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"Is There a Life after Death?": Henry James's Response to the New York Edition

by CHRISTOPHER STUART

IN THE SUMMER OF what was for him the tumultuous year of 1909, Henry James wrote his extraordinary but seldom read essay, "Is There a Life after Death?" (1910). The essay is noteworthy, first of all, as one of James's few direct statements about religion and the afterlife, as well as for the way it has been largely overlooked by James's critics and biographers. This oversight is all the more remarkable when one considers the essay's delineation of the spiritual aspects of the Jamesian consciousness. There are, after all, few discussions of religion or the afterlife in James's fiction, nor does one often find in James's letters direct statements regarding his own religious beliefs.

The article takes on an even greater significance when one considers that James wrote it during the same period in which he was attempting to grapple with the popular failure of his New York Edition, the twenty-three volumes of his own work selected and revised by himself. James had conceived of this edition of his collected works as a monument to his career; it was the achievement of a lifetime's work and suffering through which he had hoped to renew his fame and rescue himself from obscurity. "Is There a Life after Death?" can fruitfully be read as in part James's response to the collapse of the monument that he had dedicated so much of his life to building. His effort to immortalize himself through his art having failed him, James took the opportunity in "Is There a Life after Death?" to remind himself of tenets he had long before established for himself. There he argues that the human consciousness is so expansive in its proportions as to take on spiritual qualities and that the cultivation of this consciousness offers one the greatest chance for transcending death. Perhaps more than anything else, the essay reveals the surprising degree to which James felt himself driven by his need to believe in the immortality of the personal self.

Those critics who have discussed "Is There a Life after Death?" have typically been struck by what they see as the essay's pervasive pessimism. Mildred Hartsock, one of the few writers to have considered the essay at length, contends that "[t]he prevailing tone of the essay is tentative," and that at most it offers the reader "a hesitant commitment to openness and futurity" (513). In his biography of James, Fred Kaplan briefly summarizes the essay: James's answer to the title question was that "he did not know," but "that he thought it unlikely" (563). Like Kaplan, Leon Edel pays the essay scant

attention, addressing it only in the final paragraph of his five-volume biography. There Edel states flatly and confidently that the essay demonstrates that when it came to the afterlife James “believed there was none. Death was absolute” (II 819). According to Edel, the essay proves that “[l]ike Proust, he saw that art alone retains and holds the life—the consciousness—of man long after the finders and makers are gone. The true immortality was the immortal picture or statue, the immortal phrase whether of music or of words. This was his deepest faith” (II 819).

As one reads James’s essay, however, one feels that the perceptions of these critics may have been skewed by what they already knew, or thought they knew, about James. Although his novels, especially those written before the “Major Phase,” surely emphasize the immortalizing power of the great “picture,” “statue,” or “phrase,” he never touches on this theme in “Is There a Life after Death?” On the contrary, James repeatedly insists in the essay that any concept of immortality that does not involve the continued growth of one’s personal consciousness would be meaningless to him. Indeed, I would suggest that by attempting to dissuade himself of the notion that the creation of an artistic masterpiece or a “monument” like the New York Edition was the only attainable immortality, James hoped to stave off the most severe depression of his life. A more thorough examination of the essay reveals that James was far more optimistic about the possibility of continued consciousness after death than his previous critics have led readers to believe.

On what date Elizabeth Jordan, the editor of *Harper’s Bazar* from 1908-1912, first asked James for a few thousand consoling words about the afterlife is unclear, but it may very well have been in the fall of 1908. She had by then, one imagines, begun her hunt for contributors to a symposium on life after death to be published in installments between March 1909 and February 1910. Jordan imagined the symposium as being “in the nature of a counsel of consolation, addressed to those in immediate bereavement, and containing such comfort and hope as the great writers who prepare them can offer” (Edel and Powers 102). Eventually ten writers signed on and their contributions were later collected in a volume entitled *In After Days, Thoughts on the Future Life* (1910). Other contributors to the volume included William Dean Howells; Elizabeth Phelps Stuart, the best-selling author who specialized in fictional accounts of heaven; Emily Dickinson’s first editor, Thomas Wentworth Higginson; and the poet and suffragette, Julia Ward Howe.

