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After Mourning, Speaking in “We”: Henry James and World War I¹

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Since the dead are not returning,
What are the survivors to understand?

Since for the dead there is no way to lament,
About whom and what should the survivors lament?

Since those who died cannot but keep silent,
Should the survivors do the same?

“Glory of a Poet,” by Jean Tardieu²

As Tardieu writes in the poem above, the dead have no voice to speak to the living. There is no knowing what pains they went through at the time of death. Nevertheless, at least, language might serve as a bridge between the dead and the living. What if we receive letters from the fallen soldiers—their last letters home which they wrote just before they took their last flight? Would we not hear their voices despite the distance over time and space? Tardieu’s poem is quoted in the “Introduction” to *Listen to the Voices of the Sea*, a collection of the last letters written by Kamikaze soldiers during WWII, which many Japanese still consider a classic collection. The letters by no means evoke a sense of imperialistic heroism of the bygone days, since the young soldiers refer to their suicidal mission as significant and the given opportunity as a blessing. They wrote what they could write, to be sure, being under the surveillance of the military

authorities. Yet, their letters subtly reveal their emotional experience—pain, regret, and sorrow. Therefore, the remaining letters of the Kamikaze squad remind us of the horror of war, which is nothing other than a sheer waste of precious young lives. As in Tardeu's poem, it is the survivors who must act and speak for the dead in order to reexperience and remember their pain, regret, and sorrow; and most of all, not to repeat the same mistake. Such is the responsibility that the writers and poets have taken seriously, as Tardeu does. Henry James was one of them. He believed that his pen was a mighty weapon.

In my paper, I would like to examine WWI war-time articles written by Henry James. A noted master of words and connoisseur of art and life, James then turned into a political activist, making use of the power of his pen. In her post 9.11 essay, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2003), the late Susan Sontag points out that Henry James, "none other than the august master of the intricate cocooning of reality in words," expressed resistance against the war in his 1915 NYT article, breaking the silence of the sedate, private life of the Master (25). Her statement is edifying, since James would be considered the most non-political aesthete whose voice would not be taken seriously in a capitalistic and materialist society. With excitement, I assume, Sontag introduces a political James at the dawn of the 21st century post-colonial world, as an ideal precedent of a literary giant, whose eye could command both aesthetic and ethical fields of life, and who could act for the wellness of civilization.

In fact, at the outbreak of WWI James was depressed and was in mourning. In 1915, Rupert Brooke, a 27-year-old British poet whom he knew, unexpectedly died of pneumonia on his way to the battlefield of Gallipoli. James then wrote a 60-some-page-long preface to the second edition of Rupert's *Letters from America* (1916). Although the tone of his preface is rather celebratory of Rupert's talent, youth, and bravery, James's passion to write must have been triggered by his melancholy in mourning. He believed, I would imagine, that his own words would call back the soul and spirit of a young poet. Who else

but he, he might have thought, could speak for the dead? James seems to be searching for an answer to the question Tardieu asks: "Since the dead are not returning,/What are the survivors to understand?"

Since WWI took away the lives of the people he knew, especially those of young talented men, he suffered from depression. However, as if fighting against his malady, he started to take action in the public arena. Although he suspended writing his novels, he worked on war relief, and wrote about a dozen articles, which, to use Adelaine Tintner's words, was "a record in seventeen years." In other words, James produced more articles in this period than he had ever done before, and only a few of which "could be considered non-propaganda" (173). In his letters, he wrote that he was seeing "a nightmare from which there is no waking save by sleep"; he "loathed so having lived on and on into anything so hideous and horrible"; and that he was "sick beyond cure" (qtd. Edel 774). He could not, so to speak, keep up with his usual pose with his hands in his pockets, indefinitely hanging fire, and looking away. To Edith Wharton he said that the war meant a "crash of our civilization" and wrote: "The only gleam in the blackness, to me, is the action and the absolute unanimity of this country" (qtd. Edel 775). His "action" involved both physical and mental acts: he visited the injured soldiers and refugees to offer his hand, and held up his pen, in place of a gun, in order to impel his readers, or young American men particular, to act against the evil forces.

