

Alice James and the Right to Death

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We begin with a modest claim – or rather with the citation of one. “The diary of Alice James, invalid sister of the psychologist William and of the novelist Henry, represents her modest claim on posterity beside the works of her famous brothers.”¹ This claim for Alice James, made in her name, opens Leon Edel’s preface to his edition of the diary. The attribution of modesty comes as no surprise, and is entirely in keeping with the standard critical apologies for the diary and the surviving letters that, together with her commonplace book, complete this circumscribed body of work, these “thoughtful notes of a daughter and a sister,” as Edel calls them – in keeping with their devaluation and practically their invalidation on the grounds of their authorship by the invalid younger sister whose “claim to attention” at the time of the diary’s first publication in 1934 “was still as an appendage to brothers.”² The “modesty” assigned reflects the relegation to marginal status of a corpus that, so the argument goes, pales beside the monumental achievements, scientific and aesthetic, of William and Henry. In generic terms as well, this slight autobiographical *oeuvre* is taken to mark a decidedly minor event in American letters: indeed, Alice James’s sole publication prior to her death was a letter, an anecdotal note to the editor of *The Nation* signed “Invalid.”

The predictable premises of this relegation to modest, marginal, and minor status have been challenged of late in attentive interpretations of the journal and letters on the part of Ruth Bernard Yeazell and Raymond Bellour, as well as in briefer critical interventions by Mary Jacobus and Jacqueline Rose. Yeazell’s introduction to her edition of the letters, for example, tacitly amends Edel’s assessment of the diary’s modest claim, to read: “Alice claims our attention less in spite of her invalidism than because of it, and she claims it with a distinctively Jamesian energy.”³ Critics spanning several generations and theoretical positions thus acknowledge that some claim is being made, “on posterity,”

which is to say on “our attention” as readers, as the diary’s posthumous addressees. (One of the journal’s first readers, Henry James himself, noted in a letter to William following their sister’s death that “her style, her power to write,” “constitute (I wholly agree with you) a new claim for the family renown.”⁴ But what happens when we interrogate further this discourse of claiming, in an attempt to specify the nature, the object, and the validity of a demand that is in fact asserted *immodestly*, with force (Alice James’s word is “potency”), and even with a certain “violence” (again, her term), in the pages of the journal? While Edel (to cite him once more as an instance of a critical commonplace in the accounts of the corpus) notes summarily that “the claim of life against the claim of death – this is the assertion of every page of Alice’s diary,”⁵ a reconsideration of those pages suggests rather that Alice James’s diary breaks with the oppositional logic of life *against* death, and deliberately reinscribes its terms – as it does with the same logic brought to bear on the categories of gender and health. The diary disrupts, that is, the very system that would guarantee its relegation (as the private record of a woman’s – a daughter’s, a sister’s – illness) to modest, minor, marginal status in the first place.

Among the crucial junctures in this text that consistently works to preempt its own invalidation is the moment when Alice James’s long-awaited death sentence is finally pronounced, in no uncertain terms. As Yeazell observes, over the course of more than twenty years of attempted treatments, tentative recoveries, and inevitable relapses, the career invalid had weathered a succession of indeterminate diagnoses and impalpable prognoses.⁶ The diagnoses ranged from “nervous hyperaesthesia” to “spinal neurosis”⁷ to “an abnormally sensitive nervous organization”⁸ to her mother’s judgement around the time of James’s first breakdown: “It is a case of genuine hysteria for which no cause as yet can be discovered. It is a most distressing form of illness, and the most difficult to reach, because little is known about it.”⁹ (The latter diagnosis is problematic in a way that Rose elucidates: “To describe Alice as a[n] hysteric is of course a problem. We can list her constantly redefined and reexperienced ills – paralysis, suppressed gout, cramps of the stomach and what she called cramps of the mind, sick headaches, toppling over and fainting out. But we are forced to acknowledge that, in William James’s words, this disease ‘*with no definite symptoms*’ . . . resides, above all, in its designation as hysteria.”)¹⁰ And a long history of prognoses could be summarized by the patient herself: “And then these doctors tell you that you will die, or *recover!* But you *don’t* recover. I have been at these alternations since I was nineteen and am neither dead nor recovered – as I am now forty-two there has surely been time for either process.”¹¹ But between the either/or of the doctors’ logical code, an unequivocal diagnosis and prognosis are, in time, delivered:

To him who waits, all things come! My aspirations may have been eccentric, but I cannot complain now, that they have not been brilliantly fulfilled. Ever since I have been ill, I have longed and longed for some palpable disease, no matter how conventionally dreadful a label it might have. . . . I have been going downhill at a steady trot; so they sent for Sir Andrew Clark four days ago, and the blessed being has endowed me not only with cardiac complications, but says that a lump that I have had in one of my breasts for three months, which has given me a great deal of pain, is a tumour, that nothing can be done for me but to alleviate pain, that it is only a question of time, etc.¹²

Far from occasioning dread or terror, Sir Andrew's "uncompromising verdict," as James terms it, has the salutary effect of "lifting us out of the formless vague and setting us within the very heart of the sustaining concrete" – the very heart of the concrete cast as "this unholy granite substance in my breast."¹³

Yet to Alice James, avid reader of George Sand and her "beloved" Jules Lemaître, whose diary is a tissue of citations from the French, "tumour" may well have sounded as a brutal, even if welcome, judgement.¹⁴ For the physician's verdict, addressed to her with a certain familiarity, has a complex rhetorical and temporal status: it tells the truth, *dit la vérité*, accurately *describes* a state of affairs in the present (*tu meurs*: you are dying), while it also prescribes, in the tension of this present tense, a future (*tu meurs*: you must die, you shall die). The verdict, then, is also a sentence, a sentencing. And however idiomatic and untranslatable, Alice James hears and understands it as such: in particularizing her ailment, the terrible apostrophe posits the law of her life, a law that, over time, will enforce itself as reference.¹⁵