If James did receive Jordan’s request in the fall of 1908, he may very well have been penning his acceptance note just a few weeks before or after October 20, 1908 when he first received news that the monumental New York Edition, to which he had devoted the last four years of his life, had so far netted him royalties of a mere \$211. In part the check was small because Scribner’s used some of his royalties to pay other publishers for the rights to his works. Still, the amount was shockingly modest to James. Three days later, on October 23, 1908, James wrote to his agent, James Pinker, “I have

picked myself up considerably since Tuesday A.M., the hour of the shock, but I think it would ease off my nerves not a little to see you" (*Letters IV* 498). James explained to Pinker that, having heard no gloomy forecasts, he had "since the publication of the Series began ... found [him]self concluding in the sense of some probable fair return" (*Letters IV* 498). Although he had attempted to protect himself by repressing his own expectations for the Edition, he had nevertheless hoped for much more. He explains to Pinker, "I found myself ... beguiled thereto also by the measure ... of the treasures of ingenuity and labour I have lavished on the amelioration of every page of the thing, and as to which I felt that they couldn't not somehow tell" (*Letters IV* 498). Finally, James consoled himself that he was at least now prepared for the worst. "That mere fact," he wrote, "will by itself considerably relieve me" (*Letters IV* 499).

Neither his meeting with Pinker, nor "that mere fact," however, was enough to restore James to equilibrium. Throughout the winter of 1908-1909 James suffered from what he described as heart problems but which in hindsight seem to have been merely the symptoms of acute anxiety. On December 19, just two months after James learned how poorly his collection was faring in the marketplace, he complained to his brother, who suffered from serious heart problems himself, that "[t]he accursed 'thoracic symptom' is a killer of enterprise with me, and I dare say it is little better with you. But the less said of it the better—it doesn't diminish"(372). By January James's anxiety about his health had increased. In a letter of February 3, 1909 James informed William that he had eleven or twelve days earlier been to see a local doctor by the name of Skinner who gave him digitalis "as a matter of course" but who seemed otherwise unalarmed (*Correspondence* 378). Still, James explained to William, "I am—have been today—a little solitarily worried and depressed. What I find myself desirous of is to get some authoritative London judgement on the matter" (378). William responded, telling him that he should visit a Dr. James Mackenzie in London. On February 25, James visited the office of the celebrated heart specialist. James again reported the doctor's findings to his brother: "He at any rate finds so little the matter with me that it's rather difficult to say what he does find. Absolutely nothing grave or ominous at any rate.... He is the absolute reverse of an alarmist, & thinks the tendency to flurry and worry over so-called bad heart conditions greatly overdone" (384). In his own description of James's consultation with him, Dr. Mackenzie describes how he engaged James in a discussion of one of his ghost stories, probably "The Turn of the Screw." When James explained how he had left the evil deeds of the ghosts ambiguous to make them more powerful in the reader's mind, Mackenzie told him, "It is the same with you, it is the mystery that is making you ill" (Edel II 715). As Mackenzie suggested, James's symptoms were only exacerbated by his own uncertainty as to its causes. Without a specific cause on which to pin his ailment, James tortured himself by guessing at the horrible possibilities.

Initially encouraged by the doctor's lack of concern for his physical condition, James eventually found that he was unable to rid himself of his anxiety and depression by means of a doctor's appointment. The "mystery" continued to plague him, and no doubt he was hampered in his recovery by the pain he continued to feel about the New York Edition. In a letter to Frederick Macmillan on April 5, 1908, more than five months after his initial disillusionment, James's disappointment in the New York Edition still seems fresh:

The Edition has played for me, during the two or three years I have been busy with it, a terrible Dog-in-the-Manger part; it has but just ceased to take (through my immense overworking of my books) *all* my time, making every other remunerative labour impossible, & blocking my whole way, while up to this date it hasn't returned me a penny. It has been, in other words ... the most expensive job of my life. (*The Correspondence* 210)

For James, the fact that he had hoped for so much and had received so little in return for his Herculean efforts was a crushing blow that he could not easily forget. Two weeks later, on April 19, James wrote to Edith Wharton telling her, "I have had—to be frank—a bad and worried and depressed and inconvenient winter—with the serpent-trail of what seemed at the time ... a tolerably ominous cardiac crisis" (*Letters* IV 518). By then, however, James was rebounding and he told Wharton that he was "definitely better of that condition of December-January" (518).

