

RE-READING HENRY JAMES'S "THE DEATH OF THE LION"

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Many of Henry James's tales written in the 1890s focus on literary life, and are often simplistically interpreted as "parable tales" about artists and thus treated less often than other tales.¹ This simplistic interpretation can be attributed to insufficient understanding of the difference between first-person and third-person narration. Critics who recognize no difference, accepting the narrator's story at its face value, interpret the story according to the terms offered by the narrator. But Ichikawa, who explores James's first-person narratives in her recent study and criticizes such critics as Booth and Genet for not distinguishing the two modes in their effects, points out that first-person narrative is fundamentally different from third-person in that the former is never granted the kind of objectivity that the latter has.² As with most reflectors in James's third-person narratives, the vision of the first-person narrator, who is naturally the reflector in the narrative, is also limited or distorted because of his ignorance or bias. In third-person narrative, however, if the reflector is a deceptive and unreliable person, if his perception is biased or distorted and the author intends an ironic contrast of reality and the reflector's vision, it is quite easy for the reader to detect this as long as he is provided with an objective description of the reflector or of the events he is witnessing. On the other hand, in the case of first-person narrative, the detection is much more difficult because the narrator will not voluntarily reveal his deceptiveness, and without an objective report of what happens there is no reference point for the reader to measure the reflector's honesty or knowledge. But James manipulates the first-person narrative so that the reader might come to detect the fissure in the world totally unified by the narrator's vision and realize the possibility of a story different from what the narrator relates to the reader. In this study, I will re-read one of such first-person narratives, "The Death of the Lion," and explore another story different from the apparent one, while examining how James suggests the narrator's limitations or distorted vision.

I

"The Death of the Lion" is a story of the fate of a novelist, Neil Paraday, who lives a secluded life devoted to writing but suddenly finds himself a popular figure when his recently published book is praised by an influential periodical. As a witness to the novelist's fate, James adopts a young man in transitional phase; he is a journalist "taken over" from a late editor who

¹ Richard A. Hocks, *Henry James: A Study of the Short Fiction* (Twayne Publishers, Boston: 1990), p. 54.

² Mikako Ichikawa, *Henry James's Narration----Focusing on the First-Person Narration* (Osaka Kyoiku Toshō, Osaka: 2003).

sacrificed the sales of his paper out of veneration for the traditional editorial policy of abstaining from intruding into novelists' private lives, by Mr. Pinhorn, a sly editor who, embodying "new journalism," believes that journalism's mission is to provide "what the public want[s]," that is, "exposure of everything".³ When he learns of the secluded author from the young journalist, the new editor immediately decides to dispatch the latter to interview Paraday, because the public welcomes the exposure of a public figure's private life all the more for his seclusion: the more the figure is resistant to the public's curiosity, the more the act of exposure gains in value. The journalist-narrator, although sympathetic toward the late editor's policy, is determined to satisfy the new editor in order to make a living. But on meeting the author in person he experiences "a change of heart" (356), and assigns himself as the protector of the author when he witnesses another interviewer's attempt to intrude upon the author's private life. What the narrator witnesses thereafter is the process by which the author's private life is exploited and his personality, not his work *per se*, is turned into a commodity. Through the journalist-narrator's observation, James realistically depicts the conditions brought about by the "the new journalism" and also attempts to portray the way relations among the author, reader and text are changing in the contemporary cultural scene, which is drastically transforming itself with the advent of a new readership and the establishment of the literary market.⁴

The toughest opponent the narrator is confronted with after repelling the other interviewer is a new kind of reader, Mrs. Weeks Wimbush, "wife of the boundless brewer," who seized upon the glorified author and of whom the narrator has "an instinctive fear" as a "blind, violent force." She represents a rising middle-class readership and gathers together artists and celebrated authors in her salon, where readings are held and manuscripts of new books are circulated among the participants for private reading. Apparently her salon recalls the idyllic interpretive community in olden days, where the author and the reader enjoyed an intimate relationship; the author, who is asked to comment on current topics and some vital matters like moral issues and ethical questions, also seems to be granted a privileged status as a cultural authority. But the narrator calls her salon "the universal menagerie" (371) and immediately reveals that her interest in Paraday does not derive from admiration of his works; when she boasts of the privilege of having Paraday's work read by the author himself, he questions her about the title and exposes the fact that she has not read a word of his works. Mrs. Wimbush introduces Paraday into her salon simply because he is glorified by a prestigious periodical and has become celebrated, not because she recognizes the literary value of his works; it is not his book but the author himself who is sought after: "he circulated in person in a manner that the libraries might well have envied" (370). In other words, the author is turned into a cultural commodity labeled with a formula of "revelation" as a part of an advertising strategy. Being a cultural commodity, he should be measured by his creativity or his own work, not by what Jean Baudrillard calls the sign value, but to the "wife of the boundless brewer," who lacks cultural capital, the celebrated author is a symbol of culture and "a prime attraction" (371) when inviting other celebrities. So when he fails to perform the required role of entertaining a Russian princess because he is taken ill on the day he was to read the manuscript of his new

