FATHERS AND SONS, TEXTS AND CONTEXTS: HENRY JAMES, SR., AND WILLIAM JAMES

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Becoming William James. By Howard M. Feinstein. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1984. 384 pages. $24.95.

The Iron of Melancholy: Structures of Spiritual Conversion in America from the Puritan Conscience to Victorian Neurosis. By John O. King III. Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1983. 450 pages. $37.50.

THE RESONANT THEME OF FATHER-AND-SON CONFLICT DOMINATES HOWARD Feinstein's analysis of William James's crisis of vocation and accompanying maladies of the body and spirit. While John O. King's work is more daring in interpretation and wider in scope—seeking to erect a new paradigm for American Studies and ranging from the Puritan confessionals to close readings of Josiah Royce, James J. Putnam, and Max Weber—it also evaluates the relationship between Henry James, Sr., and William James. This review will, therefore, in order to highlight the methodological and evidentiary importance of these books, focus upon their authors' respective evaluations of William James, his conflict with his father, his vocational and emotional crises, and the bearing of these trials upon his later psychological and philosophical work.

The phylogeny of James family vocational conflict and accompanying neurosis was recapitulated in the ontogeny of William James. The roots of this conflict, as carefully traced by Feinstein, began with the scion of the family, William James of Albany. Calvinistic in his religion and attitude, a self-made and successful businessman, William of Albany sought to force his son Henry into the study of law. A struggle of immense psychic proportions ensued, as Henry alternatively acceded to and broke from his father's iron will. That "will" was deeply imbricated with a double meaning, at once representative of the father's will or desire to direct his son's vocational future; and also emblematic of the legal document that eventually severed the son from the family fortune. The will of the

father, in both senses, was eventually broken by Henry, but only at the cost of vocational indecision and the famed "vastation" or breakdown that Henry experienced in 1844.

As a father himself, Henry would replicate his own father's actions and seek to direct his son's future, but in a fashion cloaked with "vague benevolence." Desirous of being a dutiful son, William at first chose art, both because of his own talent, and his belief that his father respected artists. Unfortunately, no sooner had William decided on this vocation then he found that his father now considered it unworthy. Henry James, Sr., had become convinced that science alone was the proper career for William. Again wanting to be the dutiful son, William—who at this time complained of fainting spells and hinted at suicide—began a career in science at Harvard. This career only served to frustrate William's own desires, as he descended into a long cycle—Feinstein dates it from 1861 until 1873—of vocational, mental, and physical crises, punctuated by neurasthenic maladies, thoughts of suicide, indecision over a career, and a famous "panic fear" much like his father's. William, Feinstein shows, was finally able to work his way out of this crucible of parental dictation, identity crises, and physical infirmity through some fortuitous circumstances—Charles Eliot's offer of a teaching position at Harvard—and by his decision to pursue work in psychology, which would allow him to mediate between the scientific career demanded by his father and his own desire to explore philosophical questions.

Feinstein's volume presents a finely nuanced reading of the internal *Sturm und Drang* of William James's early years; he places center stage the familial conflicts over vocation. Vocational conflict bred sickness and uncertainty in young William James and was sustained and promoted by the dynamics of the James family. Rather than simply recounting the not inconsiderable horrors of James's iron cage of illness, Feinstein also constructs an account of the uses or benefits of illness as a lever for financial aid, as a means of winning parental support in sibling rivalries, as an excuse for travel abroad, and as a moratorium from career choices. James's lengthy struggle for identity comes to be viewed, in Eriksonian terms, as a joining of neurosis and genius that produced the particular qualities of mind and personality that have come to define William James. Finally, Feinstein's deep penetration into the documentary sources of the James family history unearths many new insights and facts: the largely nugatory effects of William's famous reading of Renouvier upon his crisis of the will and a new dating of William's panic fear, to name only two.

For all of Feinstein's prodigious research, carefully composed narrative, and strongly argued thesis, some readers will remain unconvinced and others will be disappointed by the methodological silences of the book. The relationship between the increasing tempo of James's illnesses and his refusal to participate actively in the Civil War is an interpretation present in the canon of James studies, but it is unfortunately ignored by Feinstein.[1] More problematic, however, is Feinstein's

[1]George M. Fredrickson, *The Inner Civil War: Northern Intellectuals and the Crisis of the Union* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1968), 229–38; Marian C. Madden and Edward H. Madden, "The Psychosomatic Illnesses of William James," *Thought*, 54 (1979), 376–92.

refusal to acknowledge and grapple with the numerous opposing interpretations for James's struggles which, while based upon the same primary sources, employ forthrightly a variety of heuristic devices: ego, humanistic, behavioral, and Freudian psychology as well as the character analysis developed by certain Dutch and French schools of interpretation.[2] One might have expected that Feinstein, a practicing psychiatrist, would have confronted this Babel of methodological positions in his volume, while also more thoroughly discussing his own theoretical premises. Feinstein's subtly rendered interpretations of various drawings executed during crisis periods by William James are clearly based upon clinical observations, but Sigmund Freud is absent from the index (Freud does, in fact, make a fleeting appearance in a single note). Even Erik Erikson, whose well-known concepts of identity formation stalk Feinstein's pages, is only mentioned twice. In sum, Feinstein is not combative enough on important methodological and interpretive issues. To be sure, in his notes he does engage other interpreters of the Jameses, but his disagreements are mostly quibbles over dates or sequences of events.

