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The Maelstrom: The Chaotic in The Principles of Psychology: Part 1

Introduction

The Principles of Psychology is a monumental work, fourteen hundred pages in the original edition, twelve years in the making, encyclopedic in its scope. It is a work well worth comparing to *Moby Dick* or *War and Peace* as a masterpiece, as Jacques Barzun indeed does.¹ It is not just that it is a large volume or a classic, but that it is inexhaustible, a work not merely of learning but of wisdom from which we emerge not merely better informed but changed.

The *Principles* changes us because it captures and challenges us, embroiling us in difficulty, not allowing us to remain the same. That is not because the book is strident or contentious or polemical. It speaks, in fact, in the friendliest of manners. The voice that comes through these pages is very much like that of James himself. As Gay Wilson Allen says, "Few teachers [or men, we might add] have been so loved and valued as a friend."² Yet, the *Principles* is nonetheless a work that creates difficulty. How is this done? I think we can get an idea by looking at James's presentation of other works in psychology.

In his preface to the Italian edition of the *Principles*, James says that his text presents the state of contemporary knowledge in psychology, "the classic tradition, the associationist analysis, the psychogenetic speculations, the experimental methods, the biological conceptions, and the pathological extensions of the field."³ All of it adds up to a state of "chaotic fermentation" in psychology, James notes. Chaotic fermentation: this is a provocative phrase. Matters are in disarray, but a disarray from which James does not wish to pro-

tect us. The expression indicates his ambivalence. Psychology may be in turmoil, and it may, therefore, have its "crudities," but it's a productive, not a threatening turmoil. He does not really want to eliminate the chaos, for that would mean losing the fermentation and the growth.

In fact, James not only omits none of the conflict in the field, he accentuates it. He allows the disputants to speak, quoting to a degree that disturbed Sully who felt a man so qualified to write his own book "would have done well not to let others contribute quite so much to his pages."⁴ He reminds us of the acrimony between disputants through asides and emphasizes disagreements through the organization of his chapters. But the conflict in interpretations is important to this book, as is the presentation of so many voices speaking from his pages. James himself becomes yet another voice, sometimes seeking to settle disputes, sometimes letting them stand, and sometimes presenting his view as just another option. Of course, it is James's book; he's the one who tells the story of the conflicts and achievements in the study of the mind. Yet, to an unusually large degree he allows his readers to feel the strife and struggle. "Terrible recriminations have, as usual, ensued between the investigators," he notes in the chapter on "The Functions of the Brain."⁵

Moreover, James compels his readers to participate in the disputes concerning the nature of the mind. Barzun compares the *Principles* to *Moby Dick* because it is "the narrative of a search," a search for the human mind.⁶ James involves his readers in that search through many techniques that this study will explore, but more generally through his use of the introspective method. In the preface to the Italian edition, he proposes to diminish the confusion of the "chaotic fermentation" of interpretations by "confining myself to what could be immediately verified by everyone's own consciousness. . . . [It is] the living reality with which I wish to bring my reader into direct concrete acquaintance."⁷ Introspection may, as James claims, disallow many psychological theories, but it does not eliminate confusion. Not only do we reach few fixed answers through James's method, but the consider-

ation of mental life is sufficient “to leave a chaotic impression on the observer.”⁸

James wants his readers to feel the chaos of interpretations through reading his text; he wants them to experience a sort of chaos through examining their own minds. The chaotic is fertile, so if we want fermentation—growth, change, and improvement—then we must not only tolerate, but actively encourage the chaotic. It seems to me that the *Principles* is an important work because it embroils us in chaos, which can be a creative medium, as it was for Plato’s demiurge.

In fact, chaos is not only something that James allows to remain, not just something he encourages. Rather, the chaotic is something that James creates. He has an enormous affinity for the chaotic; consequently he sees it wherever he looks when he turns his attention to the psychological. In all, James constructs a view of the mind where the chaotic is ubiquitous. Ultimately, the scope of James’s view of the chaotic makes it a religious worldview, and the chaotic is able to perform the paradoxical function of orienting humans, a role I will discuss later in this book.