In his newspaper articles, as Tintner describes, James, the "essentially a private person, exhibits himself for the great cause of war" (174)³. He in a sense became a documentarist, and wrote what he had witnessed and felt. He spoke in the first person. At the same time, he makes use of various personae, such as "a friendly American, living in England," "a better Englishman, in the old-fashioned sense of the word," and "us Americans." In other words, he is well aware of his own multi-faceted identity, a product of the modern world in which people are urged or forced to move beyond national borders. His

various personae represent possibilities of different viewpoints. His speaking position is free and he approaches his readers from different angles. Such mobile identity, however, is not necessarily a representation of a post-modern self in a sense that it is devoid of an essential subjective center. I would contend, on the other hand, that his subjective center is quite firm; and he can skillfully render his voice by adapting himself to the given situations fit for the target readers. Moreover, since his objective is to create a communal link through affect. He makes use of a familiar image as a metaphor, namely the image of a mother holding a child, to create a sense of touch, protection, and safety.

The *NYT* article "Noted Critic and Novelist Breaks His Rule of Years to Tell of the Good Work of the American Ambulance Corps," which appeared on 21 March 1915, demonstrates James's free and mobile speaking voice. In this article, James as the Chair of the American Volunteer Motor-Ambulance Corps in France is interviewed by a *NYT* journalist. Or, it is read that way, at least. However, the fact was that James agreed to give an interview on the condition that he would proofread the final copy (Walker xxvii). He told his typist: "no one would suspect that the interviewed dictated the whole interview" (Tintner 171). The article, therefore, is carefully stage-directed by James himself. He is both the director (interviewer) and the actor (interviewee). Moreover, James, the interviewee, has many sides: he is a Master novelist as well as the Chair of the Volunteer Corps; he is an American expatriate in England, who can give updates of the war in Europe to his fellow Americans; he is also an American patriot, who wants to work with his fellow Americans together on the same side. The change of his speaking position rhetorically moves him from across the Atlantic to America, shortening the geographical distance between him in Europe and his readers in America. By doing so, James persuades young Americans to unite with him and cross the ocean with him for the good cause.

Moreover, in his effort to let his readers know "the present

horrific complexity of things” of the war in Europe, James resorts to an ennobling picture of volunteer work as creditable conduct, and guarantees it as a fulfilling experience in Europe (140). He says: “It will do beautifully well if givers and workers and helpers are moved by intelligent human pity, and they are with us abundantly enough if they feel themselves simply roused by, and respond to, the most awful exhibition of physical and moral anguish...” (143). James wants the prospective American volunteers (they) to come to Europe to join his Ambulance Corps (us). Yet, in order to move them, he tries to evoke their moral awareness, or, to use his words, a sense of “intelligent human pity.” He asks them to feel “physical and moral anguish.”

Supposing that he has aroused his readers’ consciousness, James in this article now presents a picture of himself actually working together with young American volunteers in Europe. He begins to speak in the first person plural, “we”: “It is not for the poor wounded to oblige us by making us showy, but for us to let them count on our open arms and open lap as troubled children count on those of their mother” (144). James’s regiment, “we,” will help “them,” “the poor wounded” Europeans. Moreover, what is most striking in this sentence is the image of a mother holding a child, which speaks for a close and familiar union of Americans and Europeans based on sympathy and motherly love. It may appear odd since the role which James encourages the strong young American men to play is a protective mother. The incongruity of the metaphor, however, underlines a strong message that what is necessary in the battlefield is not a power of destruction but that of the protection and healing of a mother. James in fact asks his fellow Americans to offer their “open arms and open lap” to the wounded soldiers and war victims in Europe.

No doubt, Mother’s love universally stands for the selfless dedication of a mother who truly hopes for the welfare of the child. The cultivation of one’s emotion to the degree of such selfless love, James seems to be saying, is the most heroic act in the battlefield.

The power of Mother's love gives life, while the power enacted in the battlefields destroys life. Mother's love, therefore, is mightier than any enforced and domineering power. As to the mother image, I would say, James possibly adapted it from Walt Whitman who had dedicated himself to physically and morally support young soldiers during the Civil War. James refers to Whitman in his autobiography, which he was writing at the outbreak of the WWI (*Small Boy and Others*, 1914). Here he describes his 1864 hospital visit in search of his brother Wilky who has been injured in the Civil War, and happily identifies himself with Whitman who has made numerous good-will visits to the sick and wounded Civil War soldiers. James must have been influenced by Whitman's spirit. Whitman in his 1864 NYT article writes about "hospital visiting as an art" and explains that a visitor, whether male or female, must act as a nurse "in the fullest spirit of human sympathy and boundless love"; further, he defines that true nurses are "Mothers, [with] full of motherly feeling... with the magnetic touch of hands."

