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Leigh Wetherall-Dickson

**“A WRITTEN MONOLOGUE BY THAT MOST INTERESTING
BEING, MYSELF”: SICKNESS, SUICIDE, AND
SELF-REFLECTION IN THE DIARY OF ALICE JAMES**

In May 1895, William James delivered a talk to the Young Men's Christian Association of Harvard University entitled *Is Life Worth Living?* The lecture was subsequently published, first in the *International Journal of Ethics* in October of the same year and again as a stand-alone essay in 1896. The essay addresses the dangerous doubt that necessarily accompanies an “over-studious career”:

My task, let me say now, is practically narrow, and my words are to deal only with that metaphysical *tedium vitae* which is peculiar to reflecting men. Most of you are devoted for good or ill to the reflective life. Many of you are students of philosophy, and have already felt in your own persons the scepticism and unreality that too much grubbing in the abstract roots of things will breed. This is, indeed, one of the regular fruits of the over-studious career. Too much questioning and too little active responsibility lead, almost as often as too much sensualism does, to the edge of the slope, at the bottom of which lie pessimism and the nightmare or suicidal view of life. (16)

William is describing the predicament of Hamlet, the archetypal reflective man, but he is possibly drawing upon sources much closer to home.¹ As George Cotkin notes, “*fin de siècle* suicides and potential suicides suffered from a doubting mania akin to the type that had cast a shadow over [William]’s own life” (89). Elsewhere William describes himself as a “victim of neurasthenia and of the sense of hollowness and unreality that goes with it” (qtd. in Cotkin 77). William may also have in mind his sister’s enquiry to her father about the ethics of committing suicide. In September 1878, the year of Alice’s “hideous summer” during which she suffered her second serious breakdown, Henry James senior wrote to the youngest of the James siblings, Robertson, recounting the discussion:

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 when 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 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 flux, 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.... 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 it became intolerable ... she was more than content to stay by my side, and battle in concert 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. (qtd. in James, *Death* 15–16)

William may have seen the letter, been aware of the situation at the time, been told about it later, or even received the same advice, as there is an echo of the discussion in *Is Life Worth Living?*:

To come immediately to the heart of my theme, then, what I propose is to imagine ourselves reasoning with a fellow-mortal who is on such terms with life that the only comfort left him is to brood on the assurance “you may end it when you will.” What reasons can we plead that may render such a brother (or sister) willing to take up the burden again? Ordinary Christians, reasoning with would-be suicides, have little to offer them beyond the usual negative “thou shalt not.” God alone is master of life and death, they say, and it is a blasphemous act to anticipate his absolving hand. But can we find nothing richer or more positive than this, no reflections to urge whereby the suicide may actually see, and in all sad seriousness feel, that in spite of adverse appearances even for him life is worth living still? (14–15)

The quote “you may end it when you will” actually comes from James Thomson’s “The City of Dreadful Night,” in which the narrator poses the question, “When Faith and Love and Hope are dead indeed, / Can Life still live? By what doth it proceed?,” to which Necessity replies, “if you would not this poor life to fulfil, / Lo, you are free to end it when

you will” (14. 767–68). The poem, concerned with the meaning of life in a godless world, was begun in 1870 and initially published in 1874 in the *National Reformer*, a secularist weekly publication that promoted atheism. The poem appeared in volume form as part of a collection of Thomson’s poems in 1880. The writing of the letter from father to son regarding Alice’s enquiry occurs between these versions, but however and whenever William became familiar with the poem, there is clearly a coming together of literature and lived experience. If the poem is at the forefront of William’s mind, then the bracketed “sister” suggests Alice’s own suicidal crisis is also present. William identifies the members of his audience not only as members of the Harvard branch of the YMCA, but as those “devoted for good or ill to the reflective life,” an appellation that certainly applies to Alice James, whose diary William had read after her death and before the giving and publishing of the lecture. The diary was kept a secret from all except her friend, companion, and ultimately amanuensis, Katherine Peabody Loring. Loring had copies of the diary printed for herself and one each for Henry and William James. Even though Henry was slightly dismayed to discover anecdotes of his own included, a letter from him clearly responds to William’s admiration of his sister’s powerful voice: “It is heroic in its individuality, its independence—its face-to-face with the universe for-and-by herself—and the beauty and the eloquence with which she often expresses this, let alone the rich irony and humour, constitute (I wholly agree with you) a new claim for the family renown” (*Henry James: Selected Letters* 275). Whether for “good or ill,” or in sickness rather than in health, Alice James also devotes herself to the reflective life, or at least the last three years during which the diary is kept. As Ruth Bernard Yeazell notes, “the younger and presumably less bedridden Alice is a vague and relatively undocumented figure ... the Alice we know best is Alice sick and Alice dying” (7). James began her diary on May 31, 1889, by which time she was a confirmed invalid, having been variously diagnosed with “neurasthenia, hysteria, rheumatic gout, suppressed gout, cardiac complication, spinal neurosis, nervous hyperesthesia, and spiritual crisis,” and wrote in it right up until her death (Strouse xiii-xiv). James’s diary is the means by which she “takes up the burden” and explores whether or not life is worth living, having already considered its termination.

