

The Creation of Collective Identity in James's Nonfiction after World War I

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My reading of HJ's late essays concerning WWI and the war effort was very different four years ago. A lot has changed, and so has my focus and perspective. But when I returned to this paper, this proposal, a section I had thought of spending just a bit of time on suddenly overwhelmed me and my reading. I don't know if it's b/c of the experiences I've had, or if my brain was simply refocused and therefore grasping at points of likeness, but I thought I should share a little of what (aside from the pandemic!) has changed or at least re-framed my perspective.

Two years ago, after the pandemic restrictions lifted a bit (at least in Canada), I heard about a large protest and occupation of an area on Vancouver Island, an area that has some of the last remaining old growth trees on this planet, and how a large group of people were attempting to stop the logging, which was being done despite laws passed, etc. Money, capitalism was winning, much to the shock and horror of people who are aware of how important this ecological site is to the well-being of not only us in British Columbia, but to the world. I joined the protests, at first nonchalantly, going to 'just see' what it was about, and eventually locking arms with others as we stood in solidarity for a cause larger than us: we were hungry, dirty, exhausted, yet we stood and sang while being harassed, mentally and physically, by the RCMP. I also eventually got arrested...three times. I know, James would not approve! And while over a thousand people did the same, that was it. I could not believe how others in the area weren't throwing down everything to join the fight. This was injustice at its clearest, at its most basic level. What would make others join the fight?

I still haven't found the answer to that question, but the experience did change me, much like my activist career before I moved into academia. I worked in the former Yugoslavia just at the tail-end of the war. At first, I was there to help refugees from Bosnia find safe homes in the US and Canada, and then, disgusted at the right-wing politics of the 'Tudjman 'regime,' I moved into working with a human rights group where I found myself in the "Investigation of the Most Egregious Crimes" unit where we looked for mass graves but also intervened in some very dicey ethnic/political conflicts. We were threatened, shouted at, pushed, and once had a gun pointed at us by a man who was also holding a hand grenade. I'm still wary while watching any war films, although not as much as when I just left the job. It took a while.

So what does any of this have to do with James and his WWI essays? Both scenarios opened me to worlds that, in Canada, a white, middle-class individual doesn't have to confront:

violence, injustice, hatred, police/military brutality, and the slow workings of “diplomacy” which eventually really only centre around capital gains. Both led me to such frustration and disgust that it took me a long time to really be able to operate in ‘normal’ life again; and both made me question humanity, civilization, and whether anything was really going to change if most citizens just sat by and waited for others to step in to do the ‘right’ thing.

So that is how I approached James’s late essays, and it is because of this recent experience that my attention was immediately arrested by the young Belgian woman’s “sobbing cry” in “Refugees in Chelsea.” But I will tell you why only after I’ve approached it from James’s relationship to culture, collective memory, and language, and only after we consider: why does James end this essay with the sound of a young woman’s cry?

“I believe in Culture”

James’s oft-quoted statement from his essay “The Long Wards,” “I believe in Culture,” is our starting point, not for any new theories, but for a little reminder of what James was doing (not, of course, just saying) in his essays.

Culture is politics, and politics is culture. Cultural memory, like collective memory, is shared by a group, and in most cases, we think of the cultural realm as residing exclusively in the sites, objects, monuments: the symbols and artifacts that provide insight into where we, as a group, came from. But, as Hazel Hutchison (and many others have) noted, “for James [it] is not so much a place or a fixed set of cultural values as [it is] a process of creation, the ability to make something out of experience” (13). Most importantly, as Beverly Haviland has noted, it is “produced through articulation, which entails relative differences” (274), which is most enriching through “smaller collectives [and a] rich variety of social relations” (Schoenback 163). This continual articulation and re-articulation of differences is precisely the model of culture emphasised by Seyla Benhabib when she writes about the “*narrative* aspect of cultures, noting that insiders “experience their traditions, stories, rituals and symbols, tools, and material living conditions through shared, albeit contested and contestable, narrative accounts.” (Culture-Stanford).

In other words, narrative, language is the site of James’s culture, and it has also been pointed out (by Despotopoulou) that “James actively challenges the myths of group cohesion fostered by these [the usual, assumed sites of culture, that is] landmarks, creating with his written monument a more pluralistic *lieu de mémoire* that attends to the heterogeneity of America itself”

(433). These ‘written monuments’ and sites of individual memory reach out and shape collective memory; therefore, culture and collective memory must be plural, must be in constant negotiation and, as Nora shows, “remains in permanent evolution,” unlike history, which is “always problematic and incomplete.” But that is not all, of course...as Phyllis Van Slyck writes in her essay on James and Proust, the two authors were “concerned with the gratifying, restorative role of memories that produce “affections,” and, ... both see the fantasy involved in transmission as *enhancing* memory with valuable truths, rather than a form of deception. The emotional experience itself, the “affection,” *becomes* the memory to which their characters return and immerse themselves — not the absent, or even present, “thing,” or even the copy.” Language and affect, then, are the sites of cultural and collective formation, and that means that through language, what I have deemed in my previous works, the poetry, and most particularly, the language of lyrical poetry, as theorized by Mutlu Blasing, is the site where our ‘emotions are mobilized’ and ‘resist communication’ of and for the social order since it invokes the ‘more’ of the subliminal register of the pre-linguistic self.