James and chaos: the critical view

I am not the first to see chaos in James. Many of his critics have been dismayed by it from the start. The year after James’s death, his friend, colleague, and philosophical opponent Josiah Royce, spoke of James as one of three enduring American thinkers, but criticized his religious philosophy as “indeed chaotic.” Royce felt that James’s error lay in his individualism and reliance on the subconscious that left religion “in the comparatively trivial position of a play with whimsical powers.” James’s pragmatism, too, was denounced by Royce as anarchic for its neglect of a communal dimension. Lacking a social context, James’s notion of experience was, in the Pauline metaphor, just a “tinkling cymbal.”⁹

It is really no wonder that Royce saw chaos in James and considered that chaos a “profound and momentous error.”¹⁰ James issued a challenge to the thought of his time, and he

did it not by offering an alternative but by attempting to dissolve presuppositions about such matters as the status of truth, the nature of experience, and the state of the mind. His pragmatism traded the stability of a correspondence notion of truth for the instability of creation and evaluation, a proposition that is still enormously disquieting today.¹¹ James's radical empiricism, in the words of William Dean, praised confusion, turning aside the Cartesian requirement of "clear and distinct" ideas for a more appropriate "aboriginal sensible muchness."¹² Finally, his notion of the stream of consciousness washed away the distinctness of sensation, reasoning, and willing into what seemed—and seems—to some like a very muddy flow indeed.

Louis J. Halle is an example of a thinker who condemns Jamesian positions for being chaotic. Halle's *Out of Chaos* chronicles the progressive creation of order out of chaos in the human and physical universes. "What is basic to being," he claims, "is the tendency of its elements to combine in forms or patterns that have coherence and symmetry, that have a larger order. This seems to be a single progressive tendency to bring order out of chaos." Halle's view of chaos is a traditional one; he sees it as confused and threatening, even unaesthetic. He contrasts it with a "perfect order" that is manifested in mental conceptions and physical being on the largest scale.¹³

Though Halle does not write of James directly, he isolates two particularly Jamesian notions for criticism. The first is indeterminacy. James is like Marlow in "Heart of Darkness": he loves the blank spaces on the map. It isn't especially that James is drawn to the unknown, not that he wants to explore it and make it known; rather, it is important to James that the universe be open, that there be possibility, chance, and pluralism. Indeterminacy is a central aspect of James's view of knowledge and morality because it leaves room for novelty and for action. "Indeterminism . . . gives us a pluralistic, restless universe, in which no single point of view can ever take in the whole scene."¹⁴ James acknowledges that the embracing of chance will seem like chaos, and so it does to Halle who states that "because we cannot conceive of . . . an order

except as one of strict cause and effect, in which every item is predetermined by antecedent causes that are predetermined, in turn, by their own antecedent causes, our logic requires us to equate indeterminism with chaos."¹⁵

Through the center of the largest blank space on Marlow's map flowed a mighty river, and so, too, is the stream of consciousness central to the mind and to the *Principles*. It is a metaphor that has left an indelible mark on twentieth-century culture. To Halle the stream of consciousness is but an example of incoherence and chaos. He focuses on its depiction in *Ulysses* where it is "like an alimentary canal, through which half-digested sensations and recollections follow one another in a more-or-less incoherent succession."¹⁶ While Joyce might have enjoyed that characterization, especially as applied to Leopold Bloom, to Halle it is a condemnation. For Halle, the stream of consciousness reverses the progression toward order and allows chaos to break out.

It seems clear that if Halle turned his attention to James, it would be with disapproval. He would certainly be as disquieted as Royce or as Freud who also labeled pragmatism anarchic.¹⁷ But there are also others who spy chaos in James's thought and are not bothered by it, seeing it instead as valuable. Charlene Haddock Seigfried analyzes several kinds of chaos operating in James.¹⁸ One is the totality of sense impressions that are chaotically disordered. In contrast to that absolute chaos is a quasi-chaos in which the world has a multiplicity and abundance of relations from which we must select, but that is a chaos without such selection. Though she is not explicit about it, Seigfried also sees a chaotic aspect of consciousness since James's "knowledge of acquaintance" involves an awareness of this multiplicity of relations.¹⁹ The stream of consciousness, then, with its wide-flowing "fringe" is as chaotic as is the external quasi-chaos. Finally, chaos is not only a description of the world or of consciousness but a principle explaining why the universe resists all attempts to unify it. "No relationship that unifies various experiences has been found which unifies all experience whatever. Other experiences are always left over which appear chaotic when judged by their coherence with the given relation."²⁰ In all,

Seigfried uses the term *chaos* to characterize James not as a sign of approbation but as the most appropriate designation, and one that indicates not the error and confusion in his thought but its power and novelty.