A short essay by Susan Sontag written to explain the genesis of her play *Alice in Bed* suggests that James had no life at all that was worth living:

Suppose Shakespeare had a sister, a brilliant sister, a sister with a writing gift as immense as her brother’s. That’s what Virginia Woolf

asks us to imagine in her epochal polemic *A Room of One's Own*.... But Shakespeare, as far as we know, did not have a sister. But the greatest American novelist, Henry James, whose brother was the greatest American psychologist and moral philosopher, William James, had a sister, a brilliant sister, and we know what she became. The waters of depression closed over her head when she was nineteen, she tried to summon the courage to commit suicide, she suffered from a variety of vague debilitating ailments, she went abroad, she stayed in bed, she started a diary, she died ... at forty-three. (113; ellipsis in orig.)

Sontag's summation of James's life is both accurate and reductive in its succinctness. Alice James, the younger sister, is elusive as little material evidence of her survives. She was a prolific letter writer throughout her life, yet, as Yeazell notes, "coincidence may have helped to edit the record for us" (7). From 1884 until her death, James lived in England close enough to Henry to render writing to him redundant, and William was her main correspondent, whereas in the previous decade the roles were reversed as James, still in the States, was geographically closer to William and wrote more to Henry, who was then based in Europe. Yeazell speculates that the reason that "disproportionately few of Alice's letters from these years survive may well owe something to her fraternal correspondents' feelings toward posterity: dreading violation by future biographers, Henry burned most of the letters he had received, [and] Alice herself may have blurred the record by destroying her own letters to her parents after their death" (6). Letters that describe James would appear to reinforce Sontag's view of the vanishing sister:

Meal-times in that pleasant home were exciting. "The adipose and affectionate Wilkie," as his father called him, would say something and be instantly corrected or disputed by the little cock-sparrow Bob, the youngest, but good-naturedly defend his statement, and then, Henry (Junior) would emerge from his silence in defence of Wilkie. Then Bob would be more impertinently Insistent, and Mr. James would advance as Moderator, and William, the eldest, join in. The voice of the Moderator presently would be drowned by the combatants and he soon came down vigorously into the arena, and when, in the excited argument, the dinner knives might not be absent from eagerly gesticulating hands, dear Mrs. James, more conventional, but bright as well as motherly, would look at me, laugh-

ingly reassuring, saying, “Don’t be disturbed, Edward; they won’t stab each other. This is usual when the boys come home.” And the quiet little sister ate her dinner, smiling, close to the combatants. (Emerson 328)

William appears to lend evidence to the silenced sister whose role Sontag describes as being merely “physically attractive and patient and nurturing and docile and sensitive and deferential to fathers (to brothers, to husbands)” (113). However, in *Notes of a Son to a Brother*, Henry includes a letter written by William to their parents in which the latter describes James as his “cherry-lipped, apricot-nosed, double-chinned little Sister,” whose “strongly dashed-off letter ... inflamed the hearts of her lonely brothers with an intense longing to smack her celestial cheeks” (47). Writing home to his sister while in Berlin, William undermines the feminine ideal in relation to his sister: “how much I w[oul]d like to be with you and have you ‘sass’ me as of yore” (qtd. in James, *Death* 9). Both letters evoke sibling teasing that suggests Emerson’s “quiet little sister” could certainly hold her own against and among the combatants and remain smiling while she did so.