As the spring turned into summer, James continued to improve, so that by July he wrote to his brother saying, "I am better—ever so much better ... In short, I am easy" (*Correspondence* 391). Nevertheless, James had not completely erased the gloom from his mind, for, as he put it, "that particular brush of the dark wing leaves one never quite the same" (*Letters* IV 518). Feeling more relaxed, but with the haunting touch of that "dark wing" still fresh in his memory, James wrote "Is There a Life after Death?" When precisely he began the essay cannot be said, but we do know that he had completed it by July 28, 1909. On that day James wrote to Jordan telling her that "I am with abashed belatedness posting you, at the same moment, the article that should have been these several days on its way to you" (Edel and Powers 102). The lateness of the essay suggests that he wrote much of it, or all of it, in June or July of that year.

Although his essay was only a response to a Harper's assignment and not the spontaneous product of his imagination and curiosity, there is every indication that he wrote it with the same gravity and deliberation that he typically devoted to his fiction. Edel writes that "James began with the hack-work, and sometimes it turned out to be a finished piece of art" (Edel and Powers 75). That "Is There a Life after Death?" ultimately meant more to James than mere "hack-work" is clear in the letter he sent to Jordan. He explains that he was slowed by finding "the little business distinctly difficult, so that I had—it being a sort of thing that is so little in my 'chords,' to work it out with even more deliberation than I had allowed time for" (Edel and Powers 102). James also apologizes for the essay's length and writes that his only excuse is that "I

didn't seem to make it at all worth while except by saying what I wanted and what I seemed to *have* to." In the end James appears to have been satisfied with the article he sent to Jordan. He informed her that the essay "seems to me to hang very tightly together, as my stuff always does" (Edel and Powers 103). While James wrote the essay on demand and for money, he also clearly wrote it with great care and concentration. As he puts it, he wrote what he "had" to.

What James "had" to write in the summer of 1909 was an essay in which he argued that the human consciousness contained a spiritual dimension that one could not detect with one's "earthly" senses. One of the essential aspects of such a belief is precisely that it liberates one from the threat posed by the physical, and therefore mortal, world. James repeatedly insists in the essay that he reaches "beyond the laboratory-brain," which, of course, is only another way of saying that he felt the need to believe in something beyond the plane of physical reality. James's belief in a human consciousness that might continue to exist where the body could not meant that he no longer had to fear that human life was "wholly dependent on [a] physical outfit" ("Is There a Life?" 613). Thus, he himself could disappear from the face of the earth along with his New York Edition, and it would not in the least diminish his consciousness or its prospects for immortality. Very likely James's consolatory essay consoled no one more than himself.

Indeed, upon first reading the essay one is struck by the probability that only a very few, if any, of those readers Elizabeth Jordan describes as being in "immediate bereavement" could have drawn any consolation from the article whatever. In the first place, the essay is daunting in its difficulty even for those who are familiar with James's late style. But even if a bereaved person were to invest the time and energy required to make sense of James's essay, he or she might feel only more dejected by what appears at first to be James's skepticism, a skepticism that seems especially pronounced in part one of the essay. Thomas Hardy once wrote, "If a way to the better there be, it lies in taking a full look at the worst" (quoted in Becker iii), and in his essay James employs precisely this strategy. He devotes the entire first half of the essay to acknowledging in painstaking detail that there are many compelling reasons for a sensitive and intelligent person to conclude that death is final and absolute. He describes these arguments in their full grimness and without the least attempt to soften their reality.