This parsing of the cruel diagnosis may help us to bring into focus the outlook afforded in the physician's superfluous gloss, whose very generality of formulation makes it paradigmatic as prognosis.¹⁶ If it is "only a question of time, etc." for Alice James – who lives on, a long nine months after the verdict is delivered, and before she is delivered to her death – the temporality of the diary (a genre or mode conventionally associated with the present tense, with writing-to-the-moment) is consistently unrepresentable, surpassing the present, staking in effect a counterclaim against her father's assessment, in his essay "Woman and the 'Woman's Movement,'" of the "question of time" as it properly pertains to woman: "The very virtue of woman [is] her practical sense, which leaves her indifferent to past and future alike, and keeps her the busy blessing of the present hour. . . ."¹⁷ Far from being unmindful of the past and future, Alice James is if anything practically oblivious of the present hour, as she confesses in a letter to William:

It seems sad to think of you with yr. love of kin left alone in Cambridge with the family

melted like snow from about you, but our dead are among *les morts qui sont toujours vivants*. Your wife allies you to the present [an allusion, here, to the other Alice, and an echo of the father's thesis] & your children to the future, but I live altogether in the past, I have a momentary & spasmodic consciousness of the present. . . .¹⁸

What then are the terms of this preoccupation with the past on James's part? The diary as well as the letters are first of all the site of a memory-work and its peculiar tropology, in which death figures time and again – the locus of an effort to come to grips with her history in what amounts to a struggle for survival (“What is living in this deadness called life,” she writes, “is the struggle of the creature in the grip of its inheritance and against the consequences of its acts.”)¹⁹ From the vantage point of a “moment of middle life” that, ironically, would prove much nearer the end, the journal ostensibly seeks to reclaim a sense of the past as a basis for self-understanding:

And what joys of youth equal this blessed moment of middle life, when serene and sure of our direction all the simple incidents of daily life and human complication explain and enrich themselves as they are linked and fitted to the wealth of past experience. Whilst the blank youthful mind, ignorant of catastrophe, stands crushed and bewildered before the perpetual postponement of its hopes, things promised in the dawn that the sunset ne'er fulfils.

More specifically, as she goes on to note,

Owing to muscular circumstances my youth was not of the most ardent, but I had to peg away pretty hard between 12 and 24, “killing myself,” as some one calls it – absorbing into the bone that the better part is to clothe oneself in neutral tints, walk by still waters, and possess one's soul in silence. How I recall the low grey Newport sky in that winter of 62-3 as I used to wander about over the cliffs, my young soul struggling out of its swaddling-clothes as the knowledge crystallized within me of what Life meant for me, one simple, single and before which all mystery vanished. A spark then kindled which every experience great and small has fed into a steady flame which has illuminated my little journey and which, altho' it may have burned low as the waters rose, has never flickered out – “une pensee, unique eternelle, toujours mêlée, a l'heure présente.” How profoundly grateful I am for the temperament which saves from the wretched fate of those poor creatures who never find their bearings, but are tossed like dried leaves hither, thither and yon at the mercy of every event which o'ertakes them. Who feel no shame at being vanquished, or at crying out at the common lot of pain and sorrow, who never dimly suspect that the only thing which survives is the resistance we bring to life and not the strain life brings to us.²⁰

The considerable stakes of such a passage are to establish and affirm the continuity of past experience with a present that, while it is not the future projected by the struggling

young soul – while it was not to have been predicted – is yet part of a coherent history, and, as such, meaningful. The life lesson recounted here (“one simple, single”) seems amenable to straightforward narrative rendering, to “crystallization” as knowledge and as memory, on the model of an interiorizing (“within me”) and idealizing recollection or *Erinnerung*. But the meaning ostensibly made available here is not independent of the diary’s characteristic figuration, in which, again, death is the presiding trope. Here as elsewhere, the relationship between the text’s apparent thematic statement and its rhetorical operation is not simple, single, or straightforward. In this “memory of her youth as an exercise in self-destruction,”²¹ Alice James recalls the past in terms of “‘killing [her]self,’ as some one calls it.” Given the elaboration, over the course of what *she* calls her “mortal career,” of her project of “getting myself dead – the hardest job of all,” the metaphorical suicide alluded to here is not one figure among others – nor is it *simply* a figure, given its eventual performativity.²² If the passage lays claim to continuity, to the possibility of “link[ing] and fit[ting]” past experience to “daily life and human complication” in the present, that continuity rests uneasily upon a tropology of memory that, once again, confuses what we take to be the conditions of life and death. As Alice James goes on to assert, what “survives”²³ the passage from then to now – “the only thing” to do so – is “the resistance we bring to life”: a formulation that is itself a locus of resistance in more senses than one. In his preface to *What Maisie Knew*, Henry James raises the “question of the particular kind of truth of resistance I might be able to impute to my central figure – *some* intensity, some continuity of resistance being naturally of the essence of the subject.”²⁴ If a certain “truth of resistance” might be imputed to the figure of the invalid sister, read in the text of her diary, what particular kind would it be? What is being resisted in such a passage, and in the name of what?

