

In the Fourth Person Singular: Pragmatism, Anarchism, and the Earth

Nothing has done more to cement William James's reputation than his unrepentant individualism. In a present marked by the challenge of imagining modes of transformative action worthy of our planetary travails, James's individualism appears dated, unworthy of the present. Yet such judgement neglects its pragmatic dimension, as well as its political connections to James's anarchistic pluralism. Situating anarchism at the centre of James's vision, this article argues that his defence of individuals constitutes no ontological postulate but forms part of a speculative theory of change. Rather than apologia for individual heroism, James's individualism is better understood in the impersonal voice of the "fourth person singular:" individual lives matter not as ordinary sources of heroic action but as zones of divergence through which terrestrial forces of mutation and metamorphosis pass. Revisiting connections between James's individualism, pragmatism, and anarchism, the article offers a radical reappraisal of James's thought as a vital method for intensifying unruly forces of transformation on an earth unstable and unsafe.

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"Damn Great Empires!— Including that of the Absolute"

The Importance of Individuals: Or, RIP William James?

Of the many debates to which William James's pragmatism has given rise in the century that followed his work, nothing has done more to cement his highly contested reputation than his unrepentant individualism. For some of his heirs, James's relentless defence of individual differences, his passionate commitment to the strenuous life of pluck and courage, of danger and adventure, are the most exemplary signs of James's guiding spirit as a distinctly American philosopher— with its pioneering zeal, its restless entrepreneurship, its promotion of liberty and its quest for novelty.¹ For others, James's anti-sociology, his love of individual prowess, his “hero-worship,” are the most exemplary signs of the American corruption of philosophy: a debased and ignoble tradition, enthralled by the logics of capital, reducing the very activity of thought, the invention of concepts, to a series of mundane tasks whose very meaning and truth boil down to nothing more than the “cash-value” they might afford. Indeed, even in his faithful criticism, Cornel West (1989:60) famously chastises James for being “prohibited by his individualism from taking seriously fundamental social change.” So long as his individualism has cemented his reputation, then, one might be understandably tempted to conclude that such cement can today only serve as a plaque for his grave. For what use could individualism possibly serve when the drama in whose hold the present is configured has acquired planetary heights, when we are told the relevant unit of action has become that of a universal *Anthropos*, of Humanity as a whole, a species out of control locked in battle against its own planetary conditions of existence? Put that way, the answer is of course “none,” save for the prolonging of the capitalist disavowal that rendered the Earth itself the price to be paid for individual wealth. Only the dawning of a new planetary reflexivity, only critical recognition of the existence and destructive powers of this global actor —we're told— will enable us come to terms with what we have

¹ For thoughtful discussions of this tradition and of James's place in it see, for instance, McDermott 1986, as well as Albrecht 2012.

collectively done; and only a new planetary reflexivity, the demand for concerted, unified, global action from can demand that the existing political order change course and avert the catastrophe that looms in the horizon.² Anything else is just another way of giving up. RIP William James.

And yet, if this ravaged present is proof of anything, it is of the destructive powers of universals, of the powerlessness of critique, and of the sheer indifference of the existing political order to righteous demands for change. Which is why it may not after all be entirely outrageous to wonder what —beyond the strictures of traditional political militancy and the promised salvation of a dawning planetary consciousness— transformative action might mean today. And it is precisely under the sign of this question (*pace* Cornel West) that James’s thoughts on individuals might deserve another look. After all, what the dissenting assessments of James’s defence of individuals share is a certain habit of characterising it as a general philosophical postulate, an ontological or moral principle from which any number of implications might be derived. But this assumes what needs to be explained. It forgets that pragmatism is above all a radical art of consequences, and that as such it “is willing to take anything, to follow either logic or the senses, and to count the humblest and most personal experiences. She will count mystical experiences if they have practical consequences” (James 1975: 44). Which is why, rather than a general principle, an ontological or moral *a priori*, James’s individualism cannot be disentangled from the problem that calls it into being with an existential urgency of its own, nor can it be abstracted from the difference it may be liable to make to the manner in which the problem is posed.