David M. LaGuardia also sees chaos in James. He feels it exists even more widely than Seigfried does, and he admires it more frankly. According to LaGuardia, the flux of the world is the primary chaos in James. As in Seigfried, this chaos is a source of wealth, not only because of the festival of reality that can invigorate our thoughts, but also because the awareness of constant mutation removes the tendency to become fixed in our formulations: "the death of fixity is the mother of ripeness," summarizes LaGuardia.²¹

In addition, chaos affects the notions of truth and freedom, and, accordingly, takes on a dual character. Novelty becomes a crucial aspect of truth since the flux of reality must be integrated with the ideas we already hold. Because the flux is always new, truth must be new, too.²² Such a notion of truth is another instance of the value of chaos, of its ability to save us from the stale and rigid. But the flux of the world also offers a severe challenge since there is a great deal of insecurity without a unified design to the universe, and human responsibility in shaping its world is weighty. Humans are free to create their own worlds but also obliged to "decreate" outworn ones and are not allowed simply to let things be. While we can be burdened by the freedom in chaos, ultimately LaGuardia sees chaos in somewhat sacramental terms, for there is a "baptismal renewal" that results from "immersion into the dynamic flow."²³

While he terms James a "Connoisseur of Chaos" like Wallace Stevens, and hence one aware of the vast significance of the flux about us, LaGuardia does not make the move from chaos to the chaotic. That is, like Seigfried, he places James in a worldly chaos that has vast significance for his thoughts, both pragmatism and radical empiricism rising from it, but he maintains a substantive notion of chaos: chaos is a sea about us. LaGuardia does not see that chaos is more useful as an adjective, as a description of James's thought itself. The flux of the world is just one instance of a notion that pervades

James. While it is enormously useful to see that the flux of the world is a chaos and that it has consequences for James's theories of truth and action, it is more useful to look at this basic quality of his thinking, his affinity for the chaotic.

In fact, the chaotic is a worldview in James's thoughts. I do not mean anything as formal as Stephen C. Pepper's "world hypotheses," which are of unlimited scope, which all facts will corroborate, and of which there are only four.²⁴ Nor am I speaking of the sort of worldview Ninian Smart makes such use of, since the motivational role of worldviews is of primary importance to him.²⁵ James's pragmatism or his radical empiricism might be worldviews of those sorts. Yet since the chaotic is so pervasive in James's thought, being not so much a topic or a theme as a chief term of his thought, it seems to have the scope of a worldview. There may be two ways to look at the matter. On the one hand, the chaotic seems to have a lot in common with Pepper's "root metaphors." According to Pepper, someone trying to understand the world seizes upon some commonsense fact and uses it as a basic analogy. Such an analogy eventually may generate a world hypothesis.²⁶ Like the root metaphor, the chaotic is an image and it has considerable fertility, being applicable in many areas, perhaps tending toward unlimited scope. On the other hand, it would be wrong to relegate the metaphorical to secondary status simply because it is not developed or refined. The worlds that Nelson Goodman writes of can be made by works of art, and those worlds need no philosophical elaboration to be viable worlds. For Goodman it is reference, expression, and exemplification that create worlds, and a notion like the chaotic would seem to do so as well as anything more explicitly theoretical.²⁷

What I propose to do in the first three chapters of this book is to examine the chaotic view of the world as it lies implicit in *The Principles of Psychology* and *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. This is half of the work of the present study for it is only once we understand how it is that James imagines himself and the world that we can see that his style is an instrument in the creation of that world.²⁸ Chapters 4 and 5, then, will be detailed analyses of the role played by

style in the creation of a chaotic self and world analogous to those discussed in the earlier chapters. Superficially this may seem to be two books, one on chaos and one on James's style. Yet in fact, the rhetorical readings of the later chapters absolutely depend upon what is developed earlier. All this, I must reiterate, is fueled by an interest in James's *religious* significance: it is a study of the stylistic creation of a chaotic world that functions religiously. The religious nature of James's chaotic world will, in turn, be more explicitly addressed in the final chapter.²⁹

Yet a reader might have felt an uneasiness far before this point, for though I have cited a half dozen people describing the *chaos* in James's work, it is not at all clear what they mean when they use the word or even if they mean the same thing. In fact, a considerable degree of chaos seems to characterize the uses of *chaos*, so it seems best to begin to find some order.