James opens his discussion with the statement that he thinks the title question to be "the most interesting question in the world, once it takes on all the intensity of which it is capable" (602). Unfortunately, James notes, there are many for whom the question possesses little or no interest. According to James these people are "living altogether so much below the human privilege as to have little right to pass for unjustly excluded or neglected in this business of the speculative reckoning" (602). For them, James concludes, the question of a life after death is practically irrelevant:

And there are those—I take them for the constant and vast majority—to whom [life] in the way of intelligible suggestion says nothing. Possibly immortality itself—or another chance at least, as we may freely call it—will say as little; which is a fair and simple manner of disposing of the idea of a new start in relation to them. (603)

Some readers of these passages have, naturally, accused James of elitism. Ross Labrie, for instance, contends that the passage implies that James sees himself as among God's chosen in a way "analogous to the religious ideas of American Puritans like Jonathan Edwards" (Hartsock 511). F.O. Matthiessen, however, rightly points out in his brief introduction to the essay that James's elite are neither "of birth or of class," and neither are they the Calvinist "elect." Rather, Matthiessen suggests, James posits an elite "of consciousness itself, in which anyone intensely sensitive to life can share" (594).

This issue, however, James recognizes to be "but an instance, or a trifle ... among the difficulties with which the whole case bristles" for those who truly live (603). For these sensitive individuals the greatest obstacle to a belief in the afterlife is "the utterly contingent nature of our familiar inward ease" (606). The world reminds such people of the finality of death at every turn. "And so," he writes, "we go on noting, through our time and amid the abundance of life, everything that makes, to our earthly senses, for the unmistakable absoluteness of death" (606). Death is omnipresent in life to the degree that "[e]very hour affords us some fresh illustration of it, drawn especially from the condition of others" (606). Indeed, he asks, "How can we not make much of the terrible fashion in which the universe takes upon itself to emphasize and multiply the disconnectedness of those who vanish from our sight?" The vast and utter silence of the dead only contributes the more to "our seeming awareness of extinct things as utterly and veritably extinct." From the scientific perspective, James acknowledges that the world works on us at every moment to convince us of what he calls "the grim view" confirmed in "dismal laboratories" that "we are abjectly and inveterately shut up in our material organs" (604).

James writes so forthrightly and so emotionally of what appears to be the terrible finality of death that one can easily see how critics have mistaken this discussion for a pessimistic account of his own personal beliefs, yet James never claims such views for himself. He only acknowledges that they are frightfully compelling. Yes, James admits, the sensitive individual does "go on noting ... everything that makes, to our earthly senses, for the unmistakable absoluteness of death." But this is only the evidence supplied to us by "our *earthly* senses," and, as James repeatedly reminds the reader, he "reach[es] beyond the laboratory-brain" (614). James does recognize that "the sense of the rigor of our physical basis, is confirmed to us by overwhelming appearances," but he never goes so far as to suggest that this "rigor" amounts to more than an "appearance" (604). He only claims that the power of such "appearances" and of "our seeming awareness" often leads an intelligent and sensitive individual to conclude that death is absolute.

In the first paragraph of part two of the essay James clearly explains that in the preceding pages he was merely outlining the "scientific" attitude towards death, the claims of which he does not underestimate. James, however, announces that in the second half of the essay he will speak only for himself:

I have said "we argue" as we take in impressions of the order of those I have glanced at and of which I have pretended to mention only a few. I am not, however, putting them forward for their direct weight in the scale; I speak of them but as the inevitable obsession of those who with the failure of the illusions of youth have had to learn more and more to reckon with reality.... Yet rather than attempt to speak, to this effect, even for "many of us," I had best do so simply for myself, since it is only for one's self that one can positively answer. (608)

James dedicates the rest of the essay not to outlining the positions of the "many" and their "inevitable obsessions," but to detailing his own particular, and perhaps idiosyncratic, perspective.

James explains to his reader that the common "obsession" with the grim view of death that he discussed in part one is a view that he has sometimes shared only to find it "displaced by others" and then to "reappear again and once more to give way" (608). As the emotional intensity of part one implies, his personal faith in a life after death has been a struggle to maintain. This acknowledgment is followed by an extraordinary passage in which James briefly narrates the entire history of his attitude towards death from his youth to the present time. Not surprisingly, he found the question of life after death less compelling during his youth. "I began," he writes, "with a distinct sense that our question didn't appeal to me—as it appeals, in general, but scantily to the young ... I was content for a long time to let it alone, only asking that it should ... let *me*" (608). A glance at James's biography shows that, indeed, for a long time death did leave James alone. As James suggests, he had in his youth little firsthand experience with the dead or the dying. The closest he had come to it had been staring at his brother Wilky, who upon his return from the Civil War lay near death for three days in the doorway of his parents' home. His brother had recovered, however, and the only significant loss that James suffered during this period was the death of Minnie Temple, which he experienced only from a great physical and emotional distance. As James puts it in the essay, "death remained for me, in a large measure, unexhibited and unaggressive. The exhibition, the aggression of life was quite ready to cover the ground and fill the bill" (608-09). So long as he did not have to confront death in the face of a loved one or in the mirror, James managed to keep his eyes focused on the stuff of life and thus kept his fear of death from surfacing.