Not by chance but in honour of it, the fact is that such a problem bears no other name than that of (geo)historical *change*. James’s question, in other words, is not what individuals *are*, whether they make the primary units of the universe, or where the centre of moral responsibility might lie. The question, always situated, always in wait of the multiple responses that experiences proffer in relay and return, is always one which concerns what individuals *may become capable of*— their vital political importance in fermenting a mutation of their historical milieu. “Our problem,” he writes in his infamous “Great Men and their Environment,” is “What are the causes that make communities change from generation to generation, – that make the England of Queen Anne so different from the England of Queen Elizabeth,

² For incisive, critical explorations of these tropes, see Bonneuil and Fressoz 2016; see also Jouvancourt and Bonneuil 2014.

the Harvard College of to-day so different from that of thirty years ago?” And this difference is no other than “the accumulated influences of individuals”, and not simply of the existence of the ordinary person or the aggregate power of their numbers, but of individuals’ extraordinary character, their maladapted lives, “of their examples, their initiatives, and their decisions”— the singular possibilities that the contingency of their lives opens up (James 1956: 218). Indeed, once the problem to which James’s individualism is a pragmatic answer is rendered perceptible, once the problematic thrill to which he responds becomes felt, it may become possible to inherit James otherwise. It might be possible to reencounter James in ways that, rather than cement his reputation, might precipitate a political reevaluation. One which perhaps, just perhaps, may turn out to be vital for our times (Savransky, 2021a).

For if individuals are a pragmatic name not for the ontological pillar of a liberal ethic but for a speculative theory of change, James’s (1975: 139) individualism cannot be dissociated from his pluralistic anarchism, from his ongoing and unfinished struggle against all great empires –including that of the Absolute– and for a piecemeal, experimental composition of a many-storied universe, “a world not certain to be saved, a world the perfection of which shall be conditional merely, the condition being that each several agent does its own ‘level best.’” Indeed, if our times of ecological ravage raise again the question of what doing something might mean today, I make the proposition that, far from an object of adulation or derision, James’s defence of individuals as speculative ferments of change might enable us to reclaim pragmatism as a vector of a minor philosophical and political tradition. One which, in the face of the catastrophe of homogenisation that modernity has left in its wake, seeks to activate the political imagination on unstable terrain, envisaging action not so much as a matter of resistance and opposition at a global scale, but as one of insistence, apposition and resonance beyond all questions of scale, fostering risky experiments in dissensual modes of thinking, feeling and living well that nourish, intensify, and make what I call the heterogeneous murmurs and murmurations of the Earth resonate.

Zones of Divergence: A Speculative Theory of Change

Were one to seek to reconstruct James's (2001: 625) "rabid individualism"—as he once described it— as a metaphysical cornerstone for his thought, it would be difficult to resist the temptation to go looking for it in his treatise on the principles of psychology. After all, what is the object of psychology if not "the mind of distinct individuals inhabiting definite portions of real space and of real time"? It quickly turns out, however, that such methodological prescriptions offer neither reward nor guarantee. Not only because they in fact point to James's (1950: 183) attempt to draw a distinction between the psychologist's empiricism, which concerns itself with minds as "*objects*, in a world of other objects," and the kinds of transcendence to which philosophical idealisms have appealed, those for which "Mind" is a name for the Absolute, for a transcendent mind "unattached to a particular body, or Mind not subject to the course of time." These methodological prescriptions offer no guarantee because what inhabits these individual minds is itself indivisible but not individual. Instead, it is a singular, impersonal, continuous, and permanently changing stream of thought going on from the outset, a multifarious activity inhabiting the mind as the very subject of the thinking, such that the "thought is itself the thinker, and psychology need not look beyond" (James 1950: 401). Indeed, "could we say in English 'it thinks,' as we say 'it rains' or 'it blows,'" writes James (1950: 224-225), "we should be stating the fact most simply and with the minimum of assumption." In other words, if psychology was to adopt the individual mind as its object in an ecology of other objects, it is not because of a dogmatic metaphysical individualism that would render the body to which the mind is attached the originary source from which thought, emotion and experience emanate, but rather because this individual mind is the intensive zone and vector of divergence through which new thoughts, feelings and sensations *pass*.