At age nineteen, James’s health broke down, resulting in what Yeazell describes as “a wearily repetitive story of attempted cure, fragile recovery, and recurrent collapse” (10). But Sontag does James a disservice in her implication that James did not come back up for air. James did not remain completely submerged beneath the “waters of depression” that crashed over her head in 1866 and from which she emerged in 1868, if not wholly recovered then at least functioning. A letter written by her mother describes James in the summer of 1870 as beginning “the day with a sea-bath, and ended it with a ride on top of the hay cart.... She was the leader in the frolic, which will give you an idea of her improving condition” (*Death* 14). She continued to improve to such an extent that James undertook a tour of Europe with Henry and her Aunt Kate in 1872. In 1873 she travelled alone from Cambridge, Massachusetts, to New York, which was followed by a trip to Quebec with Aunt Kate in the same year. James also joined the Society to Encourage Studies at Home as a teacher of history in 1875 and took care of her father after her mother’s sudden death in 1882. Although James did suffer setbacks from 1866 onwards, and experienced a second major breakdown in 1878, she continually resurfaces in her letters, apologizing to all for lapses in her correspondence due to her bouts of illness. Joanne Jacobson suggests James uses her letters as a vehicle to mock the “contemporary rhetoric of female propriety,” “challenge the

rhetoric of medical omnipotence,” and “[convert] the status of language ... from passive to active and [to master] a set of strategies ... [in order] to rewrite her own narrative in her letters and to make herself central in it” (369, 370, 366). Jacobson’s claims about the use to which James put her letters is equally applicable to the diary. Sontag’s summation of James’s life as one of crushed genius and non-achievement passes over the diary and suggests that James lacked the courage to commit suicide, whereas it is the life that provides the material for James’s only achievement, and the diary reveals that it took James greater courage not to succumb to suicide. Virginia Woolf’s diary offers a rewarding approach to reading James’s:

Oh and I thought, as I was dressing, how interesting it would be to describe the approach of age, and the gradual coming of death.... To note every symptom of failure: but why failure? To treat age as an experience that is different from the others; and to detect every one of the gradual stages towards death which is a tremendous experience, and not as unconscious, as least in its approaches, as birth is. (304)

Elizabeth Duquette notes that readings of James’s diary, despite her brothers’ assessment of its power, have too often relied upon an attempt to

reconstruct the life and work of a woman who has long been understood as a mere ‘appendage’ to her brothers ... relying heavily on the psychoanalytical methodology undergirding some feminist approaches [and therefore] too often judge [James’s] journal as indicative of loss and failure.... James becomes ... a martyr to patriarchal hegemony. (717)

However, the power of the diary, the new claim for family renown, is that James interrogates the experience of life while suffering a vast amount of pain and having its end point always in view. James interrogates the mental anguish her father and William also suffered from but were unable to articulate in the same direct manner. Yeazell notes that in *Society the Redeemed Form of Man*, “Henry James senior recorded the shattering experience of what he later came to call by the Swedenborgian term ‘vastation’ as if it had occurred to one ‘Stephen Dewhurst,’” and William, in *Varieties of Religious Experience*, similarly “disguised his own ‘panic fear’ by attributing it to an anonymous Frenchman whose account of the event William had ostensibly translated” (4).

William's published version of *Is Life Worth Living?* begins: "When Mr. Mallock's book with this title appeared some fifteen years ago, the jocose answer was that 'it depends on the liver'" (5).² William's own crisis of meaning was brought on by the apparent incompatibility between his studies in science and his beliefs in freewill and God, a conflict that was exacerbated by his suffering panic attacks and hallucinations just like his father before him, which caused him to believe that his illness was rooted in a biological determinism he could not overcome. William overcame his crisis by a monumental exertion of will and concluded *Is Life Worth Living?* by exhorting his audience: "Be not afraid of life. Believe that life is worth living, and your belief will help create the fact," a phrase that appears to echo James's own thoughts on the subject of whether or not life was worth living (63):