James, however, could not repress his anxiety about death forever. As the years passed, death eventually became more "aggressive" and more often exhibited. As James puts it, "the opposite pressure [began] to show in the scale" (609). James perhaps refers here to the deaths of his parents in the 1880s. As they were the first among James's immediate family to die, their

deaths were a particular shock to him. Nevertheless, James remarks that even when death became a more apparent reality for him, he still felt nothing more than a “resented bereavement” (609). Thus his first response to the deaths of those close to him was sadness combined with anger at what he suffered because of their deaths. He discovered that the “various forms and necessities associated with our resentment can for a long time sufficiently meet then the questions that death brings up” (609). Through his anger, James kept death at arm’s length and saved himself from having to address the problem as his own.

In his later middle age, however, the deaths of James’s close friends and family became more frequent and more intrusive. He describes in the essay having suffered a period of depression during which death seemed virtually omnipresent. James perhaps has in mind the first half of the 1890s during which he witnessed his sister’s slow and agonizing death from breast cancer and received the news of the deaths of Constance Fenimore Woolson and Robert Louis Stevenson. He explains that during this time of depression he “found it long impossible not to succumb—so far as one began to yield at all to irresistible wonder—to discouragement by the mere pitiless dryness of all the appearances” (609). He finally saw then “what it is to die—and to have died—in contradistinction to suffering (which means to warmly *being*) on earth” (609).

More than the knowledge of the suffering of his friends and relatives, it was their actual disappearances that most haunted James:

This was for years quite blighting to my sensibility; and the appearances, as I have called them—and as they make, in “science” particularly, the most assured show—imposed themselves; the universe, or all of it that I could make out, kept proclaiming in a myriad voices that I and my poor form of consciousness were a quantity it could at any moment perfectly do without.... If without me then just so without others. (609)

More than just a “resented bereavement,” the deaths of others in his later middle age became an increasingly personal dilemma: he and those he loved were expendable.

Eventually, James recovered from this “blighted sensibility,” and he found that “the question [of death] subtly took care of itself” (609). The answer, he explains, came to him slowly as he increasingly retreated into his own consciousness “by reaction against so grossly finite a world” (609):

waking up as I did gradually, in the event (very slowly indeed, with no sudden start of perception, no bound of enthusiasm), to [the question of death’s] facing me with a “mild but firm” refusal to regard itself as settled. That circumstance once noted, I began to inquire—mainly, I confess, of myself—why it should be thus obstinate, what reason it could at all clearly give me; and this led me in due course to my getting, or at least framing my reply: a reply not perhaps so multitudinous as those voices of the universe that I have spoken of as discouraging, but which none the less, I find, still holds its ground for me. (609)

As he began to explore his consciousness, he found that “the more and the more one asked of it the more and the more it appeared to give” (609-10).

Although James had always been a student of the human consciousness, his conception of it now expanded until it took on practically spiritual proportions. Just when he came to these conclusions is left ambiguous in the essay, but he may be referring to the years of remarkable physical and mental health that he enjoyed at the beginning of the new century, the years in which he composed the novels of his "Major Phase." James writes that during a period of renewed optimism he eventually found himself "in communication with *sources*; sources to which I owe the apprehension of far more and far other combinations than observation and experience, in their ordinary sense, have given me the pattern of" (611). As James suggests earlier in the essay, he reaches "beyond the laboratory-brain" towards the ineffable. Although he contends that the likeness is only "superficial," James concedes that his conception of consciousness bears a "resemblance" to "the spiritual discipline" and to "orthodox theology" (613). Certainly, James had not converted to traditional Christianity in his old age. He had never been able to accept the Presbyterianism of his grandfather or even the less conventional Christianity of his father. Nevertheless, I would suggest that the differences between James's understanding of consciousness and the traditional conception of "spirit" are in fact more superficial than the similarities. The human consciousness, particularly as developed in the artistic consciousness, had come to James to seem infinite in its qualities and its possibilities. Consciousness seemed to him more penetrating and very possibly more lasting than mere biology. It was something, he felt, more mysterious, more infinite, than anything "wholly dependent on our physical outfit" could be (613).

