primacy of sensation from Berkeley, but denied that thought or consciousness could ever be reduced to substantive qualities. Thus, a separate spiritual level to reality is as fictitious as an objective world other than that provided by sensation. In short, William James rejected the transcendental ego, the distinction between mind and matter, and the necessary separation between subject and object, proposing that both materialism and idealism should be replaced by radical empiricism—by acceptance of “a world of pure experience.” As he stated: “The instant field of the present is at all times what I call the ‘pure’ experience. It is only virtually or potentially either subject or object as yet. For the time being, it is a plain unqualified actuality, a

simple *that*. . . Thought and actuality are made of one and the same stuff, the stuff of experience in general.”¹⁵

William James thus demolished the foundations of all previous philosophy, denying all categorical imperatives, and building his belief upon a belief in uncertainty. He presented a world that cannot be apprehended as a single fact, and that fades into ambiguity at its edges; a world in which theories are instruments, but not answers to enigmas; a world in which the disenfranchised soul must indulge in faith at its own risks.¹⁶

To conclude, I believe that William James, Henry James, and John La Farge shared attitudes about the primacy of sensation and the act of consciousness, attitudes that gave a common direction to their work in different fields. While no doubt the connections that could be made between the work of these three figures are manifold, three points seem particularly evident. First, they all reduced the significance of the external subject, that is to say, on objects outside the self, to concentrate instead on the internal action of consciousness. Second, they all recognized consciousness as a field of ever-changing qualities and sensations, in which feelings of transition and relation have as much significance as substantive qualities. Third, they all rendered ambiguous or obsolete the conventional distinctions between thought and matter, and sensation and matter, as well as between subject and object, presenting these traditional polarities as reunited and part of pure experience.

La Farge’s flower paintings and landscapes of the 1860s, which were painted in the period when he was most closely associated with Henry and William James, generally have been viewed as works that stand outside the mainstream of American painting.¹⁷ If considered from a slightly different standpoint, however, La Farge’s works, rather than appearing out of place, seem of central importance. But besides viewing them in relation to the history of painting, I propose that we should consider them also as part of the history of ideas, and in particular as experiments that run parallel to, and had a profound influence on, the literary and philosophical ventures of the two James brothers. When looked at in this manner, La Farge’s paintings mark a significant transition in American thought, from the belief in concrete external truths characteristic of the early nineteenth-century world view, to the introspection and uncertainty of our modern sensibility.

NOTES

This article is based on a talk given at the February, 1984, meeting of the College Art Association.

