Sonoko SAITO

The Figure In The Cage:
Reader and Writer in Henry James

Henry James’s novella, In the Cage (1898), focuses on a female telegraphist working in London and her expanding function as reader, writer and artist as she finds herself in the midst of densely condensed messages. The novella was first published in book form and was included in the collection of the author’s works, The Novels and Tales of Henry James, better known as “the New York Edition,” published between 1907 and 1909 in the author’s lifetime. Towards the end of the nineteenth century, James wrote a number of stories about writers and artists, “The Figure in the Carpet” (1896), being one of them. These fictional writers and artists experience a conflict on the boundary between readers and writers. The female telegraphist in In the Cage is no exception, even though she is not a writer or artist in the conventional sense. As a telegraphist, she works on the boundary of class distinctions and on the boundary of linguistic and epistemological distinctions, representing multiple identities, as reader, writer, and artist, revealing the overlapping functions of reading and writing.

1. The Framed Telegraphist in the Cage

The story is narrated by a third-person narrator but the central consciousness of the story is that of a young woman, a working-class telegraphist. She is both literally and figuratively “in the cage.” In a literal sense, her cage is an enclosed section behind the counter in a grocery store, a “framed and wired confinement” (IC 1), “fenced out or fenced in” by “a frail structure” between the grocery and the telegraph office (2). In the narrator’s words, “the poor identity of her function”

... was to sit there with two young men—the other telegraphist and the
counter-clerk; to mind the ‘ sounder,’ which was always going, to dole out stamps and postal-orders, weigh letters, answer stupid questions, give difficult change and, more than anything else, count words as numberless as the sands of the sea, the words of the telegrams thrust, from morning to night, through the gap left in the high lattice, across the encumbered shelf that her forearm ached with rubbing. (1–2)

This makes her human existence rather routine and mechanical, working with the sounder, a device that transmits telegraphic messages by converting words into sound. The sounder in the cage is “the innermost cell of captivity, a cage within the cage, fenced off from the rest by a frame of ground glass” (13). In this space, words are no more meaningful than “the sands of the sea,” and are merely the objects of her counting. Notably, however, while the sounder, together with the telegraphist, is “the innermost captive,” it is also the functional center of the cage.

The telegraphist is also figuratively in the “cage.” “The cage” refers to a space separated by a barrier explained as follows:

The barrier that divided the little post-and-telegraph-office from the grocery was a frail structure of wood and wire; but the social, the professional separation was a gulf. . . . (2)

The structure is frail in appearance but socially solid in reality, dividing the working-class telegraphist from the high society of Mayfair. It is a visual, and apparently impassible, boundary that signifies the class distinction between the workers inside and “the rest” (13), the telegraphist’s upper-class clients. They are not supposed to interact on a personal level, and their two worlds are separate. The workers remain trapped within the cage, while the upper-class customers are free to come and go, to spend and consume.

The state of the female telegraphist as a “captive” (10), who leads the “life of a guinea-pig or a magpie” (1) in the cage, may be further explained by turning to the words of Hugh Vereker, the author character in “The Figure in the Carpet.” Vereker claims that at the heart of his work lies an underlying authorial design, “the figure in the carpet.” The story’s narrator continues his hermeneutic quest for the figure even after Vereker’s death but ultimately fails to determine what it is. This leaves the question unresolved whether or not there is any such thing in the
author’s textual weave from the beginning. The advice Vereker gives to the reviewer-narrator is, “it [the figure] won’t [be detected]!” (FC 283) and “Give it up—give it up!” (285), which, nonetheless, sustains the narrator’s quest for the figure.

Vereker says about “the figure” as follows:

“My whole lucid effort gives him the clue—every page and line and letter. The thing’s as concrete there as a bird in a cage, a bait on a hook, a piece of cheese in a mouse-trap. It’s stuck into every volume as your foot is stuck into your shoe. It governs every line, it chooses every word, it dots every i, it places every comma.” (283–84)

This description suggests that “the thing,” or “the figure,” at the text’s center is a captive (a bird in “the cage”) and also a means of drawing others into a state of captivity (a bait on a hook, cheese in a trap). Though captive, the figure is said to govern the text in every volume. While the narrator seeks this focal “figure,” even after the author’s death, it manages both to elude and sustain the narrator’s quest, suggesting that this “figure” is both the captive and that which captivates the reader. Vereker goes on to describe it as “a heart” and “the organ of life” (284). A “life” and “a bird in a cage” overlap with the human telegraphist and the telegraphist’s framed working environment. Clarifying the state of the telegraphist may lead us to “the figure” in James’s carpet.