The chaotic: "chaosmos"

The *Oxford English Dictionary* lists two primary meanings for *chaos*. The first is the "formless void . . . out of which the cosmos or order of the universe was evolved," a standard of cosmological speculation reaching back to Hesiod. The second definition is figurative, "a state resembling that of primitive chaos; utter confusion and disorder."³⁰ James's predominant use of *chaos* follows both senses. He speaks of consciousness creating something "whereof the potency was not given in the mere outward atoms of the original chaos."³¹ He also extends such speculation from the cosmological to the epistemological, our different individual views of the world lying "embedded in the primordial chaos of sensations."³² Equally common are figurative references to chaos as an absence of order, sense, or shape. He states that "only those items which I notice shape my mind—without selective interest, experience is an utter chaos . . . without it the consciousness of every creature would be a gray chaotic indiscriminate-ness, impossible for us even to conceive."³³

Yet *chaos* is used in more varied ways than the *OED*

might lead us to believe. In general, *chaos* seems to be defined through what it is not. *Chaos* is the lack of order or structure or form. Cosmologically it is the absence of cosmos, as in Ovid's chaos, "a rude and indigested Mass."³⁴ Shakespeare brings that disorder down to earth in *Troilus and Cressida*: "When the planets / In evil mixture to disorder wander" the result is not only the plagues, storms, and earthquakes of nature but the mutiny, patricide, and rank injustice of society. This utter lack of "degree, priority and place, / Insisture,³⁵ course, proportion, season, form, / Office, and custom, in all line of order" he terms chaos.³⁶ Finally, Pascal sees an inner want of order.

What a chimera then is man! What a novelty! What a monster, what a chaos, what a contradiction, what a prodigy! Judge of all things, imbecile worm of the earth; depository of truth, a sink of uncertainty and error; the pride and refuse of the universe!³⁷

What Pascal sees us lacking is the balance and proportion of reason and innate nature whereby we could truly understand ourselves. In great part, *chaos* is used by these writers to denote what does not exist, rather than what does. Their eyes are on the orderly progression of the cosmos or the hierarchical structure of nature and society or the harmony of reason and nature, and chaos signifies their absence.

Yet, *chaos* is not used wholly negatively, even in these examples. It is not just the lack of order these writers see; it is disorder. That is, when we read the passage from Ovid, Shakespeare, or Pascal, we do not only imagine the absence of "degree, priority, and place," we imagine something more tangible. We imagine *chaos*. The word connotes an undigested lump in Ovid, civil strife in Shakespeare, a confused mixture in Pascal. Some concrete image of chaos is unavoidable, and that image is more than an operational negation of form and order; the unformed has form; the disordered has order; the unstructured has structure. That is the paradoxical nature of the chaotic: it signifies the formless but it must do so through some form or other.³⁸ Joyce is right when he speaks of "chaosmos" in *Finnegans Wake*: every chaos is a cosmos.³⁹

The argument for the figured nature of all experience, not to mention all language, reaches back at least to Kant's insistence on the active human involvement in all experience, to the extent that experience receives its shape from the shaping power of the knowing mind. It would be a contradiction for the mind to form experience formlessly.⁴⁰ Ernst Cassirer certainly contributes to such ideas by his emphasis on the importance of symbols that he takes to be "not the imitations but *organs* of reality." And those symbols, too, have definite form. "For the mind, only that can be visible which has some definite form; but every form of existence has its source in some particular way of seeing, some intellectual formulation and intuition of meaning."⁴¹ Gordon D. Kaufman summarizes the importance of such thought for theology when he argues that the experience of transcendence, ultimacy, or the infinite would be impossible without the guidance of linguistic symbols. "These symbols are not bare and empty names for the experiences which they supposedly designate. They carry nuances of meaning derived from their various uses in the language and their connections with other terms."⁴² In sum, a conception of chaos as absolutely without form would be impossible for us. Any conception of the formless would be of some form or other.

This paradox is managed in a variety of different ways. At its extreme is the desire to communicate *utter* disorder, such as we might see in Othello's anguish over Desdemona.

Excellent wretch! Perdition catch my soul
But I love thee! And when I love thee not,
Chaos is come again.⁴³

We might see an extreme, too, in Hobbes's condemnation of the commonwealth founded on some basis other than God's sovereignty as "by this means destroying all laws, both divine, and humane, reduce all Order, Government, and Society, to the first Chaos of Violence, and Civill warre."⁴⁴ Both men seem to want to push toward an unimaginable limit of disorder, and the strength of their depictions of emotional anguish or civil strife depends on how extreme the word *chaos* is.