The syntactical symmetry of the chiasmus – “the only thing which survives is the resistance we bring to life and not the strain life brings to us” – initially suggests that we understand this resistance as a resource, as the force we marshal *in* life, in what Alice James takes to be our “struggle . . . in the grip of [our] inheritance and against the consequences of [our] acts”: resistance, then, on the analogy of an attribute of matter, as what keeps it (and us) from being “tossed like dried leaves . . . at the mercy of every event which o’ertakes” us.²⁵ The epistemological stakes of such a reading are apparent if we recall the fundamental Aristotelian formulation in which matter becomes cognizable precisely through the resistance it affords; it is through their resistance that we come to *know* physical objects.²⁶ Such an understanding is apparently borne out in another symmetrical formulation in the letters: “Surely there is nothing so true as that we are simply at the mercy

of what we bring to life and not what life brings to us.”²⁷ But while Alice James’s career is arguably a life of resistance in this sense, the passage in question is liable to other readings as well, readings that complicate a response to the question posed in the preface to *Maisie*: “successfully to resist . . . what would that be?”²⁸ The apparent symmetry afforded by the grammatical figure, and the totalizing understanding that chiasmus seems to warrant, are upset by the rhetorical opening onto other possible senses, likewise justified by the text. In other words, the grammatical determination of the meaning of the figure leaves something unaccounted for (in a version of what William James, in an essay that Alice glosses in the diary, calls an “Unclassified Residuum”).²⁹

For “the resistance we bring to life” might also be read as resistance *opposed to* life, in the name of death. Alice James writes that she “aspires” to die (her word), that she lives (and writes) *for* the eventuality of her death, which finally materializes in the anticipated “mortuary moment.” Such resistance finds expression in the epitaphic tonality that prevails from early on in the diary.³⁰ Or again, “the resistance we bring to life” might be thought of as the resistance we animate or reanimate, as we might the dead. In this instance, the crucial figure in the rhetoric of memory would be, not the grammatical chiasmus, but personification or prosopopoeia, which gives “life” to the dead, and hence functions crucially in autobiographical as well as epitaphic discourse.³¹ In question, then, would be a resistance that language, in its rhetorical function as prosopopoeia, brings, figuratively speaking, to “life.”³² Rhetoric thus resists the grammatical decoding of meaning in the language of this formulation, to open up multiple possibilities that call for a reading of *this* resistance, for reading *as* the resistance to a determination of sense that would ignore the divergence between the text’s grammatical and rhetorical operations.

The scheme just outlined must accommodate a further characteristic complication in the diary passage, for it is not only her own past that is figured in terms of “killing herself” (later she will confess, “The fact is, I have been dead so long and it has been simply such a grim shoving of the hours behind me as I faced a ceaseless possible horror . . .”).³³ Indeed, the very pastness of the past is figured by death, and more specifically, figured in the person of the dead friend, the dead parent, called up like a ghost to haunt the text: for example, in a recollected scene of reading that opens onto an encounter with the past. The diary entry for 29 January 1890 begins with Alice’s ironic venting of her irritation at being overlooked by a flu epidemic; since “there is no hope of my sowing a microbe,” she writes, it seems death is to be postponed yet again. “My being, however,” she goes on to recount, has been stirred to its depths by what I might call ghost microbes imported in my Davenport which came from home ten days ago. In it were my old letters. I fell upon Father and Mother’s

and could not tear myself away from them for two days. One of the most intense, exquisite and profoundly interesting experiences I ever had. I think if I try a little and give it form its vague intensity will take limits to itself, and the “divine anguish” of the myriad memories stirred grow less. Altho’ they were as the breath of life to me as the years have passed they have always been as present as they were at first and [will be for] the rest of my numbered days, with their little definite portion of friction and serenity, so short a span, until we three were blended together again, if such should be our spiritual necessity. But as I read it seemed as if I had opened up a post-script of the past and that I had had, in order to find them *truly*, really to lose them. . . . Mother died Sunday evening, January 29th, 1882, Father on Monday mid-day, December 19th, 1882, and now I am shedding the tears I didn’t shed then!³⁴

The formalizing gesture in this passage (“I think if I try a little and give it form . . .”) corresponds to the stated function of the diary more generally as one of imposing limits on the flux, the “vague intensity” of recollected experience. (Formalization is also, as we have seen, the effect of the doctor’s diagnosis, the verdict – “tumour” – that releases Alice from the “formless vague.”) The scene of reading intervenes to transform a more complacent sense of the past expressed earlier in the journal: “Mr Howells letter made me so happy by saying that mine had made mother and father seem living to him. No greater happiness can come than finding that they survive, or can be *revived*, in a few memories.”³⁵ But what survive, what are revived with the opening of the Davenport, are mere “ghost microbes,” so many phantom proxies whose resistance to appropriation by bereaved memory (and even by Alice’s “floating particle sense”)³⁶ is a function of their virtual immateriality as well as their ephemerality. Once again, the diary’s turn of phrase breaks with the oppositional logic of life *versus* death: the microbes are indeed death-bearing, but the death in question animates, enlivens the invalid reader.

If reading these phantomized missives, addressed to her from before and beyond the grave, seems to open up a postscript of the past, it may be that reading (and writing) the past can only take place as such an afterthought, whose relation to that past is allegorical, alluding to an anteriority which, while determinant for our “momentary and spasmodic consciousness of the present,” cannot be recovered as presence, recuperated as knowledge (on the model of the self-knowledge of a self-present, self-identical subject), nor as memory conceived, after Hegel and after Freud, as the appropriation of dialectical *Erinnerung*. In the belated, postscriptive mourning that takes place here – “now I am shedding the tears I didn’t shed then!” – memory comes to terms with a certain otherness, with the radical alterity of the past *as past*, as figured in the dead (in something like the way that, in *The Portrait of a Lady*, it is figured in the “absent eyes and alien lips” of the Greek statues

that Isabel contemplates in Rome).³⁷ Death divides the living from this past, rendering it absolute, irreducible to any form of presence: a past *from which* the dead will never return except as revenant, as insubstantial and fleeting phantom proxy; a past *to which* they are irretrievably lost. The imperative “really to lose” her mother and father is the imperative to leave them (to) their otherness, to abandon the project of mourning as assimilation and prescriptive closure.