³ Henry James, "The Death of the Lion," Henry James: Complete Stories, 1892-1898 (The Library of America, 1996), p. 357. All references to the text hereafter are indicated in parentheses.

⁴ Richard Salmon, *Henry James and the Culture of Publicity* (Cambridge U.P., 1997).

work to the guests, another novelist takes over his role, but it is ironically implied that the substitute is also on the verge of being replaced by yet another novelist who has just arrived on the scene. It does not matter to Mrs. Wimbush who the author is or what he writes, as long as he possesses a sign value as a cultural commodity. Unlike the conventional literary salon, hers is a place not to exchange ideas and views but to exchange signs.

Since an author as a celebrity simply functions as a sign value of a cultural commodity, his status on the cultural map is never stabilized; as a sign never possesses an absolutely unique *signifié*, its *signifié* is threatened each time the code is rewritten. Paraday might be a "revelation" for a time, but he could lose his temporary "formula" and be replaced by another novelist at any moment, exactly as he was at Prestige. Accordingly, in order to valorize the sign value, members of the cultural community constantly refer to each other and circulate their sign values; by reciprocal reference, they create the appearance of something that cannot have absolute, objective value. Paraday, for example, sits for his portrait to a young painter, who was "the reporter on canvas" and invariably painted people of "renown" (379), which means that the portrait painted by the painter attests to the fame of the subject. On the other hand, Paraday, in his turn, has to "write something" about a new painter whom Mrs. Wimbush is eager to promote, thereby serving as "a hoarding for pictorial posters." He also has to satisfy the demands of magazine editors, who had "introduced what they called new features," which involved having a celebrated author "contribute his views on vital topics" and "taking part in the periodical prattle about the future of fiction" (380). These people are subjected to harsh criticism by the narrator: "People expect him to give them his time, his golden time, who wouldn't give five shillings for one of his books. . . . Two-thirds of those who approach him only do it to advertise themselves" (376). But the fact which the narrator deliberately closes his eyes to because of his admiration for the author is that the apparently exploited author himself seems to more than welcome these opportunities, as his casual remarks suggest: "to figure in his[the painter's] show was not so much a consequence as a cause of immortality" (380). We should also note that Paraday is neither so irritated or annoyed at his commodified state nor so helpless or naive as the narrator assumes: "he took his profit where it seemed most to crowd upon him, having in his pocket the portable sophistries about the nature of the artist's task" (370). In short, Mrs. Wimbush's salon where she "played her victims against each other with admirable ingenuity" is an embodiment of the new system of the culture industry, "a huge machine in which the tiniest and the biggest wheels went round to the same treadle" (380). By way of mutual references, authors and artists attempt to prevent the existent codes from being rewritten and fixate their meanings and values which would not otherwise be permanently maintained. We could say this might be a burgeoning of canon formation and a cultural state in which no one exists autonomously any longer, being dependent on each other for acknowledgement of their value.

II

In many of his short stories written in the 1890s, James suggests, using various narratological devices, that there might be a story other than the apparent story told by the first-person narrator, that is, a story about the narrator himself. In "The Death of a Lion," James hints at the doubleness of the story by pairing the author and his substitute in his

absence. The substitution motif is obliquely introduced; first, their parallel is suggestively indicated at the beginning of the story: after the narrator is taken under Paraday's roof, he engages himself in writing "the quintessence of my impressions" exactly at the same time as Paraday is "occupied in his study" (359).⁵ Then, a few days later, when Mr. Morrow, another journalist representing "influential journals," visits Paraday for an interview, the narrator self-consciously begins to act as a representative for Paraday, who, feeling unwell, excuses himself, saying that "his young friend might be trusted to answer for him" (367). As he is virtually given the author's warrant, the narrator behaves as Paraday's representative and remonstrates with the interviewer that "the artist's life's his work" and "the best interviewer's the best reader" and enjoins him to read the author's book in quest of the answer to the interviewer's questions rather than to ask him in person. Before he left Paraday, he and Paraday "had passed a bargain": whoever would "represent the interest in his presence," he "should represent the interest in his work—in other words in his absence" (372). It turns out that Mrs. Wimbush represents "the interest in his presence," actively engaging herself in making profit from "his presence"; on the other hand, the narrator, who "had nothing" himself, finds no opportunity to function as a substitute while the commodified Paraday is circulating in person. But finally the narrator is given an opportunity when he finds Fanny Hurter, an American enthusiastic reader, waiting for Paraday, who is engaged with Mrs. Wimbush at that moment.