Which is why it is all the more interesting that James's most elaborate defences of individuals are penned not in *The Principles of Psychology* but at the heart of his *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy*— James's first openly philosophical book, devoted in no small measure to the question of what may be at stake in living and believing in a world that remains in the making, uncertain to be saved, subject to addition and liable to loss. Indeed, the question of individuals becomes crucial in a couple of intimately connected essays composed in the course of a highly polemical exchange with the nascent social Darwinism of Herbert Spencer and Grant Allen, according to which the entire evolution of

societies was to be characterised in deterministic terms, as mere processes of collective adaptation to the shifting historical conditions of their environment. James's (1956: 226) rejoinder to this neo-Darwinian sociology is neither to deny the environmental affordances on which modes of change lean, nor to neglect the fact that the environment itself shapes the individual "to some degree, by its educative influence." His aim is rather to make frighteningly perceptible the ease with which such propositions are rendered empty abstractions the moment they characterise environmental influences in sweeping, deterministic terms, reducing every event of change to its preceding conditions of possibility, as if the conditions alone were capable of bringing such an event into being. According to James (1956: 219), these modes of explanation murder the very problem they set out to explain, for in taking the perspective of a "divine intelligence" capable of tracing all the infinite lines of convergence towards a given result, they proffer back an image in which "all things in the world are fatally predetermined, and hang together in the adamantine fixity of a system of natural law." What's worse, they are more Kantian than Darwinian, doing a terrible disservice to Darwin's imaginative characterisation of evolutionary processes themselves. For as far as James was concerned, Darwin's crowning achievement was to have sought to give an account of evolutionary processes without relinquishing the affirmative finitude of the living itself, that situated perspective from which contingency and chance cannot be extricated without also and at the same time squeezing out "the vital air which lets the world live, the salt which keeps it sweet" (James 1956: 178).

Indeed, the key contribution of Darwin's scientific imagination was not so much to account for processes of adaptation, which had been done before, but rather to affirm their relative insignificance in the face of the multitudes of *accidental variations*, "the immensely greater mass of changes being produced by internal molecular accidents, of which we know nothing" (James 1956: 223). The concept and attention to accidental variations radically transforms the relationship between individuals and their environment.³ No longer a matter of passive adaptation, to which individuals must submit, it becomes one of always situated, precarious and indeterminate experiments: of an environment that adopts or rejects, preserves or destroys; and of the individual born of variation, which –unless destroyed– perhaps becomes a transformative influence of its own milieu, "acts as a *ferment*, and changes its constitution, just

³ For an excellent discussion of the relationship between James and Darwin see McGranahan (2017) and Wiame (2021).

as the advent of a new zoölogical species changes the faunal and floral equilibrium of the region in which it appears” (James 1956: 226). Accidental variations, in other words, make chance and contingency the incorporeal backbone of evolutionary processes themselves, reminding us that, as James (1996: 158) wrote paraphrasing Gustave Fechner, history –the earth’s as much as ours– “develops from within,” like a “wonderful egg which the sun’s heat, like that of a mother-hen, has stimulated to its cycles of evolutionary change.”

The suggestion that the history of the earth develops from within deserves to be read as an planetary pluralism *avant la lettre*.⁴ For what it makes resonate is the possibility of resisting the temptation of speaking of the earth –and of ourselves, whoever we may be– as an already constituted system, surrendering too early to a oneness which it lacks. Instead, it enables us to inhabit it as an always fragile and precarious composition not certain to be saved, in the making after all: the name for an ongoing and unfinished adventure of geohistorical events, more-than-human activities, critical experiences, revolutionary rifts, at all times subject to addition and liable to loss. “We rise upon the earth,” writes James (1996: 171), “as wavelets rise upon the ocean. We grow out of her soil as leaves grow from a tree.” Yet none of this rehearses the romanticism of an ecological holism yearning for communion with the common flesh of the earth. For as James goes on to state,

The wavelets catch the sunbeams separately, the leaves stir when the branches do not move. They realize their own events apart, just as in our own consciousness, when anything becomes emphatic, the background fades from observation. Yet the event works back upon the background, as the wavelet works upon the waves, or as the leaf’s movements work upon the sap inside the branch. The whole sea and the whole tree are registers of what has happened, and are different for the wave’s and the leaf’s action having occurred. A grafted twig may modify its stock to the roots:— so our outlived

⁴ For some contemporary forms of such planetary pluralisms (as multifarious and divergent as the Earth which thinks through them) one might turn, for instance, to Nigel Clark and Bron Szerszynski’s (2020) conceptualization of “planetary multiplicity,” to Frédéric Neyrat’s (2018) conception of the earth neither as object nor subject but as “traject”, to Bruno Latour’s (2017) peculiar reading of Lovelock’s Gaia hypothesis, or to my own meditations on what I call a “speculative earth” (Savransky 2022).

private experiences, impressed on the whole earth-mind as memories, lead the immortal life of ideas there, and become parts of the great system, fully distinguished from one another, just as we ourselves when alive were distinct, realizing themselves no longer isolatedly, but along one another as so many partial systems, entering thus into new combinations, being affected by perceptive experiences of those living then, and affecting them in turn— altho they're seldom recognized by living men to do so. (James 1996: 171-172)

Ongoing and unfinished, developing from within, the multiple more-than-human stories that compose this multifarious Earth make its destiny hang on a lot of ifs and maybes. And if an individual is capable of anything, “and is productive and originative at all, his entire vital function may be said to have to deal with maybes” (James 1956: 59). Indeed, if in his psychology the individual mind is the zone and vector of divergence through which singular thoughts, feelings and sensations *pass*, here again we find that James’s (1956: 231) interest in individual lives, in the importance of their stories, examples, initiatives and decisions, revolves entirely around the question of their function and force, of the differences they’re liable to make as “ferments, initiators of movement, settlers of precedent or fashion.” In other words, individuals are *zones of divergence* whose additions to this many-storied earth “offer ambiguous potentialities of development,” creating possibles that maybe, just maybe, may come to engender social mutations and reassemble planetary relations. Which is to say that his individualism is a name for a speculative theory of change. One that—like anonymous murmur rustling through the air, or like a murmuration of starlings wherein the movement of each is shaped and influenced not by the metric space around it but by its topological relation to the movements of other starlings in the emergent formation (Ballerini et al., 2008)—conceives of the “mutations of societies” as engendered by an earthly murmuration of individual differences, one kindling the other in such a way that they compose a “zone of formative processes, the dynamic belt of quivering uncertainty, the line where past and future meet.” That, indeed, is “the theatre of all we do not take for granted, the stage of the living drama of life” (James 1956: 259).

And for all the polemic about Queens and Kings, for all the rhetoric about “great men,” *that* is precisely the importance that, in his *Varieties of Religious Experience*, James (1971: 259) would ascribe to those who are undoubtedly his prime examples of wayward individuals: the lives of saints who, in their excess, with their extravagance of human tenderness, “have often led their course so differently from other men that judging them by worldly law, we might be tempted to call them monstrous aberrations from the path of nature.” But if they seem monstrous aberrations, if their lives of extravagant strain and excessive charity seem preposterous, it is simply because the world is not yet with them— their lives and stories are forged in the leap of having accepted the risk of taking a leap, of having consented to the possibility of turning themselves into a ferment of possibles, jumping with both feet off the ground into a world they trust others would meet their jump. And yet it is that very divergence from the given state of affairs, their very maladaptation to the terms of order, that simultaneously judges them as monsters and renders them “impregnators of the world, vivifiers and animaters of potentialities of goodness which but for them would forever lie dormant.” It is not possible, James (1971: 348) writes, “to be quite as mean as we naturally are, when they have passed before us.” James’s admiration of the lives of saints is instructive not only because of the kind of individual stories that he regards as capable of kindling a spiritual murmur into existence. It is instructive because such admiration does not lead to a project of mere imitation, exhorting his readers to become saints themselves. Which is why what matters to James (1971: 350) is not so much the proper name of saints but their “saintly methods,” their character as “creative energies,” as vectors of divergence in an environment to which they are maladapted while simultaneously turning such maladaptation into their own “magic gift,” rendering the saint “an effective ferment of goodness, a slow transmuter of the earthly into a more heavenly order.”

Here again it is not the individual mind that thinks but the zone through which “it thinks,” it is not the individual person that singlehandedly effects change but the zone through which “it changes,” not the individual saint that institutes a heavenly order but a method and zone through which the earthly order mutates. Which is to say that James’s individuals are neither coextensive with the boundedness of an individual body nor with the heroic feats of the first person singular. His individualism belongs instead to what, after American poet Lawrence Ferlinghetti (1960: 93), I would call the “fourth person singular”,

the unruly murmur of a force and voice “of which nobody speaks but which still exists unvoiced”. Reducible neither to individual persons nor to a sea without difference, the fourth person singular is a name for the accursed share of every “I” and every “we”, an immanent, inappropriable, and fragmentary outside that insists and persists in the interstices and frayed edges of the established terms of order and occasionally bursts in their midst. Belonging neither the one who acts nor to what is acted upon, it is *the grammatical person of metamorphosis* itself, the mute voice of the “it rains”, “it blows”, “it thinks”. Which is to say that what the fourth person singular limns is the unruly event and intense feeling of bare activity on the edge of things, of the wavelet rising upon as it works upon the waves, of life in the imperfective: the metaphysical turmoil and tumult through which singularities “break in, thieving and stealing away, alternating back and forth, like anarchy crowned, inhabiting a nomad space” (Deleuze 2004: 143). After all, James insists (1971: 478) that it is not the individual person that is the origin and centre of feeling but “individuality” itself that “is founded in feeling”. And if it is out of this fragmentary and impersonal sociality of feeling that individuation springs forth, it is in and through the very “recesses of feeling, the darker, blinder strata of character” through which transformations —personal, social, historical, planetary—groove the terrain. Those dark passages and scattered undergrounds of the fourth person singular comprise what James describes as nothing less than “the only places in the world in which we catch real fact in the making, and directly perceive how events happen, and how work is actually done.” All of this is to say that, whenever James is concerned, to speak of individualism is nothing more and nothing less than to speak of a pragmatic method for learning how to *listen* to the passing rustle of murmurs, to the precarious formation of murmurations through which the fourth person singular, always unvoiced, speaks. A practice of attunement, in other words, to the dissensual resonances engendered in the stealing away of things, among wayward lives, in the surrounds of order through which the settled actuality of the world begins to fray and gives way to something else: to an iridescent array of singular movements disclosing possibilities for thinking, living, and inhabiting the earth otherwise.

Strange Affinities: Pragmatism, Anarchism and Victorian Murmurations

At the heart of James's individualism of the fourth person singular lies therefore a profoundly political question which would not only shape his philosophical thought but would itself implicate him in a *fin-de-siècle* murmuration of his own. The question, that is, of a radical, anti-colonial, anarchistic pluralism that, in the face of the growing imperialisation of the world and the stifling institutionalisation of thought and life, would shout "Hands off!", break with the order of the politically settled, and strive to activate and nourish pragmatic experiments in dissensual modes of thinking, feeling and living well, each faithful to their own possibilities and to their own risks, without presuming to regulate the rest of the world (Savransky 2021a, 2021b). As he put it most poignantly, in a letter addressed to his friend Sarah Wyman Whitman:

As for me, my bed is made: I am against bigness in all its forms; and with the invisible molecular forces that work from individual to individual, stealing in through the crannies of the world like so many rootlets or like the capillary oozing of water, and yet rending the hardest monuments of man's pride, if you give them time. The bigger the unit you deal with, the hollower, the more brutal, the more mendacious is the life displayed. So I am against all big organizations as such, national ones first and foremost, against all big successes and big results, and in favour of the eternal forces of truth which always work in the individual and immediately unsuccessful way, under-dogs always, till history comes after they are long dead, and puts them on top (James 1920: 90).

The letter was sent on June 7th, 1899, in the context of an epistolary exchange in which James discussed questions of democracy and the "moral crisis" of the Dreyfus affair, the American reaction to it he could not help but strongly condemn. Indeed, the turn of the twentieth century was undoubtedly a radical moment for James, turning him into an underdog against all big organisations and great empires (Coon, 1996).

In 1894 and 1898, James publicly opposed bills, in the process of being passed before the Massachusetts legislature, that sought to regulate the medical profession by requiring people engaged in medical practices to become licensed by way of an examination. His opposition, which exacted considerable damage to his reputation in the medical profession, was based on the fact that the bills included several clauses which attempted to disqualify and abolish faith-curers, such as the Spiritualists and the Christian Scientists, by requiring them to become doctors of medicine. Despite his disagreements with the unpersuasive theories many of these healers would spout, he nevertheless considered the divergent experiments and facts of “mind-cures” and other such psychotherapies to be “patent and startling; and anything that interferes with the multiplication of such facts, and with our freest opportunity of observing and studying them,” he told a legislative hearing at the State House, “will, I believe, be a public calamity. The law now proposed will so interfere, simply because the mind-curers will not take the examinations” (James 1920: 69). Indeed, it was in defence of the very possibilities of which these healers had become ferments, of the possibility that “the therapeutic relation may be what we can at present describe only as a relation of one person to another person,” that James risked composing a murmuration of “strange affinities” with a whole host of wayward practitioners –spiritists, faith-curers, magnetic healers, and others– so as to resist their disqualification in the hands of a medical profession on the cusp of becoming modern by means of legislation. “Let us not,” he implored the members of the hearing, “grow hysterical about law-making. Let us not fall in love with enactments and penalties because they are so logical and sound so pretty, and look so nice on paper” (James 1920: 69).

With the advent of the Spanish-American War and the eventual colonisation of the Philippines by the United States, James’s anarchistic pluralism, his condemnation of all great empires and his defence of the zones of divergence where possibilities become felt, only grew stronger. Deploring the “infamy” not only of American imperial conquest but also of the civilising and colonial narrative according to which it became the US’s “responsibility” to subjugate the Filipinos for their own sake, James wrote publicly against it and joined the Anti-Imperialist League. In an address to them, he forcefully questioned the colonial policy of assimilation “of our prey to us or of us to our prey for fifty years to come, and no one who knows history expects that it can genuinely come at all” (James 1987: 1130). Reciting the

consequences that a nation enthralled by the bigness of empire is capable of bringing about—from the material ruin of the islands and the poisoning of the Filipino’s “native friendliness”, to the whitewashing of torture and the condoning of massacres—he called upon members of the League to “individually do what we can” to influence public opinion, like the capillary oozing of water, in support of independence for the Philippines. And so, indeed, did he. While there is no explicit reference to American foreign policy in it, it is the politics of anti-colonialism that pulsate through his famous “On a Certain Blindness in Human Beings,” delivered publicly to students, wherein he affirms the situated partiality of perspective of every living individual, one that “absolutely forbids us to be forward in pronouncing on the meaningless of forms of existence other than our own” (James 1907: 264). Making a final plea for the vital importance of the multiple zones of divergence through which the “impersonal world of worths” steals in through the crannies of always singular lives, he writes:

Hands Off: neither the whole of truth nor the whole of good is revealed to any single observer, although each observer gains a partial superiority of insight from the peculiar position in which he stands. Even prisons and sick-rooms have their special revelations. It is enough to ask of each of us that he should be faithful to his own opportunities and make the most of his own blessings, without presuming to regulate the rest of the vast field (James 1907: 264).

Indeed, the more James defended the importance of individuals and praised the vital alterity of their wayward lives, the more he found himself in the hold of strange affinities, implicated in a pluralistic murmuration of his own. For, as postcolonial historian Leela Gandhi (2006: 9) has shown in her wonderful *Affective Communities*, James’s own anti-imperial, anarchistic pluralism made common cause with a motley crew of individual and collective “Victorian radicals” who at the turn of the twentieth century wove together, in and out of empire, the disparate energies of Marxism, utopian experimentation, spiritualism, pragmatism, vegetarianism, (homo)sexual politics, and continental anarchism, so as to precipitate “the mutation of ‘internationalism’ into a series of countercultural revolutionary practices”

that briefly rendered the possibility of a metropolitan anticolonialism an existentially urgent and socially inventive political project of dissensual coexistence.

Besides the better-known influence of Benjamin Paul Blood (1920), the “pluralistic mystic” about whom James wrote and who might have coined the term “pluriverse”, James was also deeply influenced by Henry Bennett Brewster (1887), a British writer whose delightful *The Theories of Anarchy and of Law: A Midnight Debate* he marked and annotated profusely, alive to the profound resonances that his own propositions on pragmatism established with the midnight debate the characters in this philosophical dialogue hold.⁵ On the occasion of his visit to the US in the 1894’s *Parliament of World Religions*, James met the Hindu monk and yogi Swami Vivekananda –about whom he would go on to write, if somewhat critically, yet at considerable length– and offered to write an introduction for the publication of Vivekananda’s (1998) *Raja-Yoga*. And James’s work had a direct impact upon and forged connections to the utopian socialist, homosexual reformer, anti-vivisectionist and author Edward Carpenter, who brought together aspects of James’s pluralistic metaphysics, Marxism, and the *Bhagavad Gita* to promote his conviction that “the rigid antinomies of species, class, race, and gender could only be resolved through a cultivated hybridization of subjectivity,” and went on to propound a reformulation of “the homosexual project as an ‘open coalition,’ uniquely amenable to intersubjective solidarities and cooperative counteralliegiances between disparate and shifting groups” (Gandhi 2006: 139-140).

It is therefore not exactly a coincidence that, towards the end of his discussion of the value of saintliness, James (1971: 350) would write that “the Utopian dreams of social justice in which many contemporary socialists and anarchists indulge are, in spite of their impracticability and non-adaptation to present environmental conditions, analogous to the saint’s belief in an existent kingdom of heaven.” Stealing in through the crannies of the world like so many rootlets or like the capillary oozing of water, what this fin-de-siècle murmuration together composed in the fourth person singular was precisely a minor politics of divergence, of metamorphosis and dissensual coexistence, of life lived in the

⁵ Take, for instance, the following intervention by Wilfrid, one of the characters in the conversation: “Truth itself, however much you may get of it, is but a factor in a larger work, and its greatest value is not in that which it declares, but in that which the declaration is ignorant of, but tends to fashion and form. Whatever you may express, your are at the same time co-operating in the growth of reality of a quite different kind, you are making something different to what you express. Truth is but a parcel of some becoming reality” (Brewster, 1887: 28).

imperfective as a function of being in relation with others, through which the irreducible multiplicity of the world became felt in and against the great empire of modern, global sovereignty. And at one and the same time, they also cultivated an experimental poetics of divergence that not only worked outwardly, by shouting “hands off!” and unsettling the imperium of diverse institutional structures and laws, but also operated inwardly, so as to interrupt the germinal imperialist impulses in their own forms of thinking, feeling and living, thereby articulating a form of what Gandhi (2017: 70) calls “moral imperfectionism.” An art of thinking and living that, in making of the failure of sovereign victory its very political vocation, “renders an apparently concluded (perfected) action” —including that of one’s own thought, one’s own self-fashioning, one’s own mode of political composition and earthly habitation— permanently “unfinished and suddenly infinitive.” Such became indeed the risk and possibility of consenting to a world and inhabiting an earth that is ongoing and unfinished, permanently in the making and not certain to be saved. In such a precarious and dangerous world, the word “and” trails along its edges. Something always escapes. “Ever not quite!,” James (1996: 321) famously wrote, “has to be said of the best attempts anywhere in the universe at attaining all-inclusiveness.”

In relay and return, neither can it be a coincidence, and much less a contradiction, that it is precisely out of his defence of the importance of individuals, which is to say out of this anti-imperialist anarchism, out of this earthly murmuration of wayward lives and maladapted political projects in which his own individual life became implicated, that James would go on to compose a metaphysics where profusion, rather than economy, becomes reality’s keynote. It was in honour of such profusion that he developed a philosophy for a world in ongoing composition and recomposition, “as a pluralism of independent powers” which “will succeed just in proportion as more of these work for its success” and “if none work, it will fail” (James 1996b: 229). Indeed, the very form such a world would take is but the metamorphic, fragmentary, unstable, and imperfective shape of a murmuration of its own. After all, philosophies, for James (1996a: 317), are intimate parts of the universe, “they express something of its own thought of itself.” And if philosophers always conceive the world after some analogy, be that of a forest or a block of marble, it is no surprise that James’s (1996a: 322) pluriverse would be “more like a federal republic than an empire or kingdom. However much may be collected, however much may report

itself as present in any effective centre of consciousness or action,” the fourth person singular always lurks in its midst: “something else is self-governed and absent and unreduced to unity.” Indeed, the pluriverse is the world of the scattered, where things exist distributively, in what James (1996a: 324) called the “each-form”, such that “a thing may be connected by intermediary things, with a thing with which it has no immediate or essential connexion. It is thus at all times in many possible connexions which are not necessarily actualized at the moment. They depend on which actual path of intermediation it may functionally strike into: the word ‘or’ names a genuine reality.” A many-storied universe it is indeed, composed as much by the many voices that assemble through it as by that murmur of which nobody speaks but which exists unvoiced, thieving and stealing away, alternating back and forth, like anarchy crowned, in the rustle of the wind.

The Murmurs of the Scattered: A Minor Politics of Dissensual Coexistence

What, then, might doing something mean today? It goes without saying that, in the wake of the earth-wide ravage that is now our condition of planetary habitation, fabricating a response to this question can in no way be reducible to a matter of reclaiming veganism, early twentieth-century sexual politics, yoga, or the ascetism of saintliness. The liberal imaginary governing expressions of moral virtue as well as the politics of what it calls “behaviour change” has brought that into its fold already. It is not, indeed, a question of simply reproducing the Victorian murmuration that resonated with James’s thought then. But neither is it a matter of accepting the terms of order that couch the answer in the form of misanthropic guilt and repentance, of the imperative that global political institutions get back on the path to ecologically reflexive progress, or of the need to recognise the geological powers of this would-be universal human species and act with prudence in the face of a defiant Earth. Murmurations are unstable and precarious. They must always be experimentally *formed*, assembled in the imperfective, through strange affinities to be composed in relation to the movements of others in the emergent formation. Which is why, whilst paying attention to such Victorian murmuration authorises nothing, guarantees nothing, it nevertheless renders us alive to the possibility that before and amidst contemporary threats

and promises of bigness an unsuspected profusion of invisible, molecular “doings” insist and persist in spite all, unvoiced, breaking in, thieving and stealing away, alternating back and forth, in the murmurs left behind by hurricanes and in the wake of ever growing waves.

Indeed, potential strange affinities might be in the making in the scattered movements that make a whole array of wayward experiments and maladapted projects of divergence traces of the passage of the fourth person singular on an Earth unstable and unsafe: amongst those who in the wake of Hurricane Katrina turn set out to live amphibious lives on a common swell of sociality and mutual aid, outfitting homes, trailers, as well as bars and restaurants that could float off their foundations without having to surrender to the increased threat of flooding their ongoing attachment to the place (Crow 2014, Wakefield 2020); in the improvisation practices of priests who, the other side of the Pacific, set up a mobile café in the wake of the 2011 tsunami that devastated the northeast of Japan in order to offer spiritual care both to the living and to the dead (Savransky 2021a); or indeed, amidst the efforts of those in and around Fukushima who, faced with the nuclear explosion that followed the earthquake, engage in projects –from DIY radiation monitoring and introducing medicinal diets and building communities off the grid– of learning how to die so as to learn how to live well with the multitudinous radionuclides the disaster unleashed (Khosro 2020). And as the colonial toxicity of that imperious form of bigness we have called “civilisation” now truly pervades the Earth (Savransky 2022b), wayward experiments in dissensual coexistence are also cultivated in community gardens in the environs of Arusha, Tanzania, where at the interstices of medicine and agriculture, therapeutic foods and nutritious medicines are produced to enable those living with toxic chemicals and chronic medical conditions to learn how to live and die well by implicating bodies into alternative assemblies of people and plants (Langwick 2018).

The word “or” names a genuine reality. And if the ruins of the modern imperial project which our ravaged present makes only too perceptible sadly corroborate James’s (1956: 160) fear, that even “from the point of view of our own ends, we should probably make a botch of remodelling the universe,” then perhaps interrupting the imperium of liberal demands and the progressive dreams of progress and of new global civilisations is less a matter of giving up than of shouting “Hands Off!” and giving other forms of social and political imagination a chance. The chance, that is, to activate multiple zones of

divergence, strange affinities between maladapted modes of political composition that, in a world not certain to be saved, immanently accept the risk of learning to nourish dissensual mode of coexistence with a host of disparate, wayward lives, each faithful to their own possibilities and to their own risks. None of them, to be sure, produce the blueprint for a new common world. But if they fail to lay the grounds for the making of a new civilisation, it is only because such pluralistic murmurations espouse this sovereign failure as their very political vocation, turning the tragic rumbles of this unstable Earth into the joyful murmurs of the scattered and the unsettled, giving themselves over to the imperfective, to the informality and incompleteness that they share.

Which is why, by wagering on one and many maybes, on the slim chance of inhabiting the Earth otherwise without in the process sapping the vital air which lets the world live and the salt which keeps it sweet, such precarious murmurations make it perceptible that all wholes are made of nothing but holes, that to respond to the question of what doing something might mean today might involve consenting to the risk of tinkering with fragmented futures, of an ongoing and unfinished improvisation of collective life on unstable terrain, of intensifying the zones of divergence through which the unvoiced speaks, through which the unthought thinks, through which the outside breaks in. For even when immediately unsuccessful, even when under-dogs always, such unruly metamorphoses and murmurations remind us, with James (1920: 154-155), that, yes, we are all “mysteries of condensation, and yet of extrication and individuation, and we must worship the soil we have so wonderfully sprung from.” But also that doing so does not mean worshiping it “as the Theists do, in the shape of one all-inclusive and all-operative designing power, but rather like polytheists, in the shape of a collection of beings who have each contributed and are now contributing to the realisation of ideals more or less like those for which we live ourselves.” Perhaps one day, should there be another day, the efforts of such pluralistic murmurations on unstable ecological terrain might steal in through the crannies of the world, like so many soft rootlets or like the capillary oozing of water, and rend even the hardest monuments of modern imperial pride, if you give them a chance.

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