2. The Telegraphist as Reader

The way in which the telegraphist deals with the messages is generally mechanical, counting words and operating the “sounder.” She is flooded with numberless coded messages “thrust” through the gap by faceless customers. The “frail structure” of the cage within which she works is, as Jennifer Wicke puts it, a “net of words” (146). The telegraphist processes these countless messages as nothing but meaningless chains of words. Working with her in the structure is the sounder, which translates the inserted messages into sounds. Words are converted into electric codes, which are emitted from the machine as sound. The cage is a place where words and sounds are both supplementary to each other, and it embodies a communication system that anticipates the faster and denser systems to come with the development of technology. This system is associated with James’s own
writing style in his later years. He composed his writing by speaking to his typists, the best-known being Theodora Bosanquet. His typist then converted his voice into text on a typewriter.

Unlike the sounder, however, the telegraphist’s mechanical function turns out— as the story continues—to be replaced by a more creative role. When she becomes particularly interested in the two clients, Lady Bradeen and Captain Everard, the telegraphist begins to really “read” and interpret the telegrams of these “authors.” As the telegraph messages are densely elliptical, she has to decipher the messages by an act of interpretation, by bridging the gap left by the ellipses. The telegraphist, in this sense, occupies the field where meanings are constructed. However, as her interaction with the outside world is limited and only accessible through the gap in the lattice, the telegraphist’s reading develops in a confined environment. In her given “structure,” the meaning of words is processed differently than it is on the outside. The telegraphist tries to reconstruct the meaning loaded in their condensed chains of words by supplementing them with the chains of words available on her side of the world. Her reconstructed meaning, in this way, becomes her version of the outside world.

Ultimately, it turns out that the telegraphist’s reading is a misreading; she has created a ghostly reality. In her “structure,” a different mode of reading governs her interpretation from the mode outside. Nicola Nixon argues convincingly that the novels the telegraphist habitually reads regulate her readings. She argues that the telegraphist’s imagination depends on the “ha’penny novels” borrowed from a circulating library. The story describes her practice of reading as follows:

She had forty minutes in advance of this to go home for her own dinner; and when she came back, and one of the young men took his turn, there was often half an hour during which she could pull out a bit of work or a book—a book from the place where she borrowed novels, very greasy, in fine print and all about fine folks, at a ha’penny a day. (5–6)

She reads, though her reading is limited in kind. Nixon suggests that the books she reads are “trashy romances,” or “pulp romances and sentimental tales” (190) like Picciola, a “charming” (IC 11) “prison novel” (Nixon 186). As the only tale named in In the Cage, Picciola is suggestive of the telegraphist’s own captivity and the kind of reading in it. Her readerly deviation surfaces when she figuratively jumps
out of the cage and presents her own interpretation of the relationship between Lady Bradeen and Captain Everard. The telegraphist takes “flight” (IC 68) in constructing her story about them as if she were reading “romantic fiction” (Nixon 192). Priscilla Walton also indicates that “the ha’penny novels” are “the basis of her knowledge of the upper classes” (96).

To decipher the messages and to reconstruct the reality outside the cage, the telegraphist depends on the romantic pattern she is used to through her reading, within her framed structure which does not allow her to access the reality of the upper classes. Douglas Tallack, developing his reading by using the textual strategies of deconstruction, introduces Stuart Hutchinson’s argument that Mr. Mudge, the telegraphist’s fiancé, functions as a “structural ‘frame of reference’” for the telegraphist (168). However, usually distanced from Mr. Mudge and managing to escape his influence, the telegraphist’s reading depends on the rules of the romantic stories that she reads and the romantic imagination they generate, rather than the practical, economic, and even sexual (in Hutchinson’s argument) association that Mr. Mudge could provide for her from his commercial sphere.

3. The Telegraphist as Writer and Revisionist

The telegraphist’s reading inevitably functions as writing. In the following sequence, the narrator describes her perception of the other side of the cage as being similar to the reading of a page and reveals some features of her reading:

What virtually happened was that in the shuffling herd that passed before her by far the greater part only passed—a proportion but just appreciable stayed. Most of the elements swam straight away, lost themselves in the bottomless common, and by so doing really kept the page clear. On the clearness, therefore, what she did retain stood sharply out; she nipped and caught it, turned it over and interwove it. (32–33)

She selectively perceives only a part of the outside world beyond the counter, which stays on the page, and works with what is left and interweaves it as she reads. She produces expanded textual possibilities, and the reader telegraphist is simultaneously the writer of the story she is faced with.