How might, or might not, the interpretations of Freud, Erikson, Kohut, and others jibe with Feinstein's findings? One need not embrace the ubiquitous abuses of reductionistic Freudians to recognize, if only in passing, that Freud's discussion of Oedipus and Hamlet in *The Interpretation of Dreams* might help to explain William's conflict with his father or, more usefully, his neurotic tendencies and accompanying hesitations and uncertainties.[3] This omission is surprising since the totem of the father looms so large in Feinstein's account of the James family. Conversely, for those uneasy with patriarchy, one might also ask Feinstein where the mother, Mary James, fits into William's *Bildung* or self-formation. After all, while William is shown by Feinstein as continually seeking to please his father at the same time that he was struggling to maintain his own separate identity, William did, in the end, marry a woman much like his mother and one approved by Mary as well.[4]

If Feinstein is methodologically reticent, then John O. King is methodologically talkative. King's sophistication and his sustained use of what will appear to some in American Studies as a new language of analysis demand explanation in this review, and must precede discussion of his "reading" of William James. *The Iron of Melancholy* is heavily dependent upon the concepts of Michel Foucault, Mikhail Bakhtin, and Roland Barthes; the volume's terminology—*discourse, text, figuration, difference, sign*—has a distinctively Continental ring.

[2]Cushing Strout, "William James and the Twice-Born Sick Soul," *Daedalus*, 97 (1968), 1062–82; and Strout, "The Pluralistic Identity of William James: A Psycho-historical Reading of *The Varieties of Religious Experience*," *American Quarterly*, 23 (1971), 135–52; Gary T. Alexander, "William James, the Sick Soul, and the Negative Dimensions of Consciousness: A Partial Critique of Transpersonal Psychology," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 48 (1980), 191–205; James William Anderson, " 'The Worst Kind of Melancholy': William James in 1869," *Harvard Library Bulletin*, 30 (1982), 369–86; S.P. Fullinwider, "William James's 'Spiritual Crisis,'" *The Historian*, 38 (Nov. 1975), 39–57; Gerard Deledalle, "William James and his Father: A Study in Characterology" in Walter Robert Corti, ed., *The Philosophy of William James* (Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag, 1976), 317–30.

[3]Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams, Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. James Strachey (1900; rpt. London: Hogarth, 1953), IV, 260–66.

[4]James William Anderson, "In Search of Mary James," *Psychohistory Review*, 8 (1979), 63–70.

King rejects the assumption that economic, sociological, or psychological factors exert hegemony over writing; a text is never simply a reflection of reality. A discursive formation—in King's case the Puritan conversion narrative—demands initial analysis because it shapes the individual, it constructs reality: "textual expressions . . . are in themselves capable of creating a person's character"(7). Although he gives especial credit to Foucault, many of King's formulations are akin to those of the current doyen of intellectual historians, Clifford Geertz.[5] With Geertz, and of course Max Weber, culture serves as a filter or a text that defines and explains the real. Both would argue that the text or culture performs like a play. A script exists and, while there is clearly room for improvisation and rewriting (reinterpretation, as King puts it), the individual actor works within preestablished boundaries, limits understood and accepted by the performer as well as the audience. The play truly becomes the thing.

The Iron of Melancholy is interesting as well for its presentation of the wilderness, in contrast to the familiarly reassuring garden imagery of American Studies, as the controlling myth of America. Tales of confession become the "'national' requirement" (2). The archetypal American must descend into a spiritual wasteland, then recreate himself in the journey of the twice-born sick soul. Thus images of trauma, alienation, melancholy, malaise, and vocational uncertainty become the textual and mythical landscape for America's intellectuals. What the jeremiad or the "auto-American-biography" is for Sacvan Bercovitch,[6] the wilderness in Puritan conversion narratives or in Victorian accounts of neurosis is for King: "the troubles of the person while individualized, are projected upon the state, creating the idea of a national personality" (48).

King's discursive readings lead us to a deeper understanding of the structures of writing and of the problematic nature of Marxist, psychological, and "culture and personality" methodologies. As well, we acquire a surer sense of the continuity of one type of textual expression translated into character formation in the American experience. King's insights, often brilliant, obviously make his work important. The problems of his volume, in brief, are similar to those which confront Foucault's work: an inability (or certainly a hesitancy) to explain why discursive structures change over time, an implicit denial of the subject, and a style both prolix and recherché. King's is not an easy work to decipher. In addition, King's recourse to a controlling myth will strike many readers as antiquated, a resurrection (albeit with a new vocabulary) of a problematic approach to American Studies. Finally, the penetration of the myth of the spiritual wilderness—across class, ethnic, and gender lines—remains unexamined in King's volume.