James never asserts in this essay his certain faith in a life after death, but he does state that the "artistic consciousness" seems to him the best evidence available that we do not vanish with the death of our physical selves. Its "elasticity and ... affluence ... affect [him] as symptomatic and auspicious" (614). Artists such as himself, he suggests, would be "peculiarly victimized if the vulgar arrangement of our fate ... should prove to be the true one" (611). James finds his consciousness additionally "auspicious" because it has taken him so long to understand it. James's argument here echoes the words from a letter he had written seven years earlier to his old friend, Grace Norton: "It takes one whole life ... for some persons, *dont je suis*, to learn how to live at all; which is absurd if there is not to be another in which to apply the lessons" (Edel II 495). Having only begun really to explore the inner recesses of his own mind in his sixth and seventh decades, he feels that to have his consciousness then suddenly extinguished would be a trick worthy of a "prime originator" with "the wit of a sniggering little boy who makes his dog jump at a morsel only to whisk it away" (612).

In other places in the essay, James seems still more optimistic about the spiritual possibilities of consciousness. Indeed, in some passages James writes about consciousness in almost Emersonian terms:

it is in a word the artistic consciousness and privilege in itself that thus shines as from immersion in the fountain of being. Into that fountain, to depths immeasurable, our spirit dips—to the effect

of feeling itself, *quâ* imagination and aspiration, all scented with universal sources. What is that but an adventure of our personality, and how can we after it hold complete disconnection likely? (613)

Besides the fact that James seldom wrote in such spiritual and transcendental terms, the passage is unique because of James's apparent confidence in the possibility of an afterlife. He experienced such "adventures of his personality" that "complete separation" between himself and his personal consciousness seemed positively unlikely. Simply put, James found his own consciousness so vital and so fascinating, so infinitely complicated, that he could not imagine its obliteration after death.

His confidence in what he has discovered notwithstanding, James reassures the reader later in the essay that he is not one of those "shallow minds who are happily and foolishly able to believe what they would prefer" (614). In fact, James writes, "It isn't really a question of belief" at all. Rather, "it is ... a question of desire, but of desire so confirmed, so thoroughly established and nourished, as to leave belief a comparatively irrelevant affair" (614). James acts upon his convictions exactly as if he fully believed them so that whether he believes in them or not hardly matters. As he explains, "If one acts from desire quite as one would from belief, it signifies little what name one gives to one's motive.... I can't do less if I desire, but I shouldn't be able to do more if I believed. Just so, I shouldn't be able to do more than cultivate belief" (614). A few lines later James states more explicitly than anywhere else why the human consciousness seemed so crucial to him in later life: like nothing else, it seemed to offer him "the splendid illusion of doing something myself for my prospect, or at all events for my own possibility, of immortality" (614). Although he recognizes that his "belief" may only be an illusion, he finds, nevertheless, that it sustains him, allowing him to believe that his life and his work matter, and to believe that his own, personal consciousness will not be erased by death. James's position verges on existentialism in the sense that he realizes this new belief system might only be another delusion but that he nevertheless finds it useful. Ultimately, however, James cannot be called an existentialist, for, as the concluding lines of the essay reveal, James believes that the immortal consciousness may well be a reality: "who shall say over what fields of experience, past and current, and what immensities of perception and yearning, [consciousness] shall *not* spread the protection of its wings? No, no, no—I reach beyond the laboratory-brain" (614).

Thus, in his later years, James had realized that he needed the support of a faith in something larger than himself, even if rationally he felt that he knew better. Such an illusion was for James a necessary fiction. The belief system he constructed around his consciousness proved useful to him because, no matter how illusory it might have been, his consciousness seemed not to depend upon his body. His New York Edition might never sell, but James could at least be confident that he would never witness the dismantling of his own consciousness in his lifetime. If it were obliterated by death he would, of course, no longer need it to sustain him. In short, James could reassure him-

self that this immortality symbol would serve him for at least as long as it mattered.