Fanny is a typical Jamesian American girl who is bold and independent enough to visit Europe alone and crosses the Atlantic to visit Paraday out of admiration for his works, with a "massive album" (373) full of autographs of eminent authors. She represents an innocent reader who has the potential to become an ideal reader, "the right sort" (375) as the narrator calls it, and contrasting with Mrs. Wimbush, who never reads the author's work. When the narrator learns that she is a devoted reader of Paraday's book and just wants to "look straight into his face" because she "just love[s] him," he again remonstrates against readers' personal contact with the author and recommends her to seek the author in his work itself, exactly as he told the journalist at Paraday's house. His complaints about readers who bother the author by demanding that he give them his time but would not buy his books remind us of James's own complaint about the readers. This time, however, his remonstrance sounds rather false, for readers easily sense his infatuation with Fanny from the way he describes her appearance, and begin to suspect that his desire not to lose the "opportunity of looking into hers[her face]" (375) might have led him to prevent her from seeing Paraday in person. In his relations with Fanny, he exists only as a substitute for the absent author, and therefore, in order to continue seeing Fanny, he has to create a situation in which a medium or substitute is required. Accordingly, when he insists on her giving up "the crude purpose of seeing him[Paraday]," readers become rather suspicious of the disinterestedness of his claim.

When we witness his contradictory action thereafter, our suspicion about the narrator's motives behind his apparently disinterested remonstrance necessarily increases; in spite of his critical attitude toward the reader's interest in the author's presence, what he is engaged in with Fanny is exactly what he is against. He strongly urges Fanny to "read him, read him" and

⁵ James has his characters repeat or perform the same action to imply their similarities. In "Greville Fane," the narrator performs the same act as Leonin. This might be helpful in interpreting the later problematic work, "The Turn of the Screw," in which the governess often repeats the actions of the apparitions she claims she saw.

"seek him in his works," but what he did was mainly to communicate Paraday's private life: especially during Paraday's stay at Prestige he is virtually acting as a reporter who sends a report to the reader as represented by Fanny.⁶ If Fanny follows his advice, all she has to do is just read Paraday's work, and if the work itself is, as the narrator claims, the incarnation of the author, or a substitute for the author himself, she should not need the narrator's report, or even his presence as another substitute, at all. Therefore, his opposition to readers' interest in the author's "presence" seems to be derived from his "self-interest," not "interest," in the author's "absence". We are also made aware of the nature and quality of the narrator's imagination, which can be surmised from his casual observation about Fanny: when the narrator learns that she had lost her parents, he "could conceive . . . she had inherited money". James juxtaposes what he imagined and his reference to his own financial situation made immediately after this observation to suggest a pecuniary motive behind his deeds, and the juxtaposition also makes his decision to make her his "peculiar charge" "just as circumstances had made Neil Paraday" sound self-interested rather than "generous"(374), as he calls it himself. Thus the apparently disinterested critic of the reader's interest in the author's presence has his interest at stake in Paraday's absence; just as Mrs. Wimbush makes profit from Paraday's presence, so does the narrator from his absence.

The loss of the manuscript also contributes to the substitution: since the manuscript is passed among the guests at Prestige without being read and is lost forever, the narrator who has read the manuscript is the only person entitled to talk about it in its absence. He tells us that he has endeavored to recover the manuscript after its loss, but without any luck, but we are left in doubt as to whether he really made an effort or not, for his interest is at stake in the absence of the manuscript in more than one way. In the first place, as long as the manuscript is lost, he can enjoy Fanny's sympathy and cooperation, and also talk authoritatively about the manuscript. Then we are referred back to the narrator's excuse for the publication of his private document at the beginning of the story: "These meager notes are essentially private, so that if they see the light the insidious forces that, as my story itself shows, make at present for publicity will simply have overmastered my precautions" (358). The narrator professes that his recollection is not intended to be disclosed to the public, but one critic astutely points out the narrator's contradiction about his letter transcribed in the latter part of the document: "if the text is already intended to be 'essentially private', it is hardly necessary for the narrator to obtain Fanny's permission before reproducing private documents within it."⁷ If so, the narrator's gesture of resistance to the external pressure demanding exposure might be a calculated bait for the public who are hungry for private details, as exposure of the secluded celebrity author attracts the public. It is very possible that he intended to publish his reminiscences of the dead author and his lost manuscript as substitutes in their absence. The lost manuscript and the dead author are replaced by their substitute, the narrator's reminiscence of them; in other words, the substitute, that is, his reminiscence, is possible only when the original is absent.