For all of King's admitted animus to Feinstein's psychologistic reading of the

[5]Clifford Geertz, "Blurred Genres: The Refiguration of Social Thought," *American Scholar*, 49 (1980), 171–75; and Geertz, *Negara: The Theatre State in Nineteenth Century Bali* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1980).

[6]Sacvan Bercovitch, *The Puritan Origins of the American Self* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1975); and Bercovitch, *The American Jeremiad* (Madison: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1978).

Jameses, both share deep interpretive affinities. In spite of some terminological and methodological differences, exegetical distinctions between King and Feinstein are really of degree, not of kind. According to King's methodological pronouncements, this convergence should not occur, but it results, happily, from his willingness to wander away from his own axioms. King is both expansive and learned enough to evaluate multiple possibilities with breadth and erudition. Rather than weakening his textual analysis, King's scope and eclecticism actually strengthen *The Iron of Melancholy,* though Foucaultian purists will strongly differ on this point. King joins Feinstein in relating the Jameses' accounts of their spiritual crises, as texts, to the rendition of Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progess*. Moreover, both catalogue internal similarities between the "vastation" narration of Henry, Sr., and the "panic fear" description provided by William. While for Feinstein, however, such structural and content kinships are simply interesting, for King they are central; they place the work of the Jameses within King's continuum of the confessional narrative. Both King and Feinstein detail the vocational struggle between father and son: here King is dependent upon Feinstein's labors. Yet King removes this conflict from the familial context, translating it into the intertextuality of the wilderness theme of alienated labor expressed in narrative form.

Indeed, King denies the sufficiency of the familial context for a true understanding of the travails of the Jameses. Even while he acknowledges that William worked against the particularities of his father's spiritual autobiography and that William's monumental *Varieties of Religious Experience* represents a dialogue between father and son, King continues to maintain that both Jameses defined and worked out their problems "within a larger textual history of confession" (110). The problems of the father and son, their sickness, vocational uncertainty, melancholy, asceticism, and desire for disciplined labor are formed and become realities, according to the structures of the Puritan morphology of conversion.

With the achievement of Feinstein and King grafted onto the previous work of Ralph Barton Perry, F.O. Matthiessen, James Gilbert, and Leon Edel,[7] one hopes closure will come to explanations and descriptions of the crises of the spirit and vocation endured by the Jameses. Now is the time to move forward. Yet how? Certainly, Willam James's "becoming" must be left behind; likewise, his "revealing" of himself in his texts has been thoroughly plumbed. Nor is there any hope of achieving any kind of consensus about whether William James's crisis period was finally resolved by his study of psychology, the working out of his conflicts with his father, or to his successful marriage to Alice. All interpretations

[7]Ralph Barton Perry, *The Thought and Character of William James*, 2 vols. (Boston: Little, Brown, 1935); F.O. Matthiessen, *The James Family: A Group Biography* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1947); James B. Gilbert, *Work without Salvation: America's Intellectuals and Industrial Alienation, 1880–1910* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1977), 180–211; Leon Edel, *Henry James: The Untried Years, 1843–1870* (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott, 1953). Also, Mark R. Schwehn, "Making the World: William James and the Life of the Mind," *Harvard Library Bulletin*, 30 (1982), 426–53.

are useful as biographical aids, but they do little to bring us to a fuller understanding of James's psychology and philosophy. Perhaps, following Peter Gay's lead, we can move away from studies that emphasize Victorian crisis, neurosis, and *Grübelrucht* (intense doubt) into more positive aspects of the Jamesian persona.[8] Given our firm foundation in James's early years (thanks to Feinstein) and in his "textuality" (thanks to King), we may now focus "on the more general social and intellectual matrix," to use Quentin Skinner's terms, out of which William James's work arose and was received by his audience.[9] Out of this dialogue between public philosopher and American audience, a new understanding of James and his philosophy seems ready to emerge.

[8]Peter Gay, *Education of the Senses: The Bourgeois Experience, Victoria to Freud* (New York and Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1984), I.

[9]Quentin Skinner, *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought: The Renaissance* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1978), I, x–xi. Excellent starting points for the larger study of James are David A. Hollinger, "The Problem of Pragmatism in American History," *Journal of American History*, 67 (1980), 88–107, and Hollinger, "William James and the Culture of Inquiry," *Michigan Quarterly Review*, 20 (1981), 264–83; Mark Richard Schwehn, "The Making of Modern Consciousness in America: The Works and Careers of Henry Adams and William James," Diss. Stanford Univ. 1978. Bruce Kuklick, *The Rise of American Philosophy: Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1860–1930* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1977), is helpful, but usually confines context to an institutional setting.