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“A Barnum Monstrosity”: Alice James and the Spectacle of Sympathy

In all this the philosopher is just like the rest of us non-philosophers, so far as we are just and sympathetic instinctively, and so far as we are open to the voice of complaint.
—William James, “The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life”

What expresses more perfectly the folly of the philanthropic mush of this age. . . ?—Alice James, *Diary*

In the fall of 1884, Henry James’s sister Alice sailed across the Atlantic to Europe, where she would spend the last eight years of her life as an invalid. In a postscript to one of her earliest letters home, written just one month after arriving, Alice pays tribute to the sympathetic attentions of her brother: “It occurs to me that I have never mentioned Harry. His kindness & devotion are not to be described by mortal pen, he shows no outward sign of impatience at having an old man of the Sea indefinitely launched upon him, I am afraid that he will find me attached to his coat-tails for the rest of my mortal career.”¹ Though Alice’s “mortal career,” like her “mortal pen,” seems to be the career of a living being, her phrase contains the more original sense of the “deathly” career, a career intent upon its own demise. Though I do not wish to ask, as many of James’s readers do, *why* she embraced such a ghastly “career,” I will suggest that James’s sense of herself as a professional invalid grants her a certain authority with respect to the workings of sympathy. Resigned to an inescapable invalidism, James manipulates the position commonly understood as impotent but sensitive in order to establish a clear-sighted subject position, one that claims a potency based

on its ability to resist sentimental relations between subjects. Not only her longtime proximity to illness but also her resigned acceptance of that role allow her a clarity of vision with which to watch and then describe the sympathetic visitor.

Two letters to William James in 1886 demonstrate Alice's squeamish response to her distant brother's sympathetic words. In a letter of 3–7 January, Alice gently but firmly warns William not to waste his sympathy on her:

While I am on the subject I may as well add that, as you know, the tendency of the age is rather to overdo the sympathetic & that there is a fortunate provision of nature which keeps one from seeming as flimsy and dismal to one's self as one does to one's affectionate friends. My ill-health has been inconvenient & not aesthetically beautiful, but early in youth I discovered that there were certain ends to be attained in life, which were as independent of illness or of health, as they were of poverty or riches, so that by turning my attention exclusively to them, even *my* torpid career has not been without its triumphs to my own consciousness & therefore not to be pitied for.

Alice's triumph over William's sympathy here consists of a tenacious possession of her own subjectivity, a subjectivity which cannot be maintained in the mutual exchange of sympathetic identification and which consequently requires the denial of sympathy. In rejecting her brother's pity, Alice maintains her own perception of herself against the perception and definition imposed by her spectator. If she has not been able to triumph over her body, she reminds the famous psychologist, she has been able to achieve certain "triumphs to [her] own consciousness."

Her letter of 10 September suggests that William persisted in his sympathetic correspondence:

I have two very fraternal, sympathetic and amusing letters to thank you for. The fraternity & amusingness are very grateful to my heart and soul, but the sympathy makes me feel like a horrible humbug. Amidst the horrors of wh. I hear and read my woes seem of a very pale tint. Kath.² & I roared over the "stifling in a quagmire of disgust, pain & impotence" [William's words], for I consider myself one of the most *potent* creations of my time, & though I may not have a group of Harvard students sitting at my feet drinking in psychic truth, I shall not tremble, I assure you, at the last trump.

If Alice's position as subject has provided her with a way of eluding the "flimsy and dismal" image that others see when in her presence (whether literally or, as in William's case, imaginatively), William's letters, offering such sympathetic descriptions as the one which offends Alice, deprive her of the ability to elide these uglier images with images of her own.

This exchange of letters reveals a crucial difference between Alice's and William's conceptions of sympathy. Far from understanding sympathy as a sentiment which occludes selfhood, William saw it as ensuring the protection of the world's many selves: sympathy enables individuals to look beyond themselves to understand the needs of others and thus to prevent their suffering. Sympathy, in short, mitigates "a certain blindness" to the feelings of others. Without sympathy, "the spectator's judgment is sure to miss the root of the matter, and to possess no truth. The subject judged knows a part of the world of reality which the judging spectator fails to see, knows more while the spectator knows less."³ Though true moral standards may not be clearly distinguishable from false ones, the moral individual "knows that if he makes a bad mistake the cries of the wounded will soon inform him of the fact. In all this the philosopher is just like the rest of us non-philosophers, so far as we are just and sympathetic instinctively, and so far as we are open to the voice of complaint."⁴ For William, then, sympathy serves as a healing sentiment that, although it does nothing for the sympathetic observer, soothes the wounds of the world's suffering souls. The wounded are permitted their own cries, which call attention to their experience of pain.