All this may help us to read the ways in which the diary inscribes this right of the other to death – its engagement, from early on, in a mourning that would respect the other’s infinite remove. Such a respect underlies the passages in which Alice James mocks the mystified memorializing practices of her acquaintances: “Some friend was gushing to K[atharine] over Mrs Charles Kingsley’s devotion to the memory of her husband, and gave in proof of it, that she always sat beside his bust and had his photo pinned to the adjoining pillow; as the last expression of refined spiritual sentiment, could anything be more grotesquely loathsome.”³⁸ Alice James’s respect for the memory of her dead – to the extent they can still be said to be “hers” – resists the seductions of proximity (“sat beside,” “adjoining pillow”) and mimetic fidelity (“his bust,” “his photo”), taking a different turn:

Constance Maud told me of her sorrow at some moment when it was thought that her Mother was dying and how she prayed to God to spare her life – the sincerity and strength of the feeling which she showed increased the shocked sense which filled me as I listened. One cries out, bowed down in supplication, for strength, but how can any creature . . . propose to make her paltry necessities an element for the modification of another’s destiny. . . . I remember how horrified I was to the core of my being when some said to me that in the month when Father lay dying, refusing to eat, that I must urge him and tell him that he must eat for *my sake!*³⁹

The same line of argument appears in the letters as well: “We were so glad,” she recalls, “to have him go and that he was not kept in weariness & desolation any longer after Mother’s death that we could give no thought to our own loss.”⁴⁰

What amounts to the assertion of a claim to the other’s right to a death that no longer, strictly speaking, concerns the living is even more emphatic with respect to Alice’s memory of her mother’s death, an increasing preoccupation as her own end draws near. In a passage written after the diagnosis of her cancer, Alice reflects that an old friend’s consoling words are, at this late stage, beside the point:

How little all assurances of one’s own immortality seem to concern one, now. . . . References to those whom we shall meet again make me shiver, as such an invasion of their sanctity, gone so far beyond, for ever since the night that Mother died, and the depth of filial tenderness was revealed to me, all personal claim upon her vanished, and she has dwelt in my mind a beautiful

illuminated memory, the essence of divine maternity from which I was to learn great things, give all, but ask nothing.⁴¹

When all personal claim, on the part of the living, vanishes in the void, no possibility remains of transaction, of reciprocity between the dead and those left to mourn them.

Thus Alice reserves special scorn for the figure of the “medium,” whose claim to communicate with the dead and gone promises what proves an impossible passage. As she notes in the journal a week before her death,

It is taken for granted apparently that I shall be spiritualized into a “district messenger,” for here comes another message for Father and Mother; imagine my dragging them, of whom I can only think as a sublimation of their qualities, into gossip about the little more or the little less faith of Tom, Dick or Harry. I do pray to heaven that the dreadful Mrs. Piper [a famous Boston medium whom William James researched over a period of twenty years] won't be let loose upon my defenceless soul. I suppose the thing “medium” has done more to degrade spiritual conception than the grossest forms of materialism or idolatry. . . .⁴²

And when William goes so far as to request a lock of Alice's hair to transmit to Mrs. Piper, she is not entirely defenceless, as she subsequently advises him by letter: “I hope you won't be ‘offended’ . . . when I tell you that I played you a base trick about the hair. It was a lock, not of my hair, but that of a friend of Miss Ward's who died four years ago. I thought it a much better test of whether the medium were simply a mind-reader or not, if she is something more I should greatly dislike to have the secrets of my organisation laid bare to a wondering public.”⁴³ The trick of substituting a lock of another's hair – the friend of a friend, already dead – throws a wrench into the works of a mediation in which she can have no faith.

As this latter passage begins to suggest, Alice James's fierce respect for the right of the other to its difference and its history is intricately intertwined with her own sense of self-respect as other, as resistant to “invasion” and appropriation. From early on in the diary, she registers shock at such attempts on the part of others unknown to her (to include any attempt by her prospective reader, whom she addresses as “dear Inconnu”):⁴⁴ “Imagine hearing that someone here in Leamington whom I had never seen had said that I was ‘very charitable.’ I felt as if all my clothes had been suddenly torn off and that I was standing on the steps of the Town Hall, in the nude, for the delectation of the *British Matron*.”⁴⁵ While this passage has been taken to reflect the “modesty,” the repressed sexuality of the ageing virgin, the threat of violation may rather be understood to call up the corresponding energy of a certain resistance – a resistance to determining the relation to the other as unproblematically egological intersubjectivity.

The resistance that Alice James brings to life – the only thing that survives – finds expression in the claim to her right to death as it comes to the other, and to her through the other on whom she renounces all personal claim. If the right to death – the other's and her "own" – is the object of the claim staked by the diary, the rhetoric of claiming must itself respect a temporal imperative whose terms are nonnegotiable. Those terms, which affirm the allegorical structure of memory and mourning, dictate that death cannot take place *now*, but only *then*, in the (recollected) past of the other's death, in the (anticipated) future of one's own. This impossibility imposes itself most forcefully on the text of the diary in its account of the question of suicide, an act that represents the promise of death now, on one's own terms, in one's own time. "I shall proclaim," the invalid writes, "that any one who spends her life as an appendage to five cushions and three shawls is justified in committing the sloppiest kind of suicide at a moment's notice."⁴⁶ This claim to the right to "kill herself" at a moment's notice (and even the time of this "notice" postpones the fatal moment) asks to be read in relation to another moment, from a time before the journal was undertaken. As her father recollects in a letter to his son Robertson written in 1878, during the period of one of Alice's most severe breakdowns, when she was "half the time, indeed much more than half, on the verge of insanity and suicide,"