On the other hand, we might not see the same sense of utter disorder in Kate Chopin's description of Edna Pontellier's awakening view of the world as "necessarily vague, tangled, chaotic, and exceedingly disturbing."⁴⁵ The late nineteenth-century novelist depicts confusion but not utter confusion, a tangle not an absolutely disordered knot. In speaking of the "old chaos of the sun," Wallace Stevens, too, is not aiming at quite the degree of disorder Shakespeare and Hobbes are. The spirits are dead in "Sunday Morning," so all we have is the "old chaos of the sun," but that chaos is full of deer and quail and wild berries and, significantly, the undulating *forms* of pigeons.⁴⁶ Notions of the chaotic can be less extreme, perhaps more mundane because all notions of chaos are inevitably figured. It seems difficult to maintain an austere notion of the chaotic; easy for the notion to move toward the common, as in Chopin and Stevens. The result is a loosening of the paradox. Some form must be used to express the unformed, but then chaos loses more and more of the power of its "utter confusion and disorder," until, in those like Chopin and Stevens, it is not "utter" and it is scarcely confusion or disorder.

Moreover, the threatening character of the chaotic in the extreme cases can become lost in the less extreme. Othello's emotional chaos drives him to Desdemona's death and his own. The chaos in Hobbes's *Leviathan* is a strong threat indeed. Yet Stevens's old chaos of the sun has a relaxed, native feel to it. It is the

old dependency of day and night,
Or island solitude, unsponsored, free⁴⁷

Even more notable is Henry Adams's view that "chaos often breeds life, when order breeds habit."⁴⁸ In both cases, chaos still means a disorder, but in both it is an order that has become oppressive, and its absence means some sort of a liberation. Chaos is messy, confusing, even risky, but it is preferable to an order that is stifling or wrong.

As we saw, James's use of the word *chaos* adheres more closely to the disordered extreme than to the more moderate, but we need not leave the chaotic at that. The sort of sus-

picion of rigid structure or system that we see in Adams or of an alienating order in Stevens is not only congenial but essential to James. It lies behind his view of consciousness, the self, sensation, attention, reasoning, willing, and much else. It is he who criticizes the carving of our consciousness into mere reflections of things, with an identical rigid outline and division of parts.⁴⁹ It is James who takes particular aim at "old fogeyism" as the enslavement to "the stock conceptions with which we have once become familiar,"⁵⁰ or at the "block universe" that he opposes with the "wider sea of possibilities."⁵¹ James's writing is replete with such statements. Thomas R. Martland sees James as primarily concerned with change and becoming as opposed to "structure in one form or other."⁵² Barnard P. Brennan characterizes James as oriented toward flux, novelty, and chance and resistant to regular pattern, predictability, and completeness.⁵³ James does not counter rigid structure or system with an explicit chaos; rather, there is a variety of notions that James puts forth to challenge fixity: the vague, change, fluidity, chance, indeterminacy, continuity, multiplicity, and any number of streams—of consciousness, of selves, of neural action—as well as other bodies of water. All of these dissolve those aspects of the hard-edged and the rigid that James finds violate introspection, are untenable philosophically or scientifically, or result in undesirable consequences.

It is my argument that this multiplicity of terms is best viewed as James's sense of the chaotic, not because that is the terminology that he uses, but because as a whole they operate in a way we can best describe as chaotic. In order to understand James's sense of the chaotic more precisely, we need to take a close look at *The Principles of Psychology* and relevant biographical information, but I can anticipate somewhat by recalling the variety with which chaos and the chaotic have been used historically. A similar variety seems to exist in James, but prominent within it is the sense of the chaotic we saw in his friend, Henry Adams, and the poet who was in many senses an heir, Wallace Stevens, of a chaos that can be beneficial.

The tempestuous world: roots of the chaotic in James's crisis years, 1867-1872

Since the *Principles* was so long in the making, we need first to look backward. Gerald E. Myers points out that the thought in the *Principles* doesn't characterize merely one stage in James's thought so much as it represents a lengthy line of development.⁵⁴ That seems especially true of James's attitude toward the set of ideas that concern us here, and is a warrant for some minor excavating into James's biography.

Few summaries of childhood are more striking than Henry James's statement that "the literal played in our education as small a part as it perhaps ever played in any, and we wholesomely breathed inconsistency and ate and drank contradictions."⁵⁵ The liberal thought and whimsicality of Henry James, Sr.; the family's frequent moves and travels; the "cheerful anarchy" of the schooling of the James children; their "quickenning collision" with friends of their father's such as Emerson, Thoreau, Thackeray, Ripley, and many others, and with several cities in Europe—all made change and stimulation seemingly the only constants in their childhood.⁵⁶ Though William James's son, Henry, traces his father's intellectual flexibility back to the mobility of his youth, I will resist the temptation to draw conclusions too quickly from the facts of childhood, alluring though they are.⁵⁷