In 1898, when he reviewed Whitman's *The Wounded Dresser*, James wrote that he was "affect [ed]" by Whitman's sincere language that is "familiar and undressed" without any "single bid for publicity," projecting "the troublous years, the poor and obscure, the suffering and sacrifice of the American people" (671).⁴ James gives much attention to how Whitman achieves a sympathetic comradeship with the young soldiers. "The good Walt," so James calls him as if he were his old friend, "sounds a note of native feeling, pity and horror and helpless, that is like the wail of a mother for her angled young..." (672).⁵ James appreciates Whitman for his assuming the role of a mother. Whitman, undoubtedly a gifted artificer of words, could sing his love openly in a "familiar and undressed" fashion. As James kept *The Wounded Dresser* in his library till his death (Tintner 174), it is likely that he read it a number of times. Edith Wharton remembers that James, on his visit at the Mount in 1905, referred to Whitman as the best American poet and read from *The Leaves of Grass*, filling

“the hushed room like an organ adagio” and “crooning it [the poem] in a mood of subdued ecstasy” (*Backward* 187). James’s “crooning” voice, overlapping with Whitman’s, may have affected Wharton as a mother’s lullaby. It is not surprising then that James, in his NYT article, presents himself as a Whitman, trying to realize a mutual fellowship with young Americans by way of the power of sympathy, which is only comparable to mother’s love. Since the display of an aggressive masculine power of strong America, represented by then President Theodore Roosevelt, the hero of the Spanish-American War whose motto was “A Strenuous Life,”⁶ was the predominant sign of heroism at the time, it is crucial that James used an image of a mother holding a child as the symbol of power, love and union.

The mother-child image in James’s Motor Ambulance Corps article, therefore, is significant. Yet, he never allows any sentimentalism to dominate the tone of his article. He ends the article with a warning, insisting on the danger that waits at the front. The danger concerns not only the loss of the precious lives of young soldiers but also words themselves, which are synonymous with human civilization itself.

One finds it in the midst of all this as hard to apply one’s words as to endure one’s thoughts. The war has used up words; they have weakened, they have deteriorated like motor car tires... we are now confronted with a depreciation of all our terms, or, otherwise speaking, with a loss of expression through increase of limpness, that may well make us wonder what ghosts will be left to walk. (144-5)

“One” James calls himself, as if the personal pronoun “I” was too weak and subjective to state the horror of the undeniable facts of the war. The war wastes all, not only the “tires” of Motor Ambulance Corps but also “words” which are the vehicles that carry all human activities, creating relationships and furthering civilization. Once “words” have perished, there will be no life, no social activities, no memory, no history, and thus no future for civilization. At the

outbreak of the war, James wrote to a friend that he felt as if he were only "smelling gunpowder, smelling blood" in his inkpot. The situation "on this side of the world," he wrote to another, was "horrible, unspeakable, iniquitous," and "horrors of war criminally, infamously precipitated" (qtd. Edel 774). What he is facing, he cannot describe, because it is so "horrible" that he cannot make a story out of it any more. He had to "undress" his persona of a novelist, and become a documentarist who speaks in his personal voice with his pen and with his blood.

In another NYT article, "Henry James Writes Refugees in England: Noted Novelist Is Moved by the Interesting and Inspiring Work at Chelsea in Aid of the Belgians Driven from Their Native Country by the War," James defines his article as follows: "This is not a report... it is the simple statement of a neighbor and an observer deeply affected by the most tragic exhibition of national and civil prosperity and felicity suddenly subjected to bewildering outrage that it would have been possible to conceive" (161). This article then is not an anonymously written report on dry facts, but is James's "statement" and personal view. He writes because he is "deeply affected" and feels responsible to speak up as "a neighbor and an observer."⁷ James in this article recounts his visit to the shelter where the refugees are housed. What surprises him is the fact that life, or life-force, is not to be easily quenched. The shelter is not a place of total depression and mourning: he feels a life force struggling to come out and to heal the wounded body so that it can live. He ends the article with a hopeful vision for the future:

The deepest impression from the sore human stuff with which such observation deals is that of its being strong and sound in an extraordinary degree for the conditions producing it... and under the sense of the small care and scant provision that have attended such hearty and happy growths, struggling into life and air with no furtherance to speak of, the question comes pressingly home of what a better economy might, or verily mightn't, result in. (176)

James finds the wounded and the sick "strong and sound," and their "hearty and happy growths, struggling into life and air." Something alive, though invisible, is wriggling upwards. It was a delight to find that underneath the "'quiet' physiognomy" of the soldiers there was something alive, and perhaps underneath their growing beards is a "consciousness" in motion unawares (166). Their bodies are wasted, but their life is not yet. And their life will eventually heal their bodies. What James needs to do is to help nurse that life so that it will be reinvigorated once again. Hope and good will, then, is all that James can convey to the readers.

The sight of the refugees reassures him of a possible birth of a new community in his neighborhood whose constituents are both the locals and the refugees. When Belgian refugees flooded in at Chelsea where James had his London apartment, they were sheltered at Crosby Hall. James visited there and described it: "The place has formed then the headquarters of the Chelsea circle of hospitality to the exiled, the broken and the bewildered..." (163). A new community, so James felt, emerged on the spot. It had nothing to do with nationality, race, gender nor religion. Both the Chelsea locals and the refugees became neighbors together at the Crosby Hall, which becomes a nexus and meeting place. Although James, in a posthumously published essay, still calls himself "a technical alien" even after his naturalization as a British citizen in the summer of 1915 ("Within the Rim" 185), he is able to feel himself participating in the Crosby Hall community as "a neighbor."⁸ People's flexibility to fit in and work together was a wonderful surprise for James. In this article, James takes a moment and pays a tribute to the "place" and contemplates the historical significance of Crosby Hall. The Hall was originally built in 1466 on the property of Thomas More, survived the great fire of London in 1666, then abandoned, but was later moved to Chelsea to be reassembled for community use in 1908.⁹ In short, Crosby Hall is mobile, recyclable, and fire-resistant. It is an ideal place to house the uprooted refugees, since they have shared the same fate. Their life

force is resilient, and they would survive and re-situate themselves in a new environment, just as the history of Crosby Hall attests. The concluding sentence of his article is none other than a statement of James's faith in life:

This is my moral, for I believe in Culture—speaking strictly now of the honest and of our own congruous kind. (176)

This is James's prayer and profession of "Culture," or a faith in humanity. "Culture" here signifies the cultivability of both physical and moral properties of the "human stuff." Both our body, or the physical, and the mind, or the moral, are the essentials to make a culture. His declared belief in "Culture," is his belief in life's potential and human responsibility. And "Culture" requires a "place" for humans to take root in order to grow. Thus Chelsea Hall, which had survived through centuries, is a place for the refugees to regenerate and renew their culture, just as a transplanted tree would adapt itself to a new environment, while maintaining its original character.

A life-long alien and cosmopolite in spirit, he, facing the crisis of civilization, recognizes the importance of his commitment to a community where he happens to be. The community consists of "neighbors" whose national and religious orientations, not to mention, may vary. Being "a neighbor," James is also placed in the best position to witness the moral and physical effects of the war on his fellow humans. James's mobile speaking subject and his performative role-play in his articles, therefore, demonstrate how he connects himself with his various readers in order to become "we" and "neighbors" together. His words are meant to evoke a sense of union, hospitality and empathy, which is modeled after a mother's love, or a power to give and sustain life. The responsibility he takes as a writer is not to mourn in silence or write in private but to act and speak in public for the dead and suffering. James's 1915 *NYT* articles, though already a century old, enlighten us on journalistic and literary responsibility which the late Sontag in our day considered debatable--regarding "the pain of others."