One day a long time ago . . . [she] asked me whether I thought that suicide, to which at times she felt very strongly tempted, was a sin. I told her that I thought it was not a sin except where it was wanton, as when a person from a mere love of pleasurable excitement indulged in drink or opium to the utter degradation of his faculties and often to the ruin of the human form in him; but that it was absurd to think it sinful when one was driven to it in order to escape bitter suffering, from spiritual influx, as in her case, or from some loathsome form of disease, as in others. I told her that so far as I was concerned she had my full permission to end her life whenever she pleased; only I hoped that if she ever felt like doing that sort of justice to her circumstances, she would do it in a perfectly gentle way in order not to distress her friends. She then remarked that she was very thankful to me, but she felt that now she could perceive it to be her right to dispose of her own body when life had become intolerable, she could never do it: that when she had felt tempted to do it, it was with a view to break bonds, or assert her freedom, but that now I had given her freedom to do in the premises what she pleased, she was more than content to stay by my side, and battle in concert with me against the evil that is in the world. I don't fear suicide much since this conversation, though she often tells me that she is strongly tempted still.⁴⁷

The temptation "violently [to discontinue] herself," as she elsewhere terms it, meets with an abstract reflection on suicide that culminates in the granting of paternal "permission

to end her life whenever she pleased,” of “her right to dispose of her own body when life had become intolerable.” What is remarkable about the exchange recollected by Henry Sr. is the asymmetry between the question and the answer it prompts: Alice doesn’t ask his permission – she rather inquires, with some measure of disinterest, whether suicide is a sin – but she gets it nonetheless. If afterward, in the father’s phrase, “she could never do it,” this impossibility may not be simply the effect of his disarming “lack of paternal resistance” incapacitating the daughter, emptying the tacit threat of its force⁴⁸ – the strong temptation, after all, remains. Once more, a temporal imperative intervenes to postpone the possibility of death. Time and again, Alice James observes the terms of this imperative as she translates them in the diary: “the law that you cannot either escape or hasten the moment.”⁴⁹ And in the letters: “the law that you can’t hasten the moment, in any development.”⁵⁰ The “consequences” of the doctor’s prognosis – “it is only a question of time” – thus unfold in reverse, shedding retrospective light on the text. Those consequences are brought home in another recollection, this time the daughter’s of the father (the father who eventually committed the kind of “perfectly gentle” suicide he recommended to Alice, by declining to take nourishment over a period of months after the death of his wife). In another haunting passage from the diary, Alice James confesses: “I can hear, as of yesterday, the ring of Father’s voice, as he anathematized some shortcomings of mine in Newport one day: ‘Oh, Alice, how hard you are!’ and I can remember how penetrated I was, not for the first time,⁵¹ with the truth of it, and saw the repulsion his nature with its ripe kernal of human benignancy felt – alas! through all these years, that hard core confronts me still.”⁵²

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The recollected ring of the father’s apostrophe – “Oh, Alice, how hard you are!” – affords another instance of the complex temporality and rhetoricity we noted in the “uncompromising verdict” pronounced by Sir Andrew Clark. For it is at once descriptive of past and present inadequacies, in a description whose “truth” Alice acknowledges, and uncannily prescriptive, in the grammar of the present, of the future, precisely in the way that it anticipates the verdict, the *other* terrible apostrophe: “*tu meurs*.” All unknowingly, the father diagnoses in advance the tumour, the “loathsome form of disease” that will catch up with Alice, “that hard core” that will confront her in the “unholy granite substance in [her] breast.”

A correlate of “the law that you can’t hasten the moment, in any development” – the law according to which Alice James’s history unfolds – is thus another imperative, one that demands the renunciation of all personal claim on the other, on the past as figured in the other, that she traces to the death of her mother. In the penultimate entry in the diary, dated six days before her own death, she writes:

How wearing to the substance and exasperating to the nerves is the perpetual bewailing, wondering at and wishing to alter things happened, as if all personal concern didn't vanish as the "happened" crystallizes into history. Of what matter can it be whether pain or pleasure has shaped and stamped the pulp within, as one is absorbed in the supreme interest of watching the outline and the tracery as the lines broaden for eternity.⁵³

Calmly confronting her impending death, Alice James renounces all remaining traces of personal concern with the past, and all desire to "alter things happened."⁵⁴ And she voids in advance any such concern on the part of her survivors, any claim, however well meaning, they may seek to make on her history. As she writes to William, "So when I am gone, pray don't think of me simply as a creature who might have been something else had neurotic science been born."⁵⁵ In the ironic mode characteristic of the letters and the journal, sustained unto death, Alice James rejects the modal perfect of the might have been – what her other brother, under the rubric "operative irony," understood as "the possible other case, the case rich and edifying where the actuality is pretentious and vain."⁵⁶ Hers are rather the terms of the verses of Christina Rossetti cited in a diary entry that goes on to incorporate a newspaper report of the death – by suicide – of a young woman jilted by her lover:

When I am dead, my dearest,
Sing no sad songs for me.
Plant thou no roses at my head
Nor shady cypress tree.
Be the green grass above me
With showers and dewdrops wet;
And if though wilt, remember,
And if thou wilt, forget.

Alice James's rigorous renunciation of the personal as well as the hypothetical, then, extends well beyond the limits of her own case, or any other case in particular. If she begins the diary with the idea of "writing a bit about what happens, or rather doesn't happen,"⁵⁷ as the first entry attests, what *survives* to the last is her absorbing interest in "the 'happened'" as it "crystallizes into history." We might recall here that the career invalid had another profession as well, though it was short-lived: she conducted a correspondence course for the Society to Encourage Studies at Home, on the subject of history ("In attempting to teach history," she informs a friend by letter, "I am not half the fool that I look.")⁵⁸ In the history lesson afforded by the diary, the "literary remains" addressed to her survivors ("I feel sorry for you all, for I feel as if I hadn't yet given my message"),⁵⁹ the "outline and

the tracery” of the past – of the “happened” – do not assume the shape of a self’s history. Situated at the vanishing point of all personal concern, all personal claim, at the limit of appropriation as knowledge or memory, history as the “happened” – as what has occurred, what has taken place – does not appear in any recognizably organic, teleological, or dialectical form, nor as an empty abstraction or generality.⁶⁰ It does, however, bear a certain resemblance to allegory, understood as the possibility that permits language, however provisionally, to say the other, to say the past as other, as determinant but irrecoverable for any here and now. And the marginal, minor, invalid historian begins oddly to resemble a figure from Walter Benjamin’s third thesis on the concept of history: “A chronicler who recites events without distinguishing between major and minor ones, acts in accordance with the following truth: nothing that has ever happened should be regarded as lost for history.”⁶¹ But the diarist – whose every word could be her last – resists this final attempt at appropriation by resemblance as well, for Alice James writes strictly in accordance with the terms of her own “postscript of the past”: terms that respect the other’s right to an other history, and dictate that the happened – the past as past – should be regarded as lost, “*really*” lost, *to* history.