Mutlu Blasing in her seminal work, *Lyric Poetry: The Pain and Pleasure of Words* proposes a contrasting interpretation to the well-established understanding of lyric poetry as the expression of the private emotions of individuals (the personal ‘affect’). She argues, instead, that lyric poetry resonates with readers/listeners due to its use (or access to) the public power and realm of language. In my previous work, I applied this model of poetic language — and the register of (collective and individual) memory that it can stir — to James’s late works to reveal how *A Small Boy and Others* allows readers to engage with ‘the more’ of American-ness through the linguistic register via poetic language. I believe this theory to remain helpful in my line of query, although it is important to ask: who was the essay intended for? And was James intent to reveal or affect American audiences with this image of the crying young mother?

While narratives and language allow us to symbol stories (to use Arendt’s terms), they nevertheless must connect to a semiotic code to allow for new imaginings. As Arendt states: “behind the actor stands the storyteller, but behind the storyteller stands a community of memory”(Arendt), the stuff of previous generations that were deemed worthy to keep. We inherit culture, but what we make of it is open to innumerable possibilities, and it is the current production of ‘culture’ that determines the trajectory of all that has come before us and what we will pass on to the next generations. What I deemed ‘the more’ of American-ness in my previous study is now, here, applied to the case of WWI and the broad public it was intended for. James’s language evokes the ‘ghosts,’ ‘the more’ of both individual identity and all national identities that are willing to leave behind something worthy for those who will inherit. James was very much

aware of, and spent his career exposing, the social frameworks, the value systems, that individuals are born into that stymie the potential free-play inherent in language, and it is here that Izzo's theory of Woman's role in James's writing helps reveal James's 'cultural project.' Izzo states: "one of the major effects of James's play with and deviance from narrative conventions is to provoke his readers – both female and male – into an active role, unsettling their generic expectations, challenging them to fill in the unsaid and make sense of puzzling discrepancies"(355)...in other words, James disrupts our expectations so as to help us continue the work of culture; he helps us find our individual and cultural linguistic memory, which allows us to 'make' culture through his texts.

While culture is certainly not tied to the concept of a nation or national identity, it is one aligned element, and according to Renan (whom James both admired and contested throughout his career), "a nation is...a large-scale solidarity, constituted by the feeling of the sacrifices that one has made in the past and of those that one is prepared to make in the future" (19). Much like the culture that a 'nation' produces, a nation is a feeling, it begins in the realm of affect, and it is a decision based on sacrifices in the past, present, and projected future. But Renan's definition also celebrates the differences (the plurality) between nations (and cultures) as he states: "Through their various and often opposed powers, nations participate in the common work of civilization; each sounds a note in the great concert of humanity" (20). Like our conference focus in Trieste, Italy four years ago, entitled "The Sound of James: The Aural Dimension in Henry James's Work," these concepts of culture and nation can be read through the sounds produced, via narrative, song, language, and this brings us back to Blasing's account of the lyrical language that reaches this aural dimension of our linguistic register and our formed identity, both individual and collective.

In my previous work, I tried to show how the aural dimension in both *A Small Boy* and *The American Scene* works to carry "acoustic information in excess of the linguistic information" (Blasing). The pre-linguistic self, the self of 'the more' retains its memories (scant as they may be) with the somatic articulation of sounds. It is curious that there is little sound in the WWI essays. Unlike *A Small Boy and Others* or *The American Scene*, which are rife with descriptions of sounds, smells, and tastes, one of the only sounds we 'hear' in "Refugees in Chelsea" (aside from a brief mention of the "music and chant of consolation") is, in fact, the young mothers "sobbing and sobbing cry." If, as Renan suggests, every nation "sounds a note in the great concert of humanity," has James found a way to register this concert? Can this 'concert' be condensed to the sound of one woman's voice?

This is not the voice of Woman-as-Nation, nor Maternal-Saviour. This voice, according to my reading, is meant to symbolize what James envisioned in his address to American women in “The Question of Our Speech” and “The Speech of American Women” where he positioned American Woman – limited in social influence b/c of capitalist man’s regression yet dominance on the social scene; she was not yet set in stone, and, therefore, limitless, multitudinous - the voice of Culture that allows for play, change, and discrepancies in interpretations. A woman’s voice is the voice of culture – that multivalent element that sustains humanity not through the womb, a vessel, but the sound, language, the word of humanity.

For a woman’s voice to represent culture itself, the figure must, at first, be able to be dislodged from the dominant gender ideology (as discussed by Izzo). And if culture is the expression of social relations based on difference, how is woman better suited to represent this difference? In the passage, she is the object of signification, not the designer. However, like all Jamesian symbols, there are layers.

At first, James writes: “The note I except, however, was that of a young mother carrying her small child and surrounded by those who bore her on and on, almost lifting her as they went together.” The Madonna-like image fulfills our expectations of Woman as Mother, the maternal embrace. Surrounded by those who bore her on and on, however, does not leave the mother/child image in isolation – her grief or pain is part of the collective identity of the refugees. While the mother bears her child across the boundary from danger to supposed safety, the collective “bore her on and on, almost lifting her as they went together” – alone, she becomes a surface object that is likely to be given meaning from the dominant gender ideology. “As they went together” implies she cannot be separated from the whole – she is a part of the collective, and the collective “boring her on,” carry her and her grief with them. The sound of her cry is the pre-linguistic register that contains individual and collective affect – a sound that returns us to our own line of signification and that can be shared and signify for the collective.

This doesn’t mean stable identity, of course. Walker has long since shown us what the one word, ‘incredibility’ does to the overall implication of this scene – England is not as safe as one would imagine since it, too, has displaced buildings, places of culture, for the sake of capital. Although James celebrates England and France throughout these late essays, when the time comes to symbolize what this war means to humanity’s culture, the dangers of wartime to culture, that symbol must acknowledge the lack of safety or solid grounding in any nation, regardless of the ‘side’ they are on. All are guilty of losing themselves to capital, to the business

world of seeing everything only in terms of market value. But it also serves as a reminder to American readers that their role in the war is needed.

And finally, the trajectory of the woman's cry returns to James, and the next line acknowledges "yet her cry is still in my ears," calling on the reverberations of the 'more,' the 'ghostly imprints' that occupy his autobiographical work and which work to imply, in those works, a Jamesian America to future readers. But this signification continues when James takes another turn: "whether to speak most of what she had lately or of what she actually felt" projects the voice into the past, present, and future (like all good cultural artifacts that are passed on to the present and future generations). Does the 'sobbing cry' signify present-day anguish, a past trauma, or an ongoing suffering that sheds a "tragic light over the dark exposure of her people." The example moves in terms of its signification: we move from her suffering and individual anguish to the collective to the hanging implied question: what are we going to do about it? If, as the voice of culture, she cries for her people, she is also crying for us: as James indicated, England's culture is no safer from destruction, despite its longevity and richness.

A woman's cry for many would symbolize the maternal anguish, the grief for her child and her people (as the Madonna cried tears of blood in Medugorije just before the war); but James does not limit her role in this way. James places the woman in the centre of her people, which, to me, dislodges her place as part of the binary of gender relations, and instead of celebrating the British soldiers, which Walker also shows us are reduced to "comic-opera boys," her sobbing cry becomes the reverberation, the ghostly essence that can begin the process of memory via affect and signification via multiplicity.

In his attempt to rouse the American public (since that was the main intent behind the essays), he offers the signal to action, the threat to humanity's culture: a young woman's sobbing cry, which, as Van Slyck reminded us, the emotional experience itself, the "affection," *becomes* the memory to which" we, the readers, return for our own trajectory of signification.

So, now I return to why this small passage occupied my mind so thoroughly in the last 2 years. While at camp, I heard many sounds, many voices. But I became hardwired to listen for a woman's cry. While men argued, yelled, and collective voices were constantly buzzing, we all learned, very quickly, that the cry of an indigenous woman in the forest, a forest teeming with special ops (the greens, as we called them) meant danger. Indigenous women were targeted, and if their voices rang out, it meant one had to run to throw oneself in between her and the military forces who were there to protect a private company's right to clear-cut our collective future

away. We didn't always make it, and sometimes the screams were pure anguish. Like James, I hear those screams still. I heard many cries of anguish at being punished for protecting the only home they knew, but also for protecting a region that could help all of us survive. Like Indigenous Women Activists all over the world, their cries signal real trouble ahead, and while a white, young Belgian woman may not have much in common with an Indigenous woman in North or South America, or anywhere else, for that matter, for James, she remained familiar and strange enough to symbolize the known and the unknown, the Heimlich and the unheimlich (both foreign and familiar), the individual and the ghostly reverberation. We, today, have ghost-like voices calling to us about the present-day dangers of our capitalist machine, much like a young woman's sobbing cry signalled the atrocities and horrors that lay ahead for all. The question remains to this day, long past 1915: when will we listen to the Jamesian signal of our need to act?