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Reading the “Fringe”:  
Vague Thoughts and Dim Relations in James, Emerson and Poe

“It is, in short, the re-instatement of the vague to its proper place in our mental life which I am so anxious to press on the attention.” – William James, “The Stream of Thought”

Concentrating on William James’ “The Stream of Thought,” this paper will examine James’ psychological interest in the “fringe” – a term he develops to describe “the influence of a faint brain-process upon our thought, as it makes it aware of relations and objects but dimly perceived.” By highlighting the “fringe” of thought—elsewhere described as a “halo” or “penumbra” of “felt relations” surrounding a thought—James tries to correct for previous philosophers’ overemphasis of the “substantive” in favor of a new evaluation of the “transitive” – the in-between movements of the mind as it roves from thought to thought. But, as James repeatedly acknowledges, the transitivity of thought is elusive. To mine these “dimly perceived” relations, James’ psychological inquiry comes up against the limits of his own attentiveness and the limits of language itself. Hence, what emerges is an evaluation of the mind’s irreducible vagueness that is both helped and hindered by the grammatical and syntactical forms which structure thought.

To unpack and contextualize James’ linguistic approach to the “fringe,” this paper will situate James’ desire to “reinstate the vague” within an American Romantic aesthetic tradition that sought, alternatively, to throw off and embrace the vague. Reading James against Emerson’s “Experience” and Poe’s “The Fall of the House of Usher,” this paper will place James’ musings upon the uncertainties of mental life within a literary history marked by a profound ambivalence toward the affective realm of the vague, where the vague can be experienced as a “half-pleasurable, because, poetic sentiment” to quote Poe, or, alternatively, can measure the “evanescence and lubricity of all objects” to quote Emerson. Ultimately, I will argue that aesthetic and psychological preoccupations with vague mental and social experiences register anxiety about an American individualism that confidently extols the virtues of “self-reliance” even as it frets over the unknowability of a world where, as Emerson says, “all things swim and glitter.” Hence, as an affective index for epistemological uncertainty, the vague is a sign (or perhaps, per Roderick’s hypochondria, a symptom) of the discomfort of “felt relations” which can only ever only be “dimly perceived.”