NOTES

1. Leon Edel, preface, *The Diary of Alice James*, ed. Leon Edel (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1964), vii. Cited below as *Diary*.
2. *Ibid.*, 22, viii.
3. Ruth Bernard Yeazell, introduction, *The Death and Letters of Alice James*, ed. Ruth Bernard Yeazell (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981), 5. Cited below as *Letters*.
4. Qtd. in *Diary*, 19. That the diary’s claim on posterity was in Henry James’s judgement problematic – given its verbatim transcription, names included, of his own uninhibited bedside gossip – is readable in a suggestion he makes in the same letter: “What I should LIKE to do *en temps et lieu* would be should no catastrophe meanwhile occur – or even if it should! – to edit the volume with a few eliminations of text and dissimulations of names, give it to the world and then carefully burn with fire our own four copies” (*Diary*, 20) – the copies provided to the surviving brothers by Alice James’s companion Katharine Loring.
5. *Diary*, 16.
6. *Letters*, 10.
7. *Diary*, 207.
8. *Letters*, 117.
9. *Ibid.*, 11. Jacobus notes that Alice James displaces onto “the shape of the British doctor” the symptoms

of hysteria: "The spectacle of impotent paralysis that he presents is truly pitiful" (*Diary*, 225; cited in Mary Jacobus, *Reading Woman: Essays in Feminist Criticism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 250. Yeazell's gloss on the mother's diagnosis is instructive as to the applicability but also ultimately the insufficiency of psychoanalytic criticism as an interpretive approach to the diary and letters:

"Genuine hysteria" verges on an oxymoron, but there seems no reason to doubt the rough accuracy of the diagnosis: all the evidence suggests that Mary James confronted in her daughter as typical a case of that baffling condition as any that were to present themselves to Freud and Breuer some twenty years later in Vienna. From the facial neuralgias and stomach pains to the fainting spells, the mysterious "attacks" and the partially paralyzed legs, every one of Alice's symptoms was to prove the familiar currency of the *Studies on Hysteria*; like the women whose curious histories would fill that volume, Alice's was a case of physical effects out of all proportion to their apparent causes. . . .

But if it is easy enough to imagine Alice's condition become the raw stuff of another case history, to be appended to those of Anna O. and Elisabeth von R., it is virtually impossible to trace the emotional shape such a history would have actually assumed. . . . Observant and acutely intelligent as they could be, the James family were hardly given to the sort of painstaking detective work in which Freud would later engage; when it comes to suggesting the direct causes of Alice's breakdowns, the particular links of emotion and event to which her flesh had thus given expression, the record is generally blank. To guess at the unconscious meanings of Alice's recurrent crises is to beg nearly as many questions as one answers; the private images, the immediate associations of Freud's *Studies* elude us. And . . . it is just such private and seemingly arbitrary connections that always supply the clue. (*Letters*, 11-13)

10. Jacqueline Rose, "Jeffrey Masson and Alice James," *Oxford Literary Review* 8, no. 1-2 (1986): 187.

Rose reminds us that in his 1896 Lowell lectures on "Exceptional Mental States," William James defined hysteria as the "hyper-aesthetic disorder." She situates the question of Alice's hysteria in the context of a reflection on "the question of representation and its limits"; more generally, her claim is that "in relation to psychoanalysis, what seems to have happened is that the terms of the feminist debate have shifted as the question of sexual difference is superseded or absorbed by that of representation (or reveals how the one is implicated in the other), by the loss of innocence – although also of course of guilt – which follows from any troubling of language and the sign" (191-92).

11. *Diary*, 142.

12. *Ibid.*, 206-07.

13. *Ibid.*, 207, 255. Longinus observes in *On the Sublime* that "tumours are bad things whether in books or bodies, those empty inflations, void of sincerity, as likely as not producing the opposite to the effect intended" ([Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1973], 131). Hence Alice James's relief at the physician's damning verdict.

14. Cf. Jacques Derrida, *Memoires for Paul de Man*, trans. Cecile Lindsay, Jonathan Culler, and Eduardo Cadava (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 87n.

15. Cf. Paul de Man, *Allegories of Reading: Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke, and Proust* (New

Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), 268. I would like to thank Cynthia Chase for her thoughtful commentary on an earlier draft of this essay. Her suggestions helped clarify the stakes of this and other passages.

16. In this way, Sir Andrew's prognosis is comparable to Hyacinth Robinson's paradigmatically indeterminate promise in *The Princess Casamassima*. I have analysed the rhetorical and temporal aspects of this critical speech act in "Promissory Notes: The Prescription of the Future in *The Princess Casamassima*," *ALH* 1, no. 2 (Summer 1989): 484-500.

17. Henry James, Sr., "Woman and the 'Woman's Movement,'" qtd. in Jean Strouse, *Alice James: A Biography* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1980), 45; originally published in 1853 in *Putnam's Monthly* magazine.

18. *Letters*, 139.

19. *Diary*, 38.

20. *Ibid.*, 95-96.