1. Robert C. LeClair, *Young Henry James* (New York, 1955), pp. 284–285.
2. Henry James, *Notes of a Son and Brother* (New York, 1914), p. 67.
3. One of La Farge's paintings of Bishop Berkeley's rock is now in The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. For the interaction between John La Farge, Henry James, and William James, see Henry James, *Notes of a Son and Brother*; Gibson Danes, "William Morris Hunt and His Newport Circle," *Magazine of Art*, vol. XLIV (April, 1950), pp. 144–150; and Henry Adams, "John La Farge, 1835–1870: From Amateur to Artist," doctoral dissertation, Yale University, 1980. La Farge was the model for the main character in Henry James's early short story, "A Landscape Painter," *Atlantic Monthly*, vol. XVII (Feb., 1866), pp. 182–202.
4. George Berkeley, *Philosophical Works: Including the Works on Vision*, introduction and notes by M. R. Ayers (1709; repr. ed., London, 1975). I do not mean to imply, of course, that La Farge's manner of painting directly expressed Berkeley's philosophical position. In the strict sense a painterly, dematerialized image is no more Berkelian than one which emphasizes solidity and tactility, since for Berkeley all of these qualities should be understood in terms of mere mental phenomena. I do believe, however, that Berkeley's radical emphasis on sensation influenced La Farge's artistic stance.
5. On the novel aspects of La Farge's still-life paintings, in addition to the works already cited, see Ruth Berenson Katz, "John La Farge as Painter and Critic," doctoral dissertation, Radcliffe College, 1951, chapters 3 and 4, pp. 23–59; and Kathleen A. Foster, "The Still-Life Paintings of John La Farge," *The American Art Journal*, vol. XI, no. 3 (July, 1979), pp. 5–37.
6. The artistic precedents for La Farge's work are discussed by Foster and Adams. The philosophical background of French Impressionism has been discussed by Richard Shiff, "The End of Impressionism: A Study in Theories of Artistic Expression," *The Art Quarterly*, new series, vol. 1, no. 4 (1978), pp. 338–378.
7. Henry James, of course, was intimately familiar with La Farge's work. In fact, he sometimes went on painting excursions with La Farge: one he described in *Notes of a Son and Brother* (1914), pp. 102–103, and others he worked into his early short story, "A Landscape Painter." Early in his career, Henry James discussed La Farge's work in his most significant early critical review, "On Some Pictures Lately Exhibited," *Galaxy*, vol. 20 (1875), pp. 89–97. Toward the end of his life he recorded his impressions of the posthumous exhibition of La Farge's work, held in Boston in 1910, in *Notes of a Son and Brother*, pp. 101–106. See also the references in notes 3 and 10.
8. Henry James, "The Art of Fiction," *The Portable Henry James* (New York, 1951), pp. 393–394.
9. See Adams, chapter 3, pp. 157–210.
10. Leon Edel, *Henry James, the Untried Years: 1843–1870* (New York, 1978), pp. 142–144, and 159–166.
11. Henry James, "The Art of Fiction," p. 401. I have not attempted a detailed account of Henry James's literary techniques, which have already been carefully analyzed by other writers. See, for example, Edmund Wilson, "The Ambiguity of Henry James," in *The Triple Thinkers* (New York, 1978), pp. 122–164; and Leon Edel, *The Modern Psychological Novel* (New York, 1961). While James's later work is more developed in its techniques, from the beginning he focussed on the ordeal of consciousness. Indeed, in the preface to the collected edition of his work, discussing the character of Rowland Mallet in his first novel, *Roderick Hudson*, Henry James tells us that the "centre of interest throughout *Roderick* is in Rowland Mallet's consciousness, and the drama is the very drama of that consciousness" (Leon Edel, *The Modern Psychological Novel*, p. 36).
12. F. O. Matthiessen, *The James Family* (New York, 1947), pp. 99–100.
13. *The Collected Writings of William James*, edited by John J. McDermott (Chicago, 1977), p. 295. See also p. 157, and p. 21, where William James noted: "Most books start with sensations, as the simplest mental facts, and proceed synthetically, constructing each higher stage from those below it. But this is abandoning the empirical method of investigation. No one ever had a simple sensation by itself. Consciousness, from our natal day, is of a teeming multiplicity of objects and relations, and what we call simple sensations are results of discriminative attention, pushed often to a very high degree."
14. *Ibid.*, pp. 154, 172, 186, and 193. On p. 45 James notes his area of disagreement with Berkeley, and refers to "the ridiculous theory of Hume and Berkeley that we can have no images but of perfectly definite things."
15. *Ibid.*, p. 177. While William James's fullest expression of this doctrine is his essay, "Does 'Consciousness' Exist?" of 1904, he presented it in less radical form in his earliest writings. In his *The Principles of Psychology* of 1890, for example, he noted that "Thought may, but need not in knowing, distinguish between its object and itself" (p. 62).
16. *Ibid.*, p. 135. Alfred North Whitehead rated William James among the four greatest philosophical assemblers, noting that James "had discovered intuitively the great truth with which modern logic is not wrestling," namely "that every finite set of premises must indicate notions which are excluded from its direct purview" (Alfred North Whitehead, *Modes of Thought* [New York, 1954], pp. 2–4).
17. This view is forcefully expressed, for example, by Barbara Novak in her chapter, "The Painterly Mode in America," in *American Painting of the Nineteenth Century* (New York, 1969), pp. 235–261.