Alice James, however, failed to share her brother's custodial version of sympathy. Unlike William's humanist concern for relieving suffering, Alice's version of sympathy does not allow one to hear the cries of another's pain, but rather produces a false, because alien, account of that pain. To "sympathize," this invalid suspected, was to bridge the gap of experience separating two individuals with an invented account of suffering—an account which finally bore little resemblance to the actual suffering. In order to enter into a sympathetic relationship with her brother, Alice would have to surrender her original experience of pain and substitute William's imagined retelling of that pain. But in fact she refuses to participate in her brother's sympathy. Rather than abandon her own subjectivity in the face of William's sketch of her pain, Alice reverses the terms of power in this exchange, arresting the flow of sympathy and depriving her spectator of the choice to grant or withhold sympathy. Nevertheless, in forbidding her brother's sympathy and refusing to

abandon her consciousness, Alice cannot entirely escape the transformation of herself at another person's hands: she must still be faced with the specter of herself as William sees her. In spite of her resistance, the spectacle is exposed as an object of degradation.

If James's *Diary* documents her "life-long occupation of improving,"⁵ it reveals an equally significant attempt to recover from sympathy. All of her writings, in fact, are motivated by a fierce desire to escape or subvert the workings of sympathy, which she found inseparable from illness. All of the letters cited above were written prior to 1889, the year in which James began her diary in order to "lose a little of the sense of loneliness and desolation which abides with me" (31 May 1889).⁶ James's *Diary*, however, demonstrates not simply a desire to escape loneliness but the larger problem of escaping the theft of her subjectivity by illness and by the spectators whom illness brings to her sickchamber. As James's abiding desolation would suggest, the project she sets for herself might be read as a progression from an intensely introspective to a more highly socialized subjectivity. Her attempt to escape loneliness, then, as the desire which motivates the *Diary*, also introduces the difficulties enacted in that *Diary*, since the socialized James of the *Diary* is also the figure who suffers violence at the hands of her audience(s). Faced with the collapse of both her body and her self, Alice James could not struggle to preserve both, and her *Diary* testifies to a struggle on behalf of the mind—a struggle to maintain selfhood in the face of forces seeking to strip her of that selfhood.

We can begin tracking this struggle by looking first at those moments when James defines herself as a seeing subject. The first instance of this self-construction occurs in her very first entry: "My circumstances allowing of nothing but the ejaculation of one-syllabled reflections, a written monologue by that most interesting being, *myself*, may have its yet to be discovered consolations. I shall at least have it all my own way and it may bring relief as an outlet to that geyser of emotions, sensations, speculations and reflections which ferments perpetually within my poor old carcass for its sins; so here goes, my first Journal!" (31 May 1889). Here James defines herself as a subject exploding with emotions, and—in this diary obsessed with physical suffering and bodily decline—it is significant that the first passage refers to the body only as a receptacle for the mind's activity. James suggests that this diary, like most diaries, is established in order to preserve a subjectivity, here in two senses. In the traditional sense, she preserves her subjectivity by recording for

posterity the mental workings of that self. But she also initiates a form of mental preservation by recording and giving external form to the thoughts that threaten to explode a bursting mind—a mind that is suffering from too *much* life.

Gradually, in the progression of these thoughts, James's body adopts a more central role, acting as a foil to the writer's mind. In a reflection on Lemaître's *Révoltée*, James meditates on "inheritance." "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" (21 June 1889). Although by "inheritance" James refers to "the ignominy of . . . destiny," one can but read the writer's physical collapse as part of that destiny: she figures "inheritance" as a physical trap for a struggling "creature." I read this passage as an expression of a central tension in the *Diary*. While James struggles to construct and preserve a subjectivity in the pages of her diary, she discovers that the subject must always remain subjugated to a more dominant force.⁷ Thus selfhood struggles against the body, a body always in decline but always, because of that very decline, threatening to pull the self down with it into what William James called a "quagmire of disgust, pain & impotence."

As James's suspicious response to her well-wishers might imply, the primary threat to the sick woman's subjectivity resulted from a power dynamic which, while embodied in the violence of heroic medical treatments⁸ and an oppressive social system, is also located in the beneficent, perhaps unconscious violence of sympathetic friends and family. As a spectacle in the sickchamber, James found herself reduced to a suffering body invaded by the sympathetic selves of her visitors, and the perceptions of these visitors threatened to crowd out the fragile selfhood Alice had constructed for herself. As William himself well understood, selfhood is not merely privately constructed but exists as a "historic Me" grounded partly in an outsider's observations:

Those images of me in the minds of other men are, it is true, things outside of me, whose changes I perceive just as I perceive any other outward change. But the pride and shame which I feel are not concerned merely with *those* changes. I feel as if something else had changed too, when I perceive my image in your mind to have changed for the worse, something in me to which that image belongs, and which a moment ago I felt inside of me, big and strong and lusty, but now weak, contracted, and collapsed.⁹

William James's observations on selfhood, published in 1890 (four years after his sister chastised him for his sympathy), might easily describe the application of sympathy to a suffering self. In fact, his description resembles Alice's indictment of sympathy, which she resisted by refashioning her fragile selfhood: if sympathy threatened to saddle her with a role, she would construct a role that allowed her at least to resort to irony.

Herself a longstanding recipient of sympathy, doomed to kinship with men who dwelled repeatedly on the mechanics and motives of sympathy, James indicated that she understood its theatrical and self-effacing implications: "What expresses more perfectly," she mused, "the folly of the philanthropic mush of this age than this contempt for the sympathetic man felt 2,000 y[ea]rs ago by the adorable Chuang Tsiu?—'the sympathetic man being simply a man who is trying to be some one else all the time and so misses the only possible excuse for his own existence'" (12 February 1890).¹⁰ She also understood that while the sympathetic man loses the only excuse for his existence, the recipient of sympathy suffers much more acutely by being shown her existence in a form she did not create. But what escape from sympathy can one anticipate in an age remarkable for its "philanthropic mush"? The *Diary* suggests that the only escape possible must come from an exploitation of sympathy, spectatorship, and theatricality. Rather than accepting the terms and values of sympathy, one must accept its structure even while calling attention to its theatrical and self-serving nature. By recasting sympathy as theatrical, James challenges the fiction of benevolent sympathy so prevalent in her age. Not only does her model offer no pretense of sentiment, it also mocks the sentiment that grieves for suffering: her drama, in fact, depends on the magnification of suffering. The sympathetic exchange, stripped of all sentiment, becomes akin to a circus sideshow, allowing the spectacle to taunt her indulgent spectators.

James's retort to sympathy involves an exaggeration of sympathetic exchange, a belaboring of the theatrical, and a scoffing—because of its unrelenting insistence on the spectacle—at the pretense to benevolent motives. As long as the sympathetic exchange is kept silent and subtle, the spectator can deceive him/herself by claiming kindhearted motives. Once the theatricalization is initiated by the hysteric and taken to a grotesque extreme, the structure of sympathy becomes garishly obvious, in fact precluding the possibility of sympathy. If she cannot maintain her

subjectivity, at least the Alice James of the *Diary* can strip bare the mechanism of sympathy and shake its foundations.

James's exposure of sympathy deploys the same strategy of bodily fragmentation so central to hysteria. Like the hysteria often noted in discussions of Alice James, the sympathetic exchange necessitates splitting the spectacle in two: the observing self and the perceived or bodily self. During the sympathetic exchange, the body remains constant while the mind "becomes" the mind of the spectator. If she accepts her brother's sympathy, then, James must see herself as he sees her. Subjected to sympathy, the invalid looks at her own body with the perception of a stranger, or with the "ironic detachment" that has so often been noted in the diary.¹¹

But James's fragmentation, which informs her restaging of sympathy, differs significantly from the usual sympathetic exchange and from hysterical fragmentation. Both of these models involve abandoning the self when one can no longer maintain possession of it. Sympathy requires that a spectacle maintain possession of her body while renouncing her mind in exchange for the mind of whoever happens to be observing her. Hysterical fragmentation, likewise, signifies a feebleness of the will, an inability to preserve both mind and body; William James wrote that "An hysterical woman abandons part of her consciousness because she is too weak nervously to hold it together."¹² If one begins writing a diary in order to preserve the self, then illness and sympathy, according to these models, defeat that purpose at the very outset.

James's exposure of sympathy, however, employs a self-fragmentation which, far from an emblem of weakness, in fact signifies rebellion by reversing the terms of fragmentation. When the hysteric, while repeating this self-fragmentation, chooses instead to maintain possession of the mind and abandon the body, the project of sympathy looks very different. In a frequently cited passage from the *Diary*, James responds to her brother William's pronouncements on the nervous victim's abandonment of consciousness:

I have passed thro' an infinite succession of conscious abandonments and in looking back now I see how it began in my childhood, altho' I wasn't conscious of the necessity until '67 or '68 when I broke down first, acutely, and had violent turns of hysteria. As I lay prostrate after the storm with my mind luminous and active and susceptible of the

clearest, strongest impressions, I saw so distinctly that it was a fight simply between my body and my will, a battle in which the former was to be triumphant to the end. (26 October 1890)

In the sense that James can never escape the physical pain of her body and must endure an “infinite succession” of fracturings from the mind, her body is indeed “triumphant to the end.” But insofar as the *Diary* reverses the mechanism of sympathy while exposing that mechanism, James’s “will” does indeed triumph—not over her body but over her sympathetic visitors and the very institution of sympathy.

It is not James’s mind but rather her body that becomes “other” in the *Diary*, as we see repeatedly in the passages where sympathy renders the body a monstrosity. “There are some half a dozen people who have come to see me once and who have never come again,” she writes, “causing me to feel like a Barnum Monstrosity which has missed fire” (2 December 1889). James does not defend her poor body from such implications but rather maintains a critical and perceptive distance from that body which allows her to acknowledge the alterity of her physical frame: although her spectators impose such impressions on her, James herself names her role as “Barnum Monstrosity” and, earlier, as “grotesque.” In detaching her “self”—will, perception, intellect—from her body, she rewrites the body as foreign in order to maintain supremacy over her mind. She does not entirely separate her mind from her body or intellectualize the body out of existence, but maintains possession of and identification with her body while rewriting it as “other,” a monstrosity which is both of her and alien to her. Her mind remains her own in an uncomplicated and familiar way, left to struggle with the body that is both hers and not hers.¹³ As her mother wrote in 1868, Alice’s hysteria “is not in the least degree morbid in its character—her mind does not seem at all involved in it—she never dreads an attack, and seems perfectly happy when they are over.”¹⁴ As an outside spectator, the mother registers Alice’s successful detachment from her body.

We see this detachment enacted in some of the *Diary*’s most dramatic scenes—scenes, not coincidentally, involving direct references to death and therefore to the arousal and staging of sympathy. One of the most overtly theatrical moments concerns James’s “Will, which I wanted to make over again,” as she begins to describe the scene. While she refers literally to the document providing for the disposal of her possessions, we might read the passage no less vividly as a remaking of her “will” or

selfhood, a selfhood which can only thrive once it has acknowledged the body as its own but also as a radically other version of itself. The arrival of a Boston witness, Alice writes,

caused me to “go off” and I had to be put to bed—when the most amusing scene followed. I lay in a semi-faint, draped in as many frills as could be found for the occasion, with Nurse at my head with the thickest layer of her anxious-devoted-nurse expression on, as K. told me after, when thro’ a mist I vaguely saw five black figures file into my little bower, headed by the most extraordinary little man, all gesticulation and grimace, who planted himself at the foot of the bed and stroking my knees began a long harangue to the effect that he and his wife had both “laid upon a bed of sickness” which seemed to constitute uncontrovertible reason for my immediate recovery. K. with difficulty restrained him from reading the Will aloud there and then—he has doubtless not forgiven this dam thrown across to arrest the flood of his eloquence—It was so curious for me, just like a nightmare effect and I felt as if I were assisting at the reading of my own Will, surrounded by the greedy relatives, as in novels. . . . Miss Blanche Leppington, who had been asked to be a witness, told K. after that she hadn’t looked at my face but that she felt as if she “ought to keep her eye fixed upon Miss James’s *hand*!”—she also said the scene—“Will remain in my thoughts as the most pathetic I ever saw and in my imagination as the most picturesque and American!” (17 February 1890)

James mocks the sentimental nature of this scene, making a passionate response to it all but impossible. The response of the “extraordinary little man,” meant to be passionate, is here represented as overtheatrical: he is “all gesticulation and grimace” and cares less about relieving James’s suffering than about the impact of his words on his audience, the “flood of his eloquence,” the length of his “harangue.” The nurse resembles an actress, fixing her expression to represent a particular role, a role signified by what Katharine Loring describes as an “anxious-devoted-nurse expression.” The occasion for all of this overblown sentiment is not, finally, even a suffering victim, nor a face even, but a “hand”: a ridiculous audience indeed. Equating the exaggerated drama of this scene with a novel of sensibility, James takes an ironic pleasure—if only in retrospect—in a moment which threatens to upset her sense of selfhood because it makes undeniable the impending destruction of that selfhood.

By fictionalizing the nature of the body in bed, the author of the *Diary* all but ignores that destruction; by calling the event a “scene,” she implies its literal fictionality; and by separating self from body in order to assist at the reading of her own will, she removes that body from the realm of knowable selves—implying that, to the woman writing the *Diary*, the woman in bed is a stranger, a fiction, in the same way that all selves are fictions to each other. At the same time, James posits a Cartesian foundation for her own selfhood: she, after all, is the author of Will, will, event, and narrative.

At other, similar moments, James addresses more explicitly the pleasure afforded her by these divisions into self and other. While reflecting on her impending death, she responds with cheerful anticipation of the event: “the only drawback being that it will probably be in my 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. I know I shall slump at the 11th hour, and it would complete it all so to watch the rags and tatters of one’s Vanity in its insolent struggle with the Absolute, as the curtain rolls down on this jocose humbuggery called Life!” (12 September 1890). The game of sympathy, here stripped of its pathos, becomes simply another “dramatic episode” for James, an episode that might, if she could sustain consciousness, afford her the pleasure denied at other moments of her life, a “dreadful fraud” if she could not. “The difficulty about all this dying,” she writes the following year, “is that you can’t tell a fellow anything about it, so where does the fun come in?” (11 December 1891).

James responds to “all this dying” by exposing sympathy as worthless at best, at worst a fictionalization of sentimental desires exploited for the spectator’s pleasure. These two indictments of the sympathetic process become clear in the following passage, the second James wrote after being diagnosed as having the breast cancer that would kill her: “Having [death] to look forward to for a while seems to double the value of the event, for one becomes suddenly picturesque to oneself. . . . The grief is all for K. and H., who will *see* it all, whilst I shall only *feel* it, but they are taking it, of course, like archangels, and care for me with infinite tenderness and patience. Poor dear William with his exaggerated sympathy for suffering isn’t to know anything about it until it is all over” (1 June 1891). Here two problems with sympathy become apparent. First, James’s mocking sympathy for “poor dear William” suggests that the psychologist’s overblown sensibility, against which Alice warned him

on numerous occasions, deprives him of the opportunity even to visit his sister on her deathbed. Although William did in fact hear of Alice's cancer and saw her before her death, clearly she wished to keep the sympathetic man at bay, preferring instead to deprive him of the opportunity to take pathetic pleasure in her decline.¹⁵ Alice's refusal to see her brother indicates that she, at least, thought sympathy a worthless sentiment.

However, in her paradoxical statement about seeing and feeling, we also learn that the more palatable sympathy of Katharine and Henry is still only a fiction. Though one might expect the person experiencing death to "feel" its agonies most acutely, James implies that the reverse is true; the spectators, who see the event ("whilst I shall only *feel* it"), will experience more grief. James suggests that in its attempt to bridge the gap of experience, the imagination in fact overcompensates for a person's distance from the event, imposing a more acute sense of pain on the sympathetic person than the reality offers to the actual sufferer. Sympathy, then, either serves no practical purpose beyond the unintended result of intrusion and damage (as in William's case) or fictionalizes and exaggerates the real pain of the person whose suffering it is meant to alleviate (as in Katherine's and Henry's).

In calling into question the sympathy of William, Henry, and Katharine, Alice challenges certain vantage points for sympathy—the physician's, the novelist's, even the close friend's—when the gap of experience separates that friend from the invalid. James's reading of sympathy, finally, deprives her sympathetic spectators of that pleasure just as effectively as if they were banished from her sickroom. In exposing sympathy as predicated on theatrical posturing, she arrests the sympathetic exchange; if it is to occur, it will do so self-consciously and will more closely resemble a carnival than a sentimental novel.

The split self of hysteria and the ironic detachment found in the *Diary* are the key elements of James's approach to the restaging of sympathy. In traditions of moral philosophy more skeptical than William James's humanism, the suffering spectacle was terrified by the sight of himself projected back onto himself, a sight he could only see if he abandoned his own consciousness in order to see himself through his spectator's eyes. Likewise, the sufferer in James's diary splits into self and other, the perceiving self and the bodily self. But James rewrites this moral philosophy into a comedy of manners, exploiting the fragmentation of body and self for its possibilities for comic detachment. An ironic voice in a sentimental age, James explodes the fiction of sympathy while re-enacting it.

Stripped of its sentiment, its theatrical mechanism laid bare, in the pages of James's *Diary* sympathy appears sordid and self-serving. The frequent carnival metaphors suggest that the desire to look, whatever motivates it, can never be satisfied by the spectacle. James's exposé of sympathy explains why the *Diary* discourages "sympathetic" readings, sharing little with the heart-rending accounts of suffering, illness, and death that were popular in her century and still dominate our own. In fact, James overturns the convention of tragic tales of death because her *Diary* contains more of the comic than the tragic. The possible tragedy is adumbrated in a passage which, in spite of its exaggerated rhetoric, still strikes a distressing note:

Ah, woe, woe is me! I have not only stopped thinning but I am taking unto myself gross fat, all hopes of peace and rest are vanishing, nothing but the dreary snail-like climb up a little way so as to be able to run down again! 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 I am neither dead nor recovered—as I am now forty-two there has surely been time for either process. I suppose one has a greater sense of intellectual degradation after an interview with a doctor than from any human experience. (27 September 1890)

The tragic outcome of this life, James laments, is no outcome at all: the Sisyphean struggle before her involves degradation and repetition but neither progress nor termination. In the sentimental tradition, the accretion of even "gross fat" would give cause for rejoicing, but James reverses that tradition, rejoicing only at the discovery of a cancerous tumor, an announcement which, in a sentimental diary, would inspire tears:

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, but I was always driven back to stagger alone under the monstrous mass of subjective sensations, which that sympathetic being "the medical man" had no higher inspiration than to assure me I was personally responsible for, washing his hands of me with a graceful complacency under my very nose. (31 May 1891)

In the comic tradition, a resolution is enacted when, after overcoming a longstanding obstacle, the hero or heroine is united with the longed-for object. In James's case, death presents itself, if only rhetorically, as a sub-

stitution for sexual and marital union. "My aspirations . . . have . . . been brilliantly fulfilled," she exclaims in this passage, no doubt casting an eye on a tradition of both fictional and actual romances, and casting doubt, as she does so, on the exuberance of such resolutions. But if James's words are partly ironic, they cannot be read as entirely so, for cancer presents the author with a passage out of the void between death and recovery.¹⁶

If her readers refuse to relinquish their sentimental notions about the pathos of this discovery, James explains patiently, and without any trace of irony, that the struggle with her body has been one which she will gladly conclude: "To any one who has not been there, it will be hard to understand the enormous relief of Sir A.C.'s uncompromising verdict, lifting us out of the formless vague and setting us within the very heart of the sustaining concrete" (1 June 1891). Certainly by "formless vague" James does not mean the state of transcendence but rather the entrapment between death and recovery that she longs to escape. Her description of that position, however, recalls Emerson's attempts to achieve transparency, a type of formlessness that provided him with protection from prying eyes. In imagining his own invisibility, Emerson enacted a version of the Idealism he rejected in *Nature*: if one closes one's eyes to the body and to other eyes, both body and audience will disappear. Alice James's frequent references to the "sympathetic" age suggest that, conscious or unconscious, open-eyed or blinded, healthy or ill, male or female, one can never exist without an audience, and in fact one's very selfhood is constructed with regard to that audience. Moreover, the sympathetic audience cannot help erasing the spectacle by superimposing its own perceptions onto the spectacle. At best one can hope to salvage the suffocated self and try to revive it during the lapses between visitors.

Though the *Diary* does offer several moments when James attempts to do just that, in fact the predominant action in its pages works toward a different end. As if already convinced of the self-defeating nature of self-preservation, James's *Diary* suggests that if one cannot save the self one can at least call attention to the process of its elimination and replacement by other selves. If no subjectivity is self-sufficient but is always constructed largely by the presence of other subjectivities, then self-reliance is always already an impossibility. One must rely for one's selfhood, James implies, on the very forces which self-reliance would claim to transcend. Selfhood, finally, like sympathy, is a fiction based on theatrical exchange.

Notes

I am grateful for the generous suggestions of Chris Berni, Mary Cappello, Tara Hudson, Linda Karell, Lisa Logan, Adam Parkes, and Laurie Sterling, who read an earlier version of this essay.

- 1 23 December 1884. Unless otherwise noted, all letters are from *The Death and Letters of Alice James*, ed. Ruth Bernard Yeazell (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1981) and are cited in the text by date.
- 2 Katharine Loring, James's friend and nurse, who administered hypnosis, transcribed the *Diary* and kept almost constant watch during James's final years.
- 3 William James, "On a Certain Blindness in Human Beings," in *Talks to Teachers on Psychology: and to Students on Some of Life's Ideals* (New York: Henry Holt, 1899), 229–64.
- 4 William James, "The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life," in *William James: The Essential Writings*, ed. Bruce W. Wiltshire (Albany: State Univ. of New York Press, 1984), 305.
- 5 Quoted in F. O. Matthiessen, *The James Family* (New York: Knopf, 1947), 271n.
- 6 *The Diary of Alice James*, ed. Leon Edel (New York: Viking Penguin, 1982). All subsequent references are to this edition and are cited parenthetically by date.
- 7 Michel Foucault discusses this paradox of subjectivity in "The Subject of Power": "There are two meanings of the word 'subject': subject to someone else by control and dependence; and tied to his own identity by a conscience or self-knowledge. Both meanings suggest a form of power which subjugates and makes subject to" (*Art After Modernism: Rethinking Representation*, ed. Brian Wallis [New York: New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1984], 420).
- 8 Between 1866 and 1869 Alice underwent treatments of "motorpathy," massage, electrotherapy, and sulphuric ether, though she does not mention these treatments in her diary twenty years later. See Oscar Cargill, "The Turn of the Screw and Alice James," *PMLA* 78 (1963): 238–49.
- 9 William James, *The Principles of Psychology*, in *William James: The Essential Writings*, 97. For a recent study of the categories of self and other in the writings of Henry, Alice, and William James, see Linda M. Lohn, "The Neurasthenic Dilemma: Mental Dis-Ease and Epistemology in James's *The Princess Casamassima*," *American Transcendental Quarterly* 5 (1991): 125–35.
- 10 William James arrived at a similar definition of sympathy when he wrote in 1890 that "Sympathetic people . . . proceed by . . . way of expansion and inclusion. The outline of their self often gets uncertain enough . . ." (*Principles of Psychology*, Vol. 1 [New York: Dover, 1950], 313).
- 11 See, for example, Mary Cappello, "Alice James: 'Neither Dead Nor Recovered,'" *American Imago* 45 (1988): 127–62. Cappello rightly connects this

ironic detachment with Freud's famous description of the *belle indifférence* of the hysteric.

- 12 *Principles of Psychology*, Vol. 1, 210.
- 13 Mary Jacobus has noted that "James saves her mind by giving up her body to illness" (*Reading Woman: Essays in Feminist Criticism* [New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1986], 250).
- 14 Cited in Jean Strouse, *Alice James: A Biography* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1980), 123.
- 15 As Yeazell notes, William may well have taken gothic pleasure in the event as well. Upon receiving the news of his sister's death, William telegraphed Henry "to make sure the death was not merely apparent," as he later wrote, "because her neurotic temperament & chronically reduced vitality are just the field for trance-tricks to play themselves upon" (7 March 1892, cited in Yeazell, 45).
- 16 In a 30 July 1891 letter to William, James alludes to her cancer, telling her brother, "You greatly exaggerate the tragic element in my commonplace little journey; and so far from ever having thought that 'my frustrations were more flagrant than the rule,' I have always simmered complacently in my complete immunity therefrom" (quoted in Strouse, 304–05).