The facts of young manhood are a different matter. James's physical ills and mental depression dominated his life from his bout with a mild form of smallpox in Brazil in May of 1865 until the second year of his teaching at Harvard in the early 1870s, and continued, though much abated, for the rest of his life. Commentators interpret the significance of James's illness differently. The predominant view has been that of Ralph Barton Perry who sees philosophy as the key to James's difficulties. James's depression involved questions about the nature of the world and his own nature as an agent in that world. He was unable to sort out the degree to which his restlessness and paralysis were laid upon him, whether by

a physiological cause or by the oppressive character of life more generally. His profound and painful struggle of so many years' duration was toward the discovery of the efficacy of his own will. He had, as his sister Alice remarked, "a chronic infirmity of will."⁵⁸ Perry sees this personal crisis as one "that could be relieved only by a *philosophical* insight."⁵⁹ Because of James's extreme personal involvement with it, "philosophy was never a mere theory, but always a set of beliefs which reconciled him to life and which he proclaimed as one preaching a way of salvation."⁶⁰ Jacques Barzun echoes that view when he states that James philosophized "from the need to survive intellectually and emotionally."⁶¹

Gay Wilson Allen emphasizes a psychological interpretation of James's emotional difficulties. He sees James denying himself an affectionate and sexual relationship with women while craving such a relation at the same time. The conflict, Allen suggests, goes far toward explaining James's condition. Like Perry, he argues for the importance of the strengthening of James's will, and speaks of the value of James's teaching and ultimately his marriage to Alice Howe Gibbens for his final recovery.⁶²

A somewhat provocative version comes from the psychologist Howard M. Feinstein who interprets James's emotional turmoil in terms of his internalized struggle with his father for an identity and vocation of his own. It was not James's discovery of the freedom of the will through reading Renouvier, that is, not philosophy that saved James. Rather, James had to find a way to stop stifling his desire to devote himself to art or philosophy rather than to his father's choice, science. "Instead of freedom *of* the will, William needed to be freed *from* the will," that is, his father's will. Like Allen, Feinstein feels that teaching was central to James's health. In becoming a professor of physiology and then psychology, James found a way to satisfy his own needs and the demands of his psychological heritage.⁶³

A complement to Feinstein is James William Anderson who sees James's difficulty stemming from his mother rather than his father. According to this interpretation, Mary James failed to provide adequate maternal care for her son. The

result was a fragile "self-structure," a sense of hollowness, and development of a "false self" to mask what he sensed to be a weak, small, needy, infantile self. James's depression, his isolation, his inability to develop autonomy were consequences of this lack of a stable self, and the difficulty was greatly solved with his marriage to Alice Gibbens who offered the empathy, admiration, and consistency that James sought.⁶⁴

I don't propose to adjudicate among these different interpretations. Rather, I accept them all as illuminating to a great extent. My interest is not in psychological analysis but in the analysis of how James himself articulated his difficulties, in the imagery he used, because the manner in which he imagined his predicament and its resolution greatly illumines his sense of the chaotic.

Primary among his problems is what his sister Alice mildly censored as "chronic infirmity of will," or what James himself termed "deadness of spirit." James had gone off rather suddenly to Europe in the spring of 1867 after being on the verge of suicide in the winter of that year. He tried the mineral bath treatments at Teplitz but became more depressed than before, and again considered suicide. Shortly thereafter he wrote his friend Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., complaining of the "stagnation" of his inner life. It is the absence of "motion, excitement or life," a "deadness" that troubles James. After his return to Cambridge late in 1868, recalled by his parents rather than cured, he depicts himself in a letter to Henry as a ship dead in the water, sails furled. "What is a man to write when a reef is being taken in his existence?"⁶⁵ The French correspondent passage from the *Varieties* reveals a similar fear of utter motionlessness. He visualizes himself as a patient in an asylum:

a black-haired youth with greenish skin, entirely idiotic, who used to sit all day on one of the benches, or rather shelves, against the wall, with his knees drawn up against his chin, and the coarse gray undershirt, which was his only garment, drawn over them, inclosing his entire figure. He sat there like a sort of sculptured Egyptian cat or Peruvian mummy, moving nothing but his black eyes and looking absolutely non-human.⁶⁶

It is James's moment of greatest horror. He sees himself as lifeless, vegetative, mummified, catatonic, as a figure on a shelf. Perhaps James could not bring himself to fulfill his father's wishes to study science; perhaps he could not discover the place of his individual will in a deterministic universe, reconcile his craving for a fulfilling relationship with his Victorian conscience, or form a stable self. Yet the image through which he perceives himself and his position is that of paralysis.