Owing to muscular circumstances my youth was not 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 crystallised within me 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.... 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 that 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 that survives is the resistance we bring to life and not the strain life brings to us. (*Diary* 95–96)

James reflects upon how the scales tipped toward life through the accruing of experience, each one shedding light upon the darkness that surrounds meaning. She records the suicide of others but in such a way that celebrates the choice made:

Here is a beautiful, touching tale. An old couple near London somewhere who lived together for half a century, were beyond all work and had to sell all their things and had nothing before them but the dreaded Union [workhouse], where they would have meat and drink, to be sure, but where they would be divided; they could meet all but that, so one day they went out together and never came back, and their old bodies were found tied together in the river. How perfect a death! (83)

It would appear that her father's words about not giving into suicide as a form of wantonness had impact as here she admires the dignity of death. The entry dated September 24, 1890, records an inquest into the death of Miss Amy Cullen who committed suicide by taking rat poison after her fiancé broke off their engagement. The letter that Amy Cullen wrote to her "Dear Jack" prior to her death lent what James describes as a "beautiful sincerity and dignity" to what could otherwise be viewed as a moment of self-indulgent weakness. James reflected upon the ease by which one could just let go and the effort required to hold fast:

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 this 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 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 all 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. When all one's moral and natural stock in trade is a temperament forbidding the abandonment of an inch or the relaxation of a muscle, 'tis a never ending fight. (149)

The desire to give in to the physical was a force to be reckoned with, whether it be murderous intent or suicidal tendencies; but to relent was

to lose oneself entirely, literally in the case of the latter event, from which there was no coming back. The opening statement of James's diary declares that she was not going to let that happen:

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! (25)

Without wanting to make undue claims about the relationship between James's diary and the works of her brother William, the purposes to which James planned to put her diary if not pre-empts then certainly chimes with another of William's essays, *The Hidden Self*, published in March 1890. The essay is "largely a presentation of [Pierre] Janet's ideas about 'unconscious mental life,' ideas Janet derived from the close clinical observation of a group of disturbed patients labelled as hysterics" (Richardson 296).

In *Principles of Psychology* William summarized Janet's observations upon how the "irregularities from which hysterics seem to suffer [are] due to the fact that [a] second personage has enriched itself [thereby resulting in a splitting] ... an hysterical woman abandons part of her consciousness because she is too weak nervously to hold it all together [but] the abandoned part, meanwhile, may solidify into a secondary or sub-conscious self" (210). This "hysterical fragmentation ... signifies a feebleness of the will, an inability to preserve both mind and body," but in James's case the abandonment of part of herself was necessary and conscious (Boudreau 59). In an entry dated October 26, 1890, James addresses the battle between mind and body:

William uses an excellent expression when he says in his paper on the "Hidden Self" that the nervous victim "abandons" certain portions of his consciousness. It may be the word commonly used by his kind. It is just the right one at any rate.... 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. (*Diary* 149)

As Robert Richardson notes, William's essay begins with an "extended plea to pay attention to 'wild facts,' irregular phenomena, strange experiences, facts that fit into no stall or pigeonhole" (295). James, pigeonholed as a hysteric, was conscious of the strongest sense of impressions that need to be captured and examined. James's declaration that she intends her diary to be a meaningful monologue with herself, written in 1889, suggests that the act of writing intends to recover that abandoned part of herself. To that end entries are addressed to "Inconnu," meaning "unknown person" or "stranger," which is as much an address to that abandoned part of herself she hopes to recover through the act of writing as it is an address to posterity.

On July 18, 1890, James writes, "These confidences reveal to you, dear Inconnu, so much mental debility that I don't want to rehearse herein my physical collapses in detail as well, altho' I am unable to escape a general tone of lamentation" (*Diary* 129). Boudreau observes that in "detaching her 'self'—will, perception, intellect—from her body ... [James] does not entirely separate her mind from her body or intellectualise the body out of existence" (60). But what James does not want to do is remain trapped by the hysterical body in her writing, which in turn will trap her within that tone of lamentation. Reading George Eliot's journal sent shudders of revulsion through James:

What a monument of ponderous dreariness is the book! What a lifeless, diseased self-conscious being she must have been! Not one burst of joy, not one ray of humour, not one living breath in one of her letters or journals, the commonplace and platitude of these last, giving her impressions of the Continent, pictures and people, is simply incredible! Whether it is that her dank, moaning features haunt and pursue one thro' the book, or not, but she makes upon me the impression, morally and physically, of mildew, or some morbid growth—a fungus of a pendulous shape, or as of something damp to the touch. I never had a stronger impression. Then to think of those books compact of wisdom and humour and the richest humanity, and of her as the creator of the immortal Maggie, in short, what a horrible disillusion.... What an abject coward she seems to have been about physical pain, as if it weren't degrading enough

to have head-aches, without jotting them down in a row to stare at one for all time, thereby defeating the beneficent law which provides that physical pain is forgotten. If she related her diseases and her “depressions” and told for the good of others what armour she forged against them, it would be conceivable, but they seem simply cherished as the vehicle [sic] for a moan. Where was the creature’s vanity! And when you think of what she had in life to lift her out of futile whining! But the possession of what genius and what knowledge could reconcile one to the supreme boredom of having to take oneself with that superlative solemnity! (*Diary* 40–42)

In her discussion of James’s use of humor as a “method to deflect the sympathetic gaze and the self-erasure it inflicts,” Haley French views James’s “condemnation of George Eliot’s published journal and letters [as an expression of] her impatience for her fellow ill who commit the ‘unpardonable sin’ of taking oneself too seriously” (86, 97). James is also condemning Eliot for preserving her pain for herself and posterity. By committing to paper every headache, Eliot keeps perpetually present pain that should naturally pass; but Eliot is also making a claim upon the sympathetic gaze that James was so keen to deflect, as if being ill was not “degrading enough.” James also seems to be accusing Eliot of not interrogating the experiences she records with the “wisdom ... humour and [rich] humanity” with which the “creator of the immortal Maggie” was clearly endowed. Eliot’s diary and the experiences which she chooses to record serve no purpose. James experiments with her own experiences of pain with the humor and curiosity that she finds so lacking in Eliot:

But this last prostration was rather excessive and comic in its combination, consisting of one of usual attacks of rheumatic gout in the dissipated organ known in the family as “Alice’s tum,” in conjunction with an ulcerated tooth, and a very bad crick in my neck. By taking a very small dose of morphia ... I was able to steady my nerves and experience in shivering whacks of crude pain which seem to lift you out of the present ... and ally you to long gone generations rent and torn with tooth-ache such as we don’t dream of. I didn’t succumb and send for my Primrose Knight, having no faith in anything but that time honoured nostrum Patience, with its simple ingredients of refraining from muscular contractions and vocal exclamations lest you find yourself in a worse fix than you are already in! (*Diary* 129)

To be ill, according to Henry James, was to fail. Carol Holly notes how Henry “frequent[ly] [equates] illness with characteristics of a self-negated, failed identity [and] was also the condition that both expressed and confirmed his feelings of inferiority and shame” (49). In a letter to William, Henry describes himself as: “slowly crawling from weakness and inaction and suffering into strength and health and hope ... I always looked forward with a certain eagerness to the day I should have regained my natural lead [and] become more active and masculine” (77). Henry’s equation between health and success can, in light of this, be read in terms of his failure to live up to the masculine ideal of emotional and physical stoicism, and productivity, in a way that does not apply to the feminine ideal of passivity and languidness, but in a letter to his lifelong friend, Grace Norton, he repeats the same sentiment to her: “Try not to be ill—that is all; for in that there is a failure” (*Letters* 100). The equation between being ill and a failure was not something shared by James, or at least not by the time she was keeping her diary:

This [child] is No. 5, father twenty-eight mother twenty-three—one more tiny voice to swell the vast human wail rising perpetually to the skies!... It’s rather strange that here among this robust and sanguine people, I feel not the least shame or degradation at being ill, as I used at home among the anaemic and the fagged. It comes of course in one way from the conditions being so easy, from the sense of leisure, work was reduced to a minimum and the god *Holiday* worshipped so perpetually and effectually by all classes. Then what need to justify one’s existence when one is simply one more amid a million of the superfluous? (*Diary* 36)

To be ill at home was to be at the concentrated center of an enervating discourse about illness and the need to improve. England, according to James, was much more accommodating for a perpetual convalescent because of the emphasis upon leisure. Despite being confined to the sick room with occasional outings in the bath chair, Alice’s emphasis upon well-being and improvement in general terms of health is reduced and allows her to explore instead the inner workings of the self. As Boudreau notes, for James, “this diary, like most diaries, is established in order to preserve a subjectivity ... in the traditional sense ... by recording for posterity the mental workings of that self ... a form of mental preservation by recording and giving external form to the thoughts that threaten to explode a bursting mind—a mind that suffered from too *much* life” (56–57).