NOTES

- 1 This paper was presented at “Mourning and its Hospitalities,” a three-day conference at the U of Queensland, Australia (8-20 July, 2007). It was originally a part of my paper, “‘Gay’ and ‘Non-American’: Henry James’s Contemporaneity,” which was read for the symposium “American Renaissance 2004: *Gengo Hyogen no Genzaikei* (Linguistic Expression and Its Contemporaneity),” at American Literature Society of Japan Kansai Conference held at Kyoto Women’s College on 11 Dec. 2004; the developed version of the this conference paper, “*Kyokan-suru ‘Watashi-tachi’: Henry James no Politikku* (‘We’ in Sympathy: Politics of Henry James),” was included in *American Renaissance no Genzaikei (Contemporaneity of American Renaissance)*,” Shohakusha, 2007.
- 2 Jean Tardieu’s poem, “Glory of a Poet” (1943) ends Kazuo Watanabe’s introduction to the first edition of *Listen to the Voices from the Sea—Writings of the Fallen Japanese Students* in 1949. The book is a collection of last letters home written by the suicide (Kamikaze) squad in World War II. According to the statistics gathered by a Japanese newspaper website, Asahi-com, in order not to forget the war and never to repeat the same mistake, the book is selected as the most important paper-back edition of the Iwanami Books (the oldest Japanese paperback series, equivalent of Everyone’s Library or Penguin Classics) to be read by the young people.
- 3 Tintner, in her Freudian reading of James, contends that as he tried to recruit “attractive young men” from the U. S., James’s “homosexual tastes were finally asserting themselves through the layers of repression,” and the war “acted as a successful self-analysis which he began in his confessions in Notes” (175, 176). My aim in this paper is not to reassert his homosexuality, but to focus on his style in his newspaper articles and how he crafts his language to speak in his own voice.
- 4 James’s 1865 review of Whitman’s *The Drum Taps*, points out that Whitman lacks “common-sense” and “art” and thus is not adequate for the taste of the American public (633). He, however, points out essential elements of the poet such as his “democratic, liberty-loving” spirit, the “vigor of [his] temperament” evinced by his hospital visits, the “manly independence of [his] nature,” and the “tenderness of [his] heart” (634). In 1898, he gave a favorable review of *Calamus*, a collection of Whitman’s letters to a young railroad laborer, and says that he has been much “affected” by Whitman’s friendship with a “labouring man,” and calls it “a mysterious marvel, a thing positively delightful” (661). He again uses the word “affect” in his review of *The Wounded Soldiers*.
- 5 Whitman wrote an article for the *NYT* titled “Our Wounded and Sick Soldiers” which appeared on 11 Dec. 1864. Whether or not James read this article, it deserves mentioning here, because Whitman carefully explains what “HOSPITAL VISITING AS AN ART” means. The “art” is that of “adaptation,” the ability to know what others want and need. Then, a visitor can meet the sick and the wounded “in the fullest spirit of human sympathy and boundless love,” which is only comparable to a mother’s love. Whitman explains that true nurses are “Mothers, full of motherly feeling... with the magnetic

touch of hands." He, acting as an efficient nurse, is none other than a loving mother for the young soldiers. The image of a mother in Whitman's article, whose target readers are most likely his fellow American men, is worthy of note.

6 In 1898, the year in which America won the Spanish-American War, President Roosevelt gave a speech in Chicago entitled "Strenuous Life," and triumphantly praised prosperous and progressive America. In the same year, James wrote an essay, "Democracy and Theodore Roosevelt" (23 Apr.) for *Literature* as part of his series "American Letters," and pointed out an unsettling and agitating tone of Roosevelt's repeated reference to "America." Interestingly, his review of *The Wounded Soldiers* appeared in two weeks (7 May). The two reviews crucially represent James's political view at the time.

7 On the original *NYT* page, a drawing of his portrait by Sargent largely occupies the center. James, leaning back a little, looks at the readers straight. The arrangement of a pencil-drawn portrait may be associated with Whitman's portrait on the title page of *Leaves of Grass*. After Whitman, James states his "song of myself."

8 James was naturalized as a British citizen in the summer of 1915. He wrote to his nephew that "Hadn't it been for the war, I should certainly have gone on as I was, taking it as the simplest and easiest and even friendliest thing; but the circumstances are utterly altered now" (qtd. Edel 789).

9 James uses the word "re-edified" in order to describe its reconstruction of Crosby Hall in his neighborhood. As Pierre Walker points out, the choice of the word "re-edify" is important, because it not only describes the actual re-building of the hall, but also makes it an ideal place for the re-furnishing and re-educating the war victims who are housed there (xxiv). That the Hall once belonged to Sir Thomas More is also suggestive in that James sees a new utopian communal site being born there.

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