If James's condition is paralysis, his aim must be motion, and indeed it is. Yet any motion would not do. In his letters, James speaks not only of a paralysis that oppresses but a paralysis prescribed. "Muscular and cerebral activity not only remain *unexcited*, but are *solicited*, by an idiotic hope of recovery, to crass indolence."⁶⁷ The trip to Europe in 1867-68, his shuttling between Dresden, Teplitz, and Berlin are, paradoxically enough, for rest. Like the Belgian doctor who gravely advises Marlow, "Du calme, du calme" before he departs for the heart of darkness, the latter half of the nineteenth century believed in rest. In 1866, soon after his return from the Agassiz expedition to Brazil and while he was studying medicine that he hoped he would find more interesting than he had before the year's detour, James wrote to Tom Ward. What he needs, he says, is limitation. "I am conscious of a desire I never had so strongly or so permanently, of narrowing and deepening the channel of my intellectual activity, of economizing my feeble energies and consequently treating with more respect the few things I shall devote them to."⁶⁸ What limitation can give to him is harmony and calm. They define what he terms his "salvation." He intends to imitate those who "reach a point from which the view within certain limits is harmonious, and they keep within those limits; they find as it were a centre of oscillation in which they may be at rest." From James's prescription we can see how he visualizes his problem. The matter that must be addressed through limitation produces disquiet. It is disharmonious. It is out of bounds. The image we get is of a search for a haven of safety and calm and what is fled is some tempestuousness that overwhelms. James seems caught in a chaos as Shakespeare or

Hobbes viewed it: he is in a maelstrom, a tempest.

James sees himself as stagnating and still in comparison with a world that appears to possess all power as well as dizzying, disorienting motion. In an 1870 letter to Ward, he again speaks of limitation, of "habits of order" that enable a slow but steady progression, "grain on grain of willful choice." His own purposeful motion must be tiny considering the disproportion of his power to the disorder of the world. He recalls that previously "when I have felt like taking a free initiative, like daring to act originally, without carefully waiting for contemplation of the external world to determine all for me, suicide seemed the most manly form to put my daring into."⁶⁹ It's a remarkable summary of the disproportion James saw between himself and the world, as well of that world's disorder. His self was so insignificant that his most daring act would be to surrender to the world's destructive power. The world challenges and directs, and it saps the self of originality, initiative, reality, and finally of existence. Not to act is to be swept by the world into the intellectual and emotional turmoil he had experienced through several years, which is to say, an inability to move under his own power. To dare to act is to surrender to die, that is, to submit to the destructiveness of the world, but willingly. In either case he is in a maelstrom that threatens to sweep him inexorably down to destruction.

James's other explicit references to suicide clarify his developing sense of the desirability of some sort of motion. In a letter to his father in September 1867, he speaks of his forced immobility in Dresden because of his back and of the resulting "thoughts of the pistol, the dagger and the bowl. . . . [S]ome change, even if a hazardous one, was necessary."⁷⁰ Though he speaks here of a move to Teplitz as the hazardous change, it is apparent enough that suicide is also a change preferable to his enforced repose; his inability to study physiology, as had been his plan; and his paralyzed confusion concerning his desires and abilities. Suicide does not offer rest; it offers motion. As he notes in a letter a year later, in death he sees "fermentation and crumbling and evaporation and diffusion."⁷¹ What he emphasizes is not decay but activity, a flow-

ing into the universe. This "step out into the green darkness" is certainly characterized more attractively than the tempestuousness he alludes to elsewhere. It is "innocent and desirable." In fact, it seems to be an early manifestation of James's great love of inclusiveness, his desire to welcome as much of the "teeming and dramatic richness" of the world as possible.⁷² If James rejects the motion of suicide for the "tatters and shreds of beauty" that are interwoven with his otherwise "loathsome and grotesque" life, in part it is because he is gradually becoming able to achieve his own motion. But the ideal of perfectly fluid motion is one that remains.

James finds his way to motion, though the sort he manages is often not described as motion at all. He can gain "tatters and shreds," make a "nick," accumulate "grain on grain." But the particles and pieces add up to an action, however restricted. The grains mount up when habits of order enable us to "advance to really interesting fields of action."⁷³ Even resignation to the evils of the world provides "ground and leisure to advance to new philanthropic action."⁷⁴ Advance to action: the phrase indicates James's tentativeness, for though it is an emphatic military metaphor, it denies the action in the advance itself. Isn't the advance action, too? Then why *advance* to action? Nonetheless, however hesitant and partial, it is motion that James desires and motion that he gradually achieves. "We all learn sooner or later that we must gather ourselves up, and more or less arbitrarily concentrate our interests—throw much overboard to save any," he writes to Henry in 1869.⁷⁵ Though his ship is disabled and still in danger of sinking, it is afloat and limping along, like Conrad's *Patna* or *Narcissus*.