21. Yeazell, *Letters*, 13.

22. The performative character of Alice James's relation to death cannot be fully accounted for by a theatrical, a representational, model of performance, even though Alice imagines staging her final scene, "participating in her own death as both audience and leading actress," as Jacobus notes (250) – as in the passage in which she anticipates (accurately, as it turns out) dying in her sleep, "so that I shall not be one of the audience, dreadful fraud! A creature who has been denied all dramatic episodes might be allowed, I think, to assist at her extinction" (*Diary*, 135; see also 216-17). Crucially, however, as death grows more proximate, the pathos of performance in this sense is precluded: "If it were possible, with Death so close at hand, to take anything which concerns one's ephemeral personality, with seriousness, I might pose to myself before the footlights of my last obscure little scene, as a delectably pathetic figure, for I have come to the knowledge within the last week or so that I was simply born a few years too soon . . ." – i.e., before the therapeutic possibilities of hypnosis were recognized (*Diary*, 222; my emphasis).

23. As Derrida notes, "Survival isn't simply life after death, but a strange dimension of 'plus de vie' – both 'more life' and 'no more life.' Or 'plus que vie,' that's it, 'more than life.' *Plus de vie* and *plus que vie*." See James Creech, Peggy Kamuf, and Jane Todd, "Deconstruction in America: An Interview with Jacques Derrida," *Society for Critical Exchange* 17 (Winter 1985): 25.

24. Henry James, "Preface to *What Maisie Knew*," *The Art of the New: Critical Prefaces* (New York: Scribners, 1962), 146.

25. This is Edel's reading, for example (see *Diary*, 16).

26. On the theoretical consequences of such a thinking of resistance, see Wlad Godzich, forward, *The Resistance to Theory*, by Paul de Man (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), xii-xiii. See also Peggy Kamuf, "Pieces of Resistance," *Reading de Man Reading*, ed. Lindsay Waters and Wlad Godzich (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 141: "The concept of resistance has traditionally taken shape along the line of contact between the conceptual faculty and some exteriority. The concept, in other words,

shows a double face, turned inward and outward, along the line presumed to divide consciousness from its outside or its other.”

27. *Letters*, 135. The quoted letter, of uncertain date, is addressed to William James and his wife Alice; Rose reads the passage as “one of those double linguistic takes or backhanders in which [Alice James] revels (one of Freud’s ‘witty hysterics’)” (186). For William himself, resistance was primarily an ethical stance or (counter) force, as he writes to Henry: “It seems to me that all a man has to depend on in this world is, in the last resort, mere brute power of resistance. I can’t bring myself, as so many men seem able to, to blink the evil out of sight, and gloss it over. . . . It must be accepted and hated, and resisted while there’s a breath in our bodies.”

28. James, “Preface,” 146.

29. William James, “The Hidden Self,” *A William James Reader*, ed. Gay Wilson Allen (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1971), 90. See the diary entry in which Alice James notes approvingly William’s use of the term “abandon” to describe the circumscription of the field of consciousness in the “nervous victim” or hysteric. While by her own account Alice has “never unfortunately been able to abandon my consciousness and get five minutes’ rest,” she recalls having “passed through an infinite succession of conscious abandonments,” in which,

owing to some physical weakness, excess of nervous susceptibility, the moral power *pauses*, as it were for a moment, and refuses to maintain muscular sanity, worn out with the strain of its constabulary functions. As I used to sit immovable reading in the library with waves of violent inclination suddenly invading my muscles taking some one of their myriad forms such as throwing myself out of the window, or knocking off the head of the benignant pater as he sat with his silver locks, writing at his table, it used to seem to me that the only difference between me and the insane was that I had not only all the horrors and suffering of insanity but the duties of the doctor, nurse, and strait-jacket imposed upon me, too. Conceive of never being without the sense that if you let yourself go for a moment your mechanism will fall into pie and that at some given moment you must abandon it all, let the dykes break and the flood sweep in, acknowledging yourself abjectly impotent before the immutable laws.

She has, in the wake of these recollected episodes, not only “to ‘abandon’ my brain, as it were,” but, in the following entry, to “‘abandon’ the rhetorical part of me and forego the eloquent peroration with which I meant to embellish the above, on the ignorant asininity of the medical profession in its treatment of nervous disorders. The seething part of me has also given out and had to be abandoned.” In a further allusion to William’s essay, she refers to what remains after the succession of abandonments (and what will remain after death) as “the *residuum*” (*Diary*, 148-50). In textual terms, the “residuum” may be understood as what remains (of rhetoric) once a grammatical decoding *or* (of grammar once) a rhetorical analysis has taken place.

30. Cf. Jacobus, 249.

31. Paul de Man makes this argument in *The Rhetoric of Romanticism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), 77. Derrida notes that the voice given by means of the figure of prosopopoeia, while fictive, may “already [haunt] any said real or present voice” (*Memoires*, 26).

