This is an opportunity to study in depth the writing of one of the most important and compelling writers of the nineteenth century, whose earliest work owes a great deal to Austen’s narrative ironies but whose later writing engages with questions of subjectivism and the paradoxes of authority which would preoccupy Stein, Woolf, and Joyce. We will read a chronological series of James’s fictional and nonfictional texts, developing close readings of individual novels in a context of James’s ongoing aesthetic project.

James’s aesthetic project is distinguished by the extraordinary richness and complexity of his engagement with non-literary forms of representation, especially the visual arts. The close textual focus of our seminars will be complemented by some intermedial work on non-verbal forms of aesthetic practice to enrich our analyses of James’s writing. We will also explore some texts from traditions other than the conventionally ‘literary’: psychoanalysis, theology, art history, psychology. Through the cross-fertilisation of these materials and interpretative approaches, we will develop innovative vocabularies for analysing James’s aesthetic innovations. The goal of the module is to encourage students to develop original and idiomatic readings of this most challenging writer.