We find in James's essay not a word about how artistic masterpieces can outlive the centuries. In earlier years he had written novels like *Roderick Hudson* (1875), *The American* (1877), and *The Princess Casamassima* (1886) that stressed the redeeming power of "the treasures, the felicities, the splendours, the successes of the world" (*Princess* 404). No doubt, he had such ideas in mind when he began the great project of collecting and revising his finest work for the New York Edition. Nevertheless, such an idea would surely have been painful to James after he had discovered that almost no one was buying the collection and that probably even fewer were actually reading it. The failure of the edition became for him yet another reminder of the "utterly contingent nature of our inward ease."

At the time that he wrote the essay, James was enjoying a relatively relaxing summer, although the "dark wing" continued to hover over him. In October of 1909 it descended upon him again. On that day he received his second royalty check from Scribner's, which amounted only to \$596.71. To James the second check was confirmation that his worst fears about the New York Edition had been realized. As days passed, his discouragement increased. He continued, however, to be able to attend to business. On November 4, he wrote again to Jordan, this time reminding her to be sure to send him proofs of his article which was to be published in January and February of 1910. If *Harper's Bazar* sent them promptly, one can imagine that James might have been correcting them as late as December 1909. Thus, James was very likely putting the finishing touches on his article at a time when he was increasingly feeling the encroachment of the most severe and crushing depression he would ever experience.

As we have seen, however, James did not retract his optimism about the possibility of a life after death. Rather, James seems to have clung more tightly than ever to the consolations offered in his essay. By January of 1910, the month in which the first half of his essay was published in *Harper's Bazar*, James's depression was once again acute, as it would remain for five months. Food became intolerable to him, and he was plagued by a "fairly dismal lonesomeness," and "a general dreadfulness" (*Letters* IV 547, 551). Besieged by fears of death he took to his bed and spent much of his time weeping. Work was virtually impossible. Everything seemed to James "'hung up,' blighted and indefinitely postponed" (*Letters* IV 548). In other letters he wrote that he was beset by "the black devils of Nervousness." No longer referring to his illness as "thoracic," he called it instead "my *nervous condition*" (551). Nothing seemed to help until finally in June of 1910 he was rescued from the darkest depths by the presence of his brother William and his sister-in-law Alice. They crossed the Atlantic in part to see him and in part to take William to the spas at Nauheim in the hope of easing his by then severe heart problems. Finally, James's depression broke, and he continued to improve even after the death of his brother that October. In the few years

that remained to him James would never again experience such a debilitating depression. Composed in the brief period separating the two most torturous depressions of his life, "Is There a Life after Death?" can usefully be read as James's attempt to console himself about his own obscurity and thus his own mortality. In this sense "Is There a Life after Death?" must be seen as a fitting contribution to Elizabeth Jordan's consolatory symposium because James offers the most solace to those who mourn themselves, as we all do when we grieve the deaths of others.

Although the principles expressed in James's essay did not prevent him from experiencing the second even more penetrating depression of 1910, James did not abandon these principles in later years. In his autobiographical works *A Small Boy and Others* (1913) and *Notes of a Son and Brother* (1914) he continued to record his past, but he had given up monument building forever. On August 25, 1915, James wrote to his old friend Edmund Gosse regarding the New York Edition. The tone of the letter makes clear that James admired his own achievement and that he believed the critics had vastly underestimated it. With the benefit of hindsight, however, he called into question the wisdom of the entire project:

[M]y poor old rather truncated edition ... has the grotesque likeness for me of a sort of miniature Ozymandias of Egypt ("Look on my *works*, ye mighty, and despair!")—round which the lone and level sands stretch further away than ever.... But such is "success"! (*Letters* IV 777-78, 779).

The critical failure of the New York Edition forced James to reconsider his definition of success. His beloved New York Edition became for him a "grotesque" expression of his pride. If there was an afterlife, James felt, one could not reach it through the production of a masterpiece. That path had led him only to a desert of despair. As James had reminded himself in 1910, the only real hope lay in the possibility that the human consciousness could escape from "the lone and level sands."

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