While recording her physical decline and approaching death, which James describes as “going downhill at a steady trot,” she also notes, perhaps bearing in mind Eliot’s example, that it is “decidedly indecent to catalogue oneself in this way” (*Diary* 207). The “tone of lamentation” that accompanies the charting of what James called her “mortal career” is frequently interrupted by the moments of joy in a life dominated by illness. In her diary, the minutiae she records with such fascination become a celebration and confirmation of a life that will continue without her:

I have an exquisite 30 seconds every day: after luncheon I come in from my rest and before the window is closed I put my head out and drink in a long draft of the spring—made of the yellow glory of the daffodils on the balcony, the swelling twiggery of the old trees in front, the breathless house-cleaning of the rooks, the gradation of light in transition, and the mystery of birth in the air. What hours of roaming could give me a more intense absorption of the ever-recurring Miracle than those few moments that sink into my substance!... To the perverse it must seem contemptible that a day should be made worth living by a ray of light shed athwart it, suggestive of past rays and pregnant with those to come. (105–06)

When William wrote a consoling but very pragmatic letter stating that she would now know “a finite number of days, and then goodbye to neurasthenia and neuralgia and headache, and weariness and palpitation and disgust all in one stroke,” James responded on July 30, 1891, in kind (William qtd. in Edel 14):

It is the most supremely interesting moment in life, the only when in fact when living seems life, and I count it the greatest good fortune to have these few months so full of interest and instruction in the knowledge of my approaching death ... I have a delicious consciousness, ever present, of wide spaces close at hand, and whisperings of release in the air. (*Death* 186)

James’s only disappointment is that she will not actually be able to experience the event for herself. She states, almost indignantly, “the difficulty about all this dying is, that you can’t tell a fellow anything about it after it has happened, so where does the fun come in?” (*Diary* 223). She could only record the approach, which includes a consideration of and resistance to thoughts of suicide:

I am being ground down slowly on the grim grindstone of physical pain, and on two nights I nearly asked for K[atherine]'s lethal dose, but one steps hesitantly along such unaccustomed ways and endures from second to second; and I feel sure that it can't be possible but what the bewildered little hammer that keeps me going will very shortly see decency of ending his distracted career. (232)

James's "distracted career" ended on March 6, 1892, but even into the night of March 5 she was "making sentences"; one of the last things she asked her friend and amanuensis to do was "to make a correction in the sentence of March 4th" (232). James had previously written to William asking him "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": her physical and mental suffering had played a part in the life lived, and that experience was not to be undermined (*Death* 187). There is an extraordinary overlap between James's own experiences of intense suffering and what Judith Ryan describes as "the strange kind of meta-thinking she has embarked on in the diary," and William's thoughts upon whether or not life was worth living (67). James wrote to William in 1886 stating that "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 ... my torpid career has not been without its triumphs to my own consciousness & therefore not to be pitied" (*Death* 106). James's diary can therefore be read as not only an attempt to preserve her subjectivity but also an exploration of that deeper consciousness in relation to her periods of intense suffering and, to appropriate William's phrase, in order to comprehend "the key to [her] life's significance."

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NOTES

¹ Reference to William and Henry James by their Christian names is to distinguish between them and the primary focus of this essay, Alice James, who will be referred to as James throughout.

² William James refers to William Hurrell Mallock's 1879 *Is Life Worth Living?*, in which Mallock established himself as a "forceful defender of dogmatic Christianity ... berat[ing] 'positivists,' a term he used for both Comtists and scientific naturalists, for failing to provide a persuasive secular morality to counteract the scepticism unleashed by their 'scientific' criticisms of revealed religion" (qtd. in Peters).

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