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The Delusion of the Master: The last days of Henry James

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ABSTRACT

The novelist Henry James shared with his brother William, the author of the *Principles of Psychology*, a deep interest in the ways in which personal identity is built through one's history and experiences. At the end of his life, Henry James suffered a vascular stroke in the right hemisphere and developed a striking identity delusion. He dictated in a perfectly clear and coherent manner two letters as if they were written by Napoleon Bonaparte. He also showed signs of reduplicative paramnesia. Negative symptoms resulting from right hemisphere damage may disrupt the feelings of "warmth and intimacy and immediacy" and the "resemblance among the parts of a continuum of feelings (especially bodily feelings)", which are the foundation of personal identity according to William James. On the other hand, a left hemisphere receiving inadequate input from the damaged right hemisphere may produce positive symptoms such as delusional, confabulatory narratives. Other fragments dictated during Henry James's final disease reveal some form of insight, if partial and disintegrated, into his condition. Thus, even when consciousness is impaired by brain damage, something of its deep nature may persist, as attested by the literary characteristics of the last fragments of the Master.

INTRODUCTION

In the past decades, the study of patients with right hemisphere damage has revealed important roles for the (formerly considered) “minor” hemisphere in several fundamental aspects of consciousness, such as, for example, in experiencing one’s body as belonging to oneself in all its parts [1,2], or in perceiving one’s personal identity [3]. Personal identity was a central and recurrent theme in the literary production of the novelist Henry James (1843-1916). For example, in *The Lesson of the Master* [4], a young writer is persuaded by his older and idolized mentor to renounce his projects of marrying a charming young lady, in order to assume the perfect artistic identity, only to later discover that the Master has himself married the girl he was longing for. *The Jolly Corner* [5] further elaborates on the theme of building self-identity through personal choices and history. The protagonist, Spencer Brydon, has expatriated to Europe just like the American-born Henry himself. After 30 years, he returns to his old home in New York. He keeps wondering whether his decision to live overseas, thus abandoning a promising business career in order to devote himself to art, was the right one. In the “immense” flat, at the end of a night of feverish search, his doubts take the form of a ghostly encounter with "his other self", the man he would have become had he not left his homeland. “Such an identity fitted his at no point, made its alternative monstrous. A thousand times yes, as it came upon him nearer now--the face was the face of a stranger”. The 'ghost' appears as an "evil, odious, blatant, vulgar" stranger, and made poor Brydon fall and pass away. *The Jolly Corner* underlines some of the favourite themes of Henry James, such as the development of identity through moral choices, and a relentless search for deeper forms of self-awareness, which paralleled the enterprise endeavoured by his brother William (1842-1910) in the scientific domain (Fig. 1).

========= Fig. 1 about here =========

CASE REPORT

It is a tragic irony that at the end of his life, after a stroke in the right hemisphere, Henry James should suffer in his own flesh a dramatic disease of consciousness, in the form of a highly structured delusional belief about his own identity. Characteristically, the delusion took the literary form of two letters written by Napoleon Bonaparte. Even more characteristically for an author who prized self-consciousness to the highest degree, other fragments dictated during his disease reveal some form of insight, if partial and disintegrated, into his condition.

His biographer, Leon Edel, described the last days of the life of Henry James [6]. In October 1915, Henry James was given digitalis because of cardiac arrhythmia, possibly auricular fibrillation. On December 2nd, he was found lying on the floor of his London flat bedroom. His left leg had given way under him. He was conscious, and told his secretary, Theodora Bosanquet, that he had had a stroke "in the most approved fashion." He later reported, according to Edith Wharton, that in the act of falling he had heard in the room a voice, which was not his own, saying, "So here it is at last, the distinguished thing." Two days later, a second stroke occurred. The paralysis on the left side was now more complete, and a ptosis of the left eyelid had appeared. The day after, the patient was searching a dictionary for the exact word describing his condition. He was not satisfied with "paralytic".

After the second stroke, he developed a fever. He was disoriented in space, and did not recognize he was in London. In December 1915, he said "... Such is my sketchy state of mind, but I feel sure I shall discover plenty of fresh worlds to conquer, even if I am to be cheated of the amusement of them." He was anxious that his "madness" was not spoken of in the presence of his nurses.

On December 12th, James dictated in English to his secretary what would later be known as his "Napoleonic fragments". In Miss Bosanquet's words, "he (…) dictated perfectly clearly and coherently two letters from Napoleon Bonaparte to one of his married sisters…

After he had finished the second letter he seemed quite satisfied not to do any more and fell into a peaceful sleep." The letters read as follows:

Dear and most esteemed brother and sister,

I call your attention to the precious enclosed transcripts of plans and designs for the decoration of certain apartments of the palaces, here of the Louvre and the Tuileries, which you will find addressed in detail to artists and workmen who are to take them in hand. I commit them to your earnest care till the questions relating to this important work are fully settled. When that is the case I shall require of you further zeal and further taste. (…) It is, you will see, of a great scope, a majesty unsurpassed by any work of the kind yet undertaken in France. Please understand I regard these plans as fully developed and as having had my last consideration and look forward to no patchings nor perversions, and with no question of modifications either economic or aesthetic. This will be the case with all further projects of your affectionate

Napoléone

My dear brother and sister,

I offer you great opportunities in the exchange for the exercise of great zeal. Your position as residents of our young but so highly considered Republic (…) is a piece of luck which may be turned to account in the measure of your acuteness and experience. A brilliant fortune may come to crown it and your personal merit will not diminish that harmony. But you must rise on each occasion (…), and please remember that any failure to push your advantage to the utmost will be severely judged. I have displayed you as persons of great taste and great judgment. Don't leave me a sorry figure in consequence but present me rather as your very fond but not infatuated

> relation able and ready to back you up, your faithful brother and brother-in-law
>
> Henry James

James carefully spelt out the orthography of the "Napoléone" signature to his secretary. He had the second fragment signed with his own name; however, the tone, style and content seem highly consistent with the previous one.

James also showed signs suggestive of reduplicative paramnesia. He said he was in California or in Cork and complained of being told he was actually in London. He expressed the desire to go to his mansion in Rye; afterwards, he believed he was there and commented upon how comfortable and pleasant the place was. In his words, "This place I find myself is the strangest mixture of Edinburgh and Dublin and New York and some other place that I don't know".

After an obscure reference to "the great R.L.S." [Robert Louis Stevenson], he dictated:

> (…) These final and faded remarks all have some interest and some character – but this should be extracted by a highly competent person only – some such, whom I don't presume to name, will furnish such last offices. In fact I do without names not wish to exaggerate the defect of their absence. Invoke more than one kind presence, several could help, and many would – but it all better too much left than too much done. I never dreamed of such duties as laid upon me. This sore throaty condition is the last I ever invoke for the purpose.

This fragment, also reminiscent of a fictional epistolary style, is the very last note the Master dictated on his deathbed. On January 1st, 1916, Henry James was appointed the Order of Merit. He died on February 28th, 1916.

DISCUSSION

There is no anatomical information about the localization of the brain lesion sustained by Henry James. Clinical considerations such as the dense left hemiplegia and its progression over days suggest the occurrence of a vascular stroke, with a likely involvement of the vascular territory of the middle cerebral artery in the right hemisphere. Also, ptosis is often associated with right hemisphere strokes in this territory [7]. A possible starting event could have been a thromboembolic stroke from a thrombus within the heart in the context of James's cardiac arrhythmia, perhaps triggered by the inotropic effect of digoxin.

Delusional misidentifications are often observed after right hemisphere damage. Damage to the right hemisphere may produce delusional verbalizations concerning the patients' left limbs, which may not be perceived anymore as belonging to the patients' self (asomatognosia, somatoparaphrenia) [8,1]. Delusional misidentifications of other persons' identity, such as the Capgras and Fregoli syndromes, are also sometimes associated with frontal lesions in the right hemisphere [9].

Negative symptoms resulting from right hemisphere damage may blur the ego boundaries, impair self-monitoring and produce inappropriate emotional reaction to external stimuli (such as erroneous familiarity or feelings of estrangement) [3]. thus perhaps disrupting the feelings of "warmth and intimacy and immediacy" [10] and the "resemblance among the parts of a continuum of feelings (especially bodily feelings)" [10], which are the foundation of personal identity according to William James. Also, a left hemisphere receiving inadequate input from the damaged right hemisphere may produce positive symptoms such as delusional, confabulatory narratives [3]. The personal misidentification syndrome Henry James suffered after his stroke is not commonly described in the literature. However, it fits well these notions about the potential consequences of right hemisphere lesions on self-awareness. The analogy is further reinforced by the concomitant presence of reduplicative paramnesia, which has been associated with frontal damage in the right hemisphere [11].

Thus, the functioning of the right hemisphere appears to be crucial for awareness and image of self, as well as to relate perceptual and emotional self to the external and internal environments [3].

Henry James's explicit references to his "sketchy state of mind" and "madness" suggest that he did have some awareness of his consciousness deficits, similar to other brilliant individuals, who after brain damage show some insight into their condition at an intellectual level of understanding, and yet remain unable to compensate for their deficits by translating their understanding into their everyday life [12,13]. Indeed, a deep sense of continuity of James's apparently disintegrated self seems to emerge through the reading of his Napoleonic fragments. The literary style, the authoritativeness, the elaborate syntax of the sentences, all evoke a sense of familiarity in the Jamesian reader. Despite the fragmented nature of this narrative, it appears that James's mind was once again creating, without explicit engagement or planning, a fictional, epistolary work. James's peculiar form of literary authorship, built through decades of restless artistic reflection and practice, was hardly affected by the right hemisphere lesion. Aspects of such preserved organization are reminiscent of the deep narrative identity that, according to Paul Ricœur, can mediate between the different aspects of one's self [14].

Neuroscientific hypotheses concerning the precise relationships between the right hemisphere and the experience of the self need to be better articulated through the development of theoretical models and the outcome of future empirical research in cognitive neurology. The last lesson that the Master gave us though his literary delusion remains, nevertheless, fully consistent with his fictional production, stressing the continuous building of self-identity through the events of life and consciousness. Even when consciousness is severely impaired by brain damage, however, something of its deep nature may persist. In Henry's own words [15], "I like to think it open to me to establish speculative and imaginative connections… 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".

FIGURE CAPTION

Figure 1. Henry (left) and William James

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