⁶ Here we should note James's interesting narrative device: he has the narrator transcribe his letter sent to Miss Hurter elaborating the first-person narrative in more complex form. Readers are given his own account of the life at Prestige and what he recounted to Miss Hurter, with whom he has fallen in love. Readers are made aware of the difference between what he told the imagined general reader to whom this retrospect or memoir might happen to be exposed and a particular reader on whom he is inclined to impress himself favorably.

⁷ Salmon, pp. 113-14.

When we detect the narrator's interest in Paraday's absence in the latter part of the story, his earlier remarks assume a different significance; when the narrator learns of Paraday's recovery of health at the beginning of the story, he jokingly remarks to Paraday that he should not be glad about his recovery because he is not sure what a successful living artist may do, and says to him, "you must be as dead as you can" (362). Even if his remarks are meant as a joke, we can sense his insidious, probably unconscious, wish for the author's early death. Thus, though he is not directly involved in the author's death, he impresses us as complicit in victimization of the author; he is responsible for his death at least in a negative sense, because, in spite of his knowledge of the author's frail health and his claim to feel the greatest concern about it, he lets Paraday go out with Mrs. Wimbush in unfavorable weather conditions.

The above examination of the narrator's remarks and contradictory deeds shows us that the narrator is, even if not a liar, someone whose interest is deeply involved in the subject of his observation, and whose views are naturally biased. If we believe in the integrity and disinterestedness of the narrator and take the story as it is told, the story is about the victimization of a celebrated author by new readers and cultural criticism of the trend to take interest not in the work itself but in the author's personality and private life. But if we are made aware of the narrator's bias in his vision by clues provided insidiously by James's narratological devices and resist the narrator's vision or the imposition of his frame of interpretation, then we also become aware of the complicity of the narrator in the victimization, whether consciously or unconsciously. When James constructs the story so as to suggest the possible complicity of the narrator, he is taking a risk to some extent, because unconsciousness or deception on the narrator's side makes us suspicious of the disinterestedness of his criticism and the criticism's validity seems to be immediately undermined.

But at the same time, if James deliberately makes the narrator involved in the victimization, it is because he is suggesting that such unconscious involvement is also an aspect of the present cultural situation to be criticized. It is not only the reader but also what might be termed the medium between the reader and the text, such as reporters and reviewers, who should be criticized. The reader should be criticized for lack of genuine interest in the work itself, but James also criticizes the medium for being responsible for distancing the reader from the text, by replacing the absent author. Moreover, James indicates his understanding of the difficulty of cultural criticism in such a commercialized cultural space as caricatured in Mrs. Wimbush's salon; he denies the possibility of autonomous disinterested criticism, for, in such a space, even the act of cultural criticism is woven into the mesh of reciprocal profits and is never free from self-interest.

III

In series of literary sketches written before "The Death of the Lion," James has adopted a novelist or artist as a narrator and focusing on creative activity and production of text, explored the relationship between the novelist and the popular novelist in the changing literary scene, and the artist's conflict between demands of marketplace and his aesthetic principle. In "The Death of the Lion" he adopts a reporter who is aspiring to be a reviewer as a narrator and the shift of the narrator from the novelist to the reporter enables James to grasp more comprehensively the new environment where the authors find themselves and to view more

objectively the literary marketplace and the relation ship among the author, text and the reader in it. What is satirically depicted in the tale is the commercialized state of culture; the author's personality as well as his work is turned into commodity and as a result of commodification, the author's value is not determined by his creativity or his work, but by the author's capacity to signify culture to consumers. Accordingly, artists and authors endeavor to valorize his sign value by mutual recognition and reference, and everyone in the system is implicated in the mesh of interests. While having the narrator criticize such practices, James also implicates him in the mesh to hint at the impossibility of extrication from the tightly knitted relations of interests, and therefore the impossibility of completely disinterested cultural criticism. The adoption of first-person narrative and implication of the narrator indicates James's awareness of his own inextricability from the commercial practices of the contemporary literary culture. It is through this reflexive strategy of the tale that James was able to criticize contemporary cultural scene with cogency and deeper understanding.

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