What seems to happen in the final term of these difficult but highly important years for James's thought, is a growing widening of boundaries and loosening of limits. The movement that the self can achieve is not a slow, narrow gathering of grains but becomes more expansive. It is tempting to say that the motion of the self assimilates some of the characteristics of the threatening, tempestuous world and thereby becomes able to deal with it more adequately. In some notes James writes of two kinds of self-assertion, "the expansive,

embracing [and] the centripetal, defensive.”⁷⁶ James wonders if the two might be combined. The great difference evident here is that it is possible for him to consider something other than sheer defense or slow, small steps; he can contemplate taking the universe in. The expansive motion is similar to that in his lyrical contemplation of suicide, the “step out into the green darkness,” but here he expands and incorporates rather than dissolves. The only way he could do so, he feels, is if the mind “is so purely fluid or plastic.” What a change we can see in this statement. Far from the mind being paralyzed in life and fluid only in death, James sees it flowing beyond narrow fixed limits that purely defend it and instead encompassing the universe. It’s important to note that James doesn’t feel he can do so at this time; important, too, to recall that the French correspondent incident takes place shortly after this, between the fall of 1869 and the spring of 1870. But the alternative to paralysis and the really successful counter to the threatening movement of the world is visualized as limitation combined with fluidity. “[Do] the two combine and give respect?” he wonders in conclusion.

What does James have in mind by the combination of limitation and fluidity? We may get our clearest idea from the “finished” James, of the later 1870s, once the depths of his crises had passed. In an article published in *The Nation* in 1876, he expresses his views on the teaching of philosophy. Its greatest value, he says, is in giving students a fluidity of mind. “Philosophic study means the habit of always seeing an alternative, of not taking the usual for granted, of making conventionalities fluid again, of imagining foreign states of mind.”⁷⁷ James seems to be advocating the “mind so purely fluid or plastic” that he had mused upon in 1869. The sort of mental motion that James urges is an outward movement, toward the unknown and the indefinite; it flows around, over, or through the stable, staid, and solid. It overcomes the exclusions of the conventional, the expected, and the established. Moreover, such fluidity is possible because of its combination with limitation, as he had predicted in 1869. It is a *habit* of fluidity that James speaks of, which is to say, the fluidity is an integral part of personality. It takes place, he says, from within an “inde-

pendent, personal look at all the data of life.”⁷⁸

Evidently James has come to the liberating view that movement is an integral part of self, and the nature of that movement seems remarkably similar to the tempestuousness that had hobbled and threatened him. It is a motion that overcomes limits, that challenges and dissolves the fixed and definite, whether that be the structures of James's self or the inhibiting conventions of thought. Of course, the chaos of the world, which haunted him in the late 1860s and early 1870s, was extreme and destructive. It ruptured bounds and required strict defenses. It was the traditional chaos that is utterly disorderly and threatening. The harnessed power of fluidity within operates not only more gently but also productively, as it does for Chopin, Stevens, and Adams. It seems as though James overcomes the danger of tempestuousness not, as in Poe's "Descent into the Maelstrom," by surrendering to the chaos without, but, closer to Conrad, by realizing his own, intrinsic moral resources, in this case of creative instability. He discovers a fluidity that dissolves the fixed, flows past the coercion of the conventional, moves into the strange, and is an ineluctable aspect of the self. James doesn't lose his anxiety about the tempestuous. "My strongest moral and intellectual craving is for some stable reality to lean upon," he writes in 1873.⁷⁹ But in a way he has incorporated the instability that he had feared.

What do we learn of James and the chaotic by this quick glance through his years of crisis? We see a kind of motion that threatens the self, challenging its autonomy and its ability to act, a tempestuousness that creates paralysis and necessitates defensive limitations. We also see a kind of motion that is enabling, which allows the self to overcome paralysis and to incorporate the new and the strange. Integral to personality is a motion that is inclusive and that contrasts with and challenges the fixed, the conventional, the familiar, and the external chaos of the world. This was how James imagined his predicament and his need in the 1860s and 1870s. It might be divided into the harsh chaotic without and the harnessed power of the chaotic within. Both poles are dominant in the *Principles*, as we shall see in the next chapter.