32. See also the diary passage quoted by Yeazell: "In those ghastly days, when I was by myself in the little house in Mt. Vernon St., how I longed to flee in to the firemen next door & escape from the 'Alone! Alone!' that echoed thro' the house, rustled down the stairs, whispered from the walls & confronted me, like a material presence, as I sat waiting, counting the moments as they turned themselves from today into tomorrow . . ." (*Letters*, 24). Brydon's *alter ego* confronts him in Henry James's autobiographically based story "The Jolly Corner." I have analysed the role of prosopopoeia in James's late tale in "A Jamesian About-Face: Notes on 'The Jolly Corner,'" *ELH* 50, no. 3 (Fall 1983): 587-605. The "quasi-hallucinatory refrain which passes through the male line" of the James family (Rose, 189) – the much-discussed "vastation" of Henry Sr. (in which he hallucinates "some damned shape squatting invisible to me within the precincts of the life") and William's account of a depressive episode in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (in which "a horrible fear of my own existence" coincides with "the image of an epileptic patient whom I had seen in the asylum," who "sat there like a sort of sculptured Egyptian cat or Peruvian mummy . . . looking absolutely non-human" [Rose, 189; Strouse, 127-29] – must also be read in this light. If, as Rose suggests, hallucination (like telepathy) is to be understood as "the vanishing [point] of what was to become the psychoanalytic account of hysteria" (189), it is at this point that rhetorical reading can intervene to supplement that account. It is likewise in these (rhetorical) terms that the conjuring, reanimating power of the *name* – in particular, the name "William" – in Alice James's diary is to be read and thought. In the entry for 16 July 1889, Alice writes of "a curious psychological problem to solve, the spell cast over the French race by the commonplace name of William." She is responding to Jules Lemaître's commentary on an adaptation of Shakespeare, and she addresses him directly: "I should greatly like to know just what the sound *William* stands for in your mind and that of your kind" (*Diary*, 50). In the entry that follows, "William" materializes before her:

I must try and pull myself together and record the somewhat devastating episode of July 18th when Harry after a much longer absence than usual presented himself, doubled by William!! [Edel notes that "William James was in Europe during the summer of 1889. He had last seen his sister in 1884 when she sailed for England. "] We had just finished luncheon and were talking of something or other when H. suddenly said, with a queer look upon his face, "I must tell you something!" "You're not going to be married!" shrieked I. "No, but William is here . . . and is waiting now in the Holly Walk for the news to be broken to you and if you survive, I'm to tie my handkerch[ief] to the balcony." Enter Wm. not *à la* Romeo via the balcony; the prose of our century to say nothing of that of our consanguinity making it super[er]ogatory.

The other William – Shakespeare – is once again inscribed as William James is conjured by his sister's sounding of his name. "He doesn't look [much] older for the five years, and all that there is to be said of him, of course, is that he is simply himself. . . ." But the simplicity of this self-identity and its affirmation is belied by the sequence in the diary, and Alice goes on to write of her brother as

a creature who speaks in another language as H. says from the rest of mankind and who would lend life and charm to a treadmill. What a strange experience it was, to have *what had seemed so dead and gone* all these years suddenly bloom

before one . . . redolent with the exquisite *family* perfume of the days gone by, made of the allusions, the memories and the point of view in common, so that my floating-particle sense was lost for an hour or so in the illusion that what is forever shattered had sprung up anew, and existed outside of our memories. . . . (*Diary*, 51-52; some emphasis added)

33. *Diary*, 230.

34. *Ibid.*, 78-79. A citation of this passage from the diary closes chapter 12 of Strouse's biography, entitled "Gains and Losses" (213). In a letter to her sister-in-law, dated 5 February 1890, Alice James urges her to instill in her children "the most conservative habits with regard to their family letters. . . they will have priceless value in time." She then recounts the arrival of the Davenport containing her parents' old letters: "I fell upon them and wallowed for two days in the strangest & most vivid experience. I had to tear myself away for pathological causes & do not dare return yet, but they are perpetually soliciting me; like living things sucking me back into the succulent past out of this anomalous death in life – an existence as juicy as that of a dried cod-fish!" (*Letters*, 180).

35. *Diary*, 32-33.

36. *Ibid.*, 51.

37. I address this figuration of the past in "Understanding Allegories: Reading *The Portrait of a Lady*," *Modern Critical Interpretations: The Portrait of a Lady*, ed. Harold Bloom (New Haven: Chelsea House, 1987), 131-53.

38. *Diary*, 228.

39. *Ibid.*, 124-25.

40. *Letters*, 91.

41. *Diary*, 220-21.

42. *Ibid.*, 231.

43. *Letters*, 106-07.

44. *Diary*, 129, 166.

45. *Ibid.*, 32.

46. *Ibid.*, 81.

47. Qtd. in *Letters*, 15-16.

48. Yeazell, *Letters*, 16.

49. *Diary*, 161.

50. *Letters*, 184.

51. Elsewhere in the diary, it is the "first-timeness" of events and passages that seems to Alice James to guarantee their "survival" in memory (*Diary*, 128).

52. *Diary*, 191.

53. *Ibid.*, 231-32.

54. Jacobus cites Strouse's assertion that, for Alice James, "the anomalous literary realm occupied by

the diary lay safely within the feminine province of the personal" (Jacobus, 251). One aim of the present reading is to suggest that the text of the diary is neither safe nor personal. In part, this is to argue that the diary is not simply a private document, but is rather apostrophic, addressed to some other or others (Katharine Loring noted repeatedly that Alice James meant for the diaries to be published one day, and wrote for publication). Indeed, for Alice, public and private "inhabit exactly the same language, in the way that a postcard is at once public and private" (Geoffrey Hartman, *Saving the Text* [Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981], xxvi). But it is important to preserve the alternative possibility that the diary may be language "[i]ntended for no one and nothing, [a] remainder of language" that "may well be language in its purity, nonreferentiality and virtuality" (Werner Hamacher, "History, Teary," *Yale French Studies* 74 [1988]: 71).

55. Letters, 187.

56. Henry James, "Preface to *The Lesson of the Master*," *The Art of the Novel*, 222. This is the irony operative for example in "The Jolly Corner" as well as in *The Sense of the Past*.

57. *Diary*, 25.

58. *Letters*, 76.

59. *Diary*, 218.

60. Cf. Werner Hamacher, "Journals, Politics," *Responses: On Paul de Man's Wartime Journalism*, ed. Werner Hamacher, Neil Hertz, and Thomas Keenan (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1989), 463: "History, this vague abstraction, seems then and now to function as a powerful means of homogenizing and making a taboo out of history – namely, *that* history which exists only concretely, singularly, idiosyncratically, painfully." Such is the history of Alice James.

61. Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1969), 254.