Moreover, her reading as writing is “writing in” the ellipses of the telegrams. The telegraphist’s reading and writing seem to have things in common with
Millicent Bell’s insight about reading as writing in James’s work. Bell accounts for the combination of reading and writing in his stories as follows, focusing upon textual blanks:

More often than we sometimes realize, too, the blanks must stay open for the full richness of the work to continue to operate. . . . One may say, of course, that these blanks are only there to be confidently filled by the reader. . . . (15)

She goes on to liken this aspect of James’s writing to Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter* and suggests that the reader is encouraged to write in the “ellipses” that are left out by the writer (16). The writer expects the reader to fill in the blanks with something she/he refuses to specify but intends to be there. Also, the blanks allow for “a variety of other meanings to enter” and this is something James “claimed to have calculated in writing that story” (Bell 16). James states that if what is left out pertains to “evil,” then the sense of evil will be as intense as the individual reader’s experience, imagination, sympathy, or horror make it (AN 176). In this sense, the blanks also endow the reader with “an escape” from “the prison house of conventional ideas” (Bell 16). The reader functions as a writer, and this invites a dangerous proliferation of meaning because the blanks may or may not be filled with meanings that the writer intends.

This image of the reader is applicable to the telegraphist. As a reader, she tries to fill in or “write in” the blanks left out by the telegraphic words. As the telegraphist’s writing is led by her misreading, that in turn leads to a chain of deviations; her text is exposed to original writers as readers, Lady Bradeen and Captain Everard, and brings practical consequences. Two scenes can be considered to reveal the telegraphist’s writing based on her misreading: one involving Lady Bradeen and the other involving Captain Everard. Ralf Normman’s analysis of these two scenes, centered on the telegraphist’s interception of their telegrams, assesses the extent to which the telegraphist is wrong and clarifies how a subjective reality constructed by her imagination deviates from the objective reality. Norrmman’s analysis is accurate in provisionally filling in the blanks of the conversation between the telegraphist and Lady Bradeen. On learning that the lady intends to change a word in her telegram, the telegraphist gives Lady Bradeen a suggestion of an alternative.
'Isn’t it Cooper’s?'

It was as if she had bodily leaped—cleared the top of the cage and alighted on her interlocutress. ‘Cooper’s?’—the stare was heightened by a blush. Yes, she had made Juno blush.

This was all the more reason for going on. ‘I mean instead of Burfield’s.’

Our young friend fairly pitied her; she had made her in an instant so helpless, and yet not a bit haughty nor outraged. She was only mystified and scared. ‘Oh, you know—?’

‘Yes, I know!’ Our young friend smiled, meeting the other’s eyes, and, having made Juno blush, proceeded to patronise her. (IC 79–80)

Norrman fills in the space of the dashes as follows:

The dash stands for ellipsis—a blank-type ambiguity. In other words Lady Bradeen did not finish her sentence. She is just aghast at the little spying, meddling telegraphist. “You know—” for the telegraphist means “You know—[the right word],” but to Lady Bradeen we may very well imagine that it means something like “You know—[about my affair with Captain Everard. You know whom I usually send telegrams to. You spy into my private life and meddle in my business].” But the girl thinks her guess was correct. (426)

Norrman’s example shows the possible differences between the words as they are understood by Lady Bradeen and by the telegraphist. When she makes a correction to Lady Bradeen’s words, she is writing in place of the original writer and making a revision. Not only does she not hesitate to revise in the “author’s” place, she also does not care whether or not her writing is “correct” in the author’s mind. Her misreading and her revision result in changing the effect of the original writing. This becomes obvious when she gives Captain Everard the information about the earlier telegrams:

She [the telegraphist] wrote something on the back of the card and pushed it across to him [Everard].

He fairly glared at it. ‘Seven, nine, four—’

‘Nine, six, one’—she obligingly completed the number. ‘Is it right?’ she smiled.
He took the whole thing in with a flushed intensity; then there broke out in him a visibility of relief that was simply a tremendous exposure. He shone at them all like a tall lighthouse, embracing even, for sympathy, the blinking young men. 'By all the powers—it’s wrong!' (157)

She is again writing in place of the original writer, Lady Bradeen, and her misreading allows her to give Everard crucial information, which has an actual influence on his next action. Ironically, as a response to her question, “Is it right?”, Everard says, “it’s wrong!” Although the conversation does work in the literal sense of the word, it does not work on the level of understanding. While her understanding of the situation is wrong, her text, a result of her reading and writing, has a practical influence on the page she is reading. This affected “page” would produce still more texts without the author’s “approval,” entailing practical effects.

4. The Telegraphist as Artist

The telegraphist finally marries Mr. Mudge and leaves the telegraph office. She eventually exits the cage. However, it is debatable whether she really is freed from “the cage.” Critics tend to find her still in a cage of some sort. Nicola Nixon, for example, assesses the limits of the telegraphist’s ability as a reader and contends that the telegraphist “is finally disengaged” (196) from the cage of contemporary social norms, “the Victorian protection and isolation of young female readers” (196). However, Nixon believes the telegraphist is still in “the intractable social cage, an inescapable prison on which a readerly education and augmented critical acumen can have no appreciable impact whatsoever” (196).

