

Henry James and the Spaces of “Silent-Speaking Words”

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Henry James wrote novels by day; by night he wrote letters. In Virginia's Woolf distinction, after the “elaborate and austere” labours of the morning, “there remained...the flying hand at midnight,” animated by restless affections and capable “of throwing out at its swiftest well-nigh incredible felicities of phrase” (*Essays* 204-5). Woolf's image – of the author persistently engaged in nocturnal compositional raptures – is arresting for the series of dualities it enshrines: the isolation of the solitary, almost static figure whose writing hand – flinging out lassoes of sentences to bring his correspondents closer – yet testifies to the processes of human exchange; the intimacy claimed yet the absence affirmed by the written missive; the abstractions and physical forces of spatial distance which both threaten the fragility and are contested by the strength of sheets and envelopes; the self contained therein – incarnated by the materiality of ink and paper, while being a thing disembodied, discarnate, detached from physical being, and always arriving too late to satisfy the immediacy it craves: “here I am beating with my pen at this poor blank paper as grimly as my wretched infantile heart is thumping against my breast [...] sitting here in this dreary London lodging,” so a homesick James wrote to his mother from Half-Moon Street, Piccadilly, in 1869, “I must begin a letter, or else I shall begin to howl” (*MHJ*). The epistolary act, in this formulation, doesn't just describe sensation, it claims identity with it, reconfiguring the beating heart and incipient wail in its sentences. All letters have something of this tortured vitality about them, arrive out of breath from journeys across physical and imaginative voids, bring with them the silent reverberations of their words, the presence and absence of their writers and the darkness in which, out of which they are written.

A number of nineteenth-century writers registered both the symbolic import of letters themselves and the spatial networks created by their circulation, perhaps in consequence of the establishment of official postal distribution bodies in the early part of the 19th century. Dickens, whose career coincides with the beginnings of the British government postal system, was described by his close friend, the American publisher James Field, as seized with visionary intensity when they explored the central London post office together:

It was a warm summer afternoon towards the close of the day when Dickens went with us to visit the London Post-Office. He said: “I know nothing which could give a stranger a better idea of the size of London than [this] great institution. The hurry and rush of letters! men up to their chins in letters! nothing but letters everywhere! the air full of letters! [...] For two hours we went from room to room, with [Dickens] as our guide.

(509)

Dickens's hallucinatory vision images a city defined and constructed by postal pathways, and in turn evokes the compulsions and spatial dimensions of so many of his novels, intent on mapping the intersecting trajectories of personal wills as they travel along, collide, lose their way or find their destinations in London's streets and environs. James, perhaps under the influence of Dickens's humour, also imagined a habitation built by the post in the 1880 satiric tale “A Bundle of Letters” where a series of overlapping

missives from various persons occupying a Parisian boarding-house reveal, with comic pathos, the disparity between actuality and desire in their writers' experiences there.

"A Bundle of Letters" plays with the question of, and issues a salutary warning about, the potentially erroneous realities that might be constructed through reasoning backwards from any individual's correspondence. James's later fiction frequently turns its focus instead on how a letter may effect its recipient, as in that novel much concerned with messengers of all kinds, *The Ambassadors*, whose Second Book of section II opens with Strether's impatience for word from Woollet being at last gratified in the aptly named Rue Scribe. But Strether's relief at receipt of his post immediately gives way to "the growth of restlessness [...] marked in him from the moment he had assured himself of the superscription of most of the missives" (78), that invisible but potent stage manager Mrs Newsome, and sends him searching for "the best place of all for settling down with his chief correspondent" (79). Under the influence of this "temporary law," however, his peregrinations take the appearance more of absent-minded pleasure than deliberated quest:

He had for the next hour an accidental air of looking for it in the windows of shops: he came down the Rue de la Paix in the sun and, passing across the Tuileries and the river, indulged more than once – as if on finding himself determined – in a sudden pause before the book-stalls of the opposite quay. In the garden of the Tuileries he had lingered...it was as if the wonderful Paris spring had stayed him as he roamed. (79)

It takes Strether nearly two pages to get from the Rue Scribe to where he finally pulls up, a penny chair in the Luxembourg, by which time he has traversed half of Paris. The letters he carries send him wandering through the city, in the course of which he enacts and erects, against their urgencies, a mental space of refuge that anticipates the unsettling task ahead. Strether's state of mind, described by verbs of intransitive dalliance - he "drifts," he "floats," he "pauses," he "lingers" – recalls de Certeau's notion, in *The Practice of Everyday Life*, of the walker in the city, in which the pedestrian process is "inseparable from the dreamed place" (103). As Strether sits holding his letters, he realizes that this place derives from "the plentitude of his consciousness of difference [...] the difference of being just where he was and *as* he was [...] of his finding himself so free" (81). This scene figures two types of mental habitations in spatial images: one associated with the autonomous fluidity and seemingly undetermined movement of the city streets is constituted by an evasion of the impress of definition; the other, figured in the diminutive, sedentary space of the Luxembourg seat and a fixed perspective, is created by Mrs Newsome's letters and has been shadowing poor Strether's footsteps all along. Letters don't just arrive in James's late fiction, they stalk you, hunt down your hiding places, and are perfectly timed to shatter the labyrinths of the self's avoidances or conspiracies. As Merton Densher insistently intuits, holding up Milly's unopened letter before Kate Croy's apprehensive eyes at the end of *The Wings of the Dove*, "This thing had been timed" (384).

John Ashbery has a fine imagination for the menacing nature of the post and his lines from “Grand Galop” echo the unease James’s characters experience whenever one of its minions arrives:

Someone is coming to get you:

The mailman, or a butler enters with a letter on a tray

Whose message is to change everything (143-5, 18).

Like Ashbery, James perceives a letter as inevitably insinuating itself into private spaces, and placing the recipient in a position of ominous vulnerability. Perhaps this is because opening an envelope entangles you in someone else’s desires, plots or narratives, formulated from the sender’s imagination of your usefulness. Love letters, such as those in *The Ambassadors* or *The Wings of the Dove*, seem to be particularly hazardous. Roland Barthes, musing on their distinction, proposes that when a lover writes he or she is engaging in “a *relation*, not a correspondence,” and attempting to bring together two images, so that “like desire, the love letter waits for an answer; it implicitly enjoins the other to reply” (158). As Strether and Kate’s disquiet, when confronted with love letters, proclaims, such solicitation can be seductive or fearsome, depending on whether one wants to be inside or outside the imagined mutuality. Unsurprisingly, one of the participants in the nineteenth century’s most passionate correspondence, Robert Browning, jealously guarded the privacy of his epistolary intercourse with Elizabeth Barrett, and defined it in spatial terms. Disapproving of the reading of “real” letters, Browning declared that exchanges of letters between two people “move & live; the thoughts, feelings, & expressions even, -- in a self-imposed circle limiting the experience of two persons only.” The presence of a “third person,” he insisted, “breaks the line [...] and lets in a whole tract of country on the originally enclosed spot” (73). This suggests one clue as to why Edith Wharton preserved the envelopes of James’s letters to her, each of which still guards the missive it carried, mute presences asserting the dominion once only occupied by herself and James, and which we must encounter if we read this correspondence in the Beinecke Library archive: how unlike, indeed, this experience is from encountering her letters detached from their fellows, scattered in the editions of Lubbock, Edel or Horne. Virginia Woolf, reviewing the fourteen volumes of Madame de Sévigné’s correspondence, likened them to “a vast open space, like one of her own great woods,” in which “figures roam down the glades, pass from sun to shadow, are lost to sight, appear again, but never sit down in fixed attitudes to compose a group” (*Moth* 66). What Strether anticipates of course, in his avoidance of Mrs Newsome’s letters, is that she won’t tolerate being a figure in a park and doesn’t like the open air. His choice of a seat in the Luxembourg concedes the “fixed attitude”, somewhat perversely, however, it also preserves a view.

When Kate throws Milly’s sealed letter into the fire, she might be said to display a certain delicacy, a wish not to transgress a Browning-like “self-imposed circle,” but her action also involves a fearful premonition of its force. Densher too senses the psychic territory a letter can claim when, after removing it from his pocket-book, he approaches Kate, but as the narrative voice asks us to visualize, “with a movement not the less odd for being visibly instinctive and unconscious, [he] carried the hand containing his letter behind him” (382). A lover’s letters must be kept hidden, enclosed, encased, which is why Strether’s letters are tucked into the intimacy of his “loose grey overcoat,” why Densher keeps his receptacle in his breast pocket. There are obvious sexual reverberations here, but more familiar psychological explanations still don’t encompass the elaborate embellishments of the image of a concealed letter that form the symbolic epicenter of *The Ivory Tower*. When Rosanna delivers her father’s letter to Gray, she carries it in a sealed box because, as she explains, she doesn’t “somehow [...] want just to thrust

at [him]” her father’s last words, preferring instead “to present them in a precious casket in which they may always abide” (144, 145). Not wishing to read the letter immediately, however, Gray searches with Rosanna for an even more elaborate receptacle of safekeeping and finally alights on the eponymous tower, which is really:

a cabinet, of easily moveable size, seated in a circular socket of its own material and equipped with a bowed door, which dividing in the middle, after a minute gold key had been turned, showed a superposition of small drawers that went upwards diminishing in depth [...] The high curiosity of the thing was in the fine work required for making and keeping it perfectly circular; an effect arrived at by the fitting together, apparently by tiny golden rivets, of numerous small curved plates of the rare substance, each of these, including those of the two wings of the exquisitely convex door, contributing to the artful, the total rotundity. (148).

When Gray slips his letter into one of the drawers, causes the protective door to meet, turns the gold key, places it in his pocket, and faces Rosanna, it seems at once, “with an effect out of proportion to the cause, that a great space before them had been cleared” (149-50). Attention is obviously directed, in this prolonged scene, to how Rosanna and Gray, acting together to hide the letter, become intimate conspirators, but the passage also assigns a power to the letter in direct relation to the extravagant exaggeration of its imprisoning enclosure. What is at risk here? Bachelard reminds us that while “the homology between the geometry of the small box and the psychology of secrecy does not call for protracted comment” images of locked containers assume greater poetic significance and evoke the “*unforgettable*” in regard to both giver and receiver (82, 84). Certainly Gray’s letter seems to be one which, once read, can never be unread – in other words, its message may take up psychological space out of all proportion to its size.

Jacques Lacan proposed that perhaps letters have no proper owners, and that they may properly belong neither to senders, who only retain “certain rights” over them, nor to addressees (57). This is suggestive, but perhaps more appropriate to letters as they circulate, as they move along invisible postal networks, than to those which have arrived - or at least in regard to James’s epistolary frameworks where letters come replete with the writer’s identity and desire and struggle for possession of the addressee’s soul. And this identity, or sense of possession, seems to have a direct relation to the way a correspondent’s written words may also embody and voice their distinct manner of speaking. Although Strether, upon receiving his letters, has an acute sensation of an order of experience separate from Woollet, as he reads he is permeated with “the deepened intensity of the connection,” one partially dependent on hearing and understanding the characteristics of Mrs. Newsome’s voice; reading, he realizes that “he might almost [...] have had to come this distance to get its full carrying quality” (81). Similarly, Densher mourning the destruction of Milly’s letter, associates it with a smothered sound, a cry of pain or loss. Thus, he imaginatively corrects his metaphor for the destroyed letter as a “priceless pearl cast [...] into the fathomless sea” to “the sacrifice of something sentient and throbbing, something that, for the spiritual ear, might have been audible as a faint far wail. This was the sound he cherished when alone in the stillness of his rooms” (396).

Densher's agony suggests that a letter derives its authority from its power to blur the boundaries between actual and imagined experience, material and immaterial possession, and that this wondrous characteristic has much to do with understanding letters as voices. A voice imparts the physical and spiritual sensation of immediacy and presence yet can travel without corporeal containment, overcoming physical limitation. Thus Maud Ellmann, in *The Hunger Artists*, addressing the resemblances between writing, fasting and correspondence, cites *Clarissa's* Lovelace rhapsodizing on the eerily unsubstantial dimension of the post: "Nothing of body, when friend writes to friend" (92). Indeed, but incarnate a voice in the medium of pen and ink in place of flesh and it becomes all the more resistant to surrounding silence, it can echo and re-echo in the addressee's mind. One can repossess the sender endlessly, or be possessed by them, even from the grave. So perhaps the risk lies in the forms such possession may take – which is why letters from the dead, in James, so often end up in the fire or the ivory tower.

This conception may owe a great deal to Tennyson. Densher, within the enclosure of his room and memories, able only to imagine not read Milly's words, mounts a vigil in an echoing tomb: "He sought and guarded the stillness, so that it might prevail there till the inevitable sounds of life, once more [...] should smother and deaden it" (396). The phrasing recalls the "dark house" and "long unlovely street," haunted by the sleepless speaker of "In Memoriam" who, desiring the materiality of "A hand that can be clasp'd no more -" suffers despair when "The noise of life begins again" (VII,1,2,5,10, 325-6). The restless consciousness of the poem's anguished investigation of the processes of grief contemplates what forms of possession we may have of the dead, and it is striking that its supreme moment of spiritual fulfillment, in which the tortured speaker finds at last deliverance and reunion, is achieved in a revelation which occurs through letters: in section XCV the poet attempts to articulate an experience occurring during a summer night when he remains awake, alone, and reads "those fallen leaves which kept their green, / The noble letters of the dead," of his beloved Hallam (23-4, 412). Hallam's letters challenge the dominion of Tennyson's solitude and the night's silence as the dead man returns to him:

And strangely on the silence broke

The silent-speaking words, and strange

Was love's dumb cry defying change

To test his worth; and strangely spoke

The faith, the vigour, bold to dwell

On doubts that drive the coward back (25-30, 412).

Mute but eloquent, able to revive Hallam's voice in a manner so mysterious it can only be dimly apprehended by that repetitive "strangely," as if the writer now reader cannot ultimately fathom this miraculously incarnated power, Tennyson patiently attends to and accepts these words until enraptured by a momentary experience which incorporates but stands outside orthodox conceptions of material and immaterial existence:

So word by word, and line by line,

The dead man touched me from the past,

And all at once it seemed at last

The living soul was flashed on mine (33-36, 413).

The disorientating miracle of hearing Hallam's dead voice through his written words delivers a new possibility for Tennyson and affirms that the tangible and intangible are not incompatible.

The imaginative centrality of this episode in Tennyson's elegy puts me in mind of a similarly charged moment among the examples of epistolary exchange in the James canon, and may offer some guidance on how to understand it. I'm referring to that letter broken off and begun again between 15 and 18 November 1913, from James to his nephew Henry James III, when his written utterance itself almost breaks as he fervently attempts to describe the experience of reading William's correspondence in preparation for writing *Notes of a Son and Brother*: "And when I laid hands upon the letters [...] I found myself again in such close relation with your Father, such a revival of relation as I hadn't known since his death, and which was a passion of tenderness for doing the best thing by him that the material allowed, and which I seemed to feel him in the room and at my elbow asking me for as I worked and as he listened" (*HJL* 802). Reading his uncle's justifications, the understandably defensive, but indignantly unimaginative other son, made explanation marks in the margins of James's sheets, marks which echo in a variety of critical comments on what is perceived as James's imperialistic or improperly irresponsible rewriting of William's prose. But such positions, smug with easily claimed moral superiority and dull to the drama of immense psychological and spiritual dimensions that James engages in while writing this volume and its predecessor, *A Small Boy and Others*, take into account neither the complex authority that James assigned to letters themselves nor the intimate associations in James's practice between revision and personal continuities. From the record we have of the composition of these works, as figured in James's correspondence with William's widow and son, it seems clear that the power of his family letters was one James's both pursued and resisted, honoured and evaded, listened to and denied, as the voices they contained solicited his loyalty and threatened his own self-definitions. Indeed, like Strether, lingering on the streets of Paris, James's first volume, *A Small Boy and Others*, can be seen as an ardent avoidance of those psychological enclosures his family letters threatened. What is freer, more pleasurable, more unconstrained, than its exploratory improvisations of the past, unencumbered by a single piece of family correspondence for several hundred pages: this volume which James always spoke of with guilty pleasure, suggested as something distinct from the family memoir, and considered publishing after *Notes of a Son and Brother* had appeared. James's pathways through his memories, his resumption of his childhood peregrinations in New York and London and Paris, create a vast open space in which other figures form a type of harmonious polyphony but do not challenge the destinations of his own story nor interrupt his voice with distinct tones of their own. Yet we also know that when he turned to *Notes of a Son and Brother* it was precisely the forceful presences embodied in letters that he depended on and which generated his own biographical creativity. So that, on 13 November 1911, James lamented to his sister-in-law the "perfect blank" left by his sister Alice's burning of her letters to their parents, a blank his own memory or ingenuity could not fill, as emphasized by his confirmation to his nephew two years later, on 23 January 1913, that the "meagre provision" of Alice's letters would render impossible any extended portrait of her (*LHJ* 207, 290). There is ample reason to doubt James's justification for his revisions as the result of a fraternal conspiracy between himself and William. But what is certain is that he was engaged in a conversation. When James heard letters, he spoke back to them, he wrote back to them, in revisions which imagine an ideal mutuality, an enclosure of corresponding voices, a claim on an intimacy of relation and possession enacted in the spaces of silent-speaking words.

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