Molly Vaux analyses the telegraphist’s practice of writing, associating it with James’s own practice. According to Vaux, although “the telegraphist steps out of her cage,” there still remains the cage of “aesthetic limits,” which provide a writer with a “defining form” (137). Vaux reads the story as suggestive of the telegraphist’s “creative failure” and concludes that “the telegraphist reaps no tangible reward from her failure,” differentiating her from “her creator” (137), Henry James:

Unlike her creator, the telegraphist reaps no tangible reward from her failure. She has lost consciousness of herself as a writer. A perpetual reminder of the inescapability of aesthetic limits, she walks the London streets sightlessly,
her thoughts “too numerous to find a place” in the final sentences of the story. (137)

Vaux’s reading is astute in that she takes note of the dynamics of the telegraphist’s writing. However, we do not know that the telegraphist remains a failure, or even stops writing as Priscilla Walton suggests (160). The telegraphist does not show any inclination to stop reading and writing in the final scene. Rather, it would be more appropriate to think that her act of reading and writing continues, only now it is active in a less apparent and more disruptive manner as the cage no longer works as a visible boundary to “fence” her out.

Vaux reads In the Cage alongside “The Art of Fiction” published in 1884 and asserts that the telegraphist’s “writing” overlaps with the writer’s ability that James celebrates: “the power to guess the unseen from the seen” (AF 32; Vaux 129). In this sense, the telegraphist is potentially an artist who possesses the power of imagination that leads to aesthetic insight. The “creative failure” (Vaux 137) should rather be due to the fact that the telegraphist is enclosed in the figurative cage. In James’s formulation in “The Art of Fiction,” being “fenced in” is crucially harmful to the novel, which has to be free. James writes:

The ways in which it is at liberty to accomplish this result (of interesting us) strike me as innumerable and such as can only suffer from being marked out, or fenced in, by prescription. They are as various as the temperament of man, and they are successful in proportion as they reveal a particular mind, different from others. . . . The tracing of a line to be followed, of a tone to be taken, of a form to be filled out, is a limitation of that freedom and a suppression of the very thing that we are most curious about. (AF 29)

The telegraphist’s situation, that of being in the cage, certainly works as such a confinement. Her reading of the telegrams is doomed to fail by her framed location in which she can only anticipate romantic outcomes. After this failure, however, the “brooding” telegraphist (AN 156) outside the cage assumes an artist’s posture, freed from such a “form” or confinement that has been “prescribed” for her. The final scene seems to imply that the telegraphist still continues to write in order to be an artist, against Vaux’s claim:
Out of the cage, she is not selective of the objects on her page—being “full of her thoughts,” and is busy dealing with thoughts which cannot be simply sorted into a particular place. After the bitter failure in romantic reading, she attempts to develop her reading in her newly expanded surroundings. The escape from the cage does not take her to an easy-to-read place but to a more complicated place, where the cage is omnipresent and invisible, like the hazy atmosphere. In this place outside the “romantic” cage, she accepts a “realistic” house for herself, a little home with Mr. Mudge. The telegraphist as writer seems to anticipate James’s own struggle as an artist, and the telegraphist’s struggle with her “thoughts” here is resonant with James’s struggle under circumstances where “relations stop nowhere” (AN 5).

Vaux observes that James in writing In the Cage takes a different view towards the telegraphist’s artistic potential from his view in 1884. According to Vaux, while celebrating “the exhilaration of limitlessness in artistic potential” in 1884, James’s New York Edition Preface to In the Cage shows his awareness of “the dangers in the limitlessness of creative work” (132):

In his preface to “In the Cage” James speaks of the telegraphist’s “moral vibrations, well-nigh unrestricted” and her “winged” intelligence and wit, yet his project in the novella is clearly to demonstrate that such an intelligence is doomed to failure. In the preface to the novella, he describes his representations of the “brooding telegraphist” as an admonishment to the working class, “even though obscurely enough, of neglected interests and undivined occasions.” Behind this admonishment there seems to be a different kind of warning, one offered to writers. (132)

As Vaux points out, James’s Preface implicitly associates the telegraphist’s activity
with that of “critics” and “artists” (AN 155). He even mentions his awareness of the reader’s necessary function in completing the intended reading (AN 158). It seems, however, James himself did not express decisive opinions about any positions, except in his final sentence, “I shouldn’t really go on as if this were the case with my readers” (AN 158), which may well be a warning to readers to ensure their pursuit of his “figure” in the carpet.

It is possible to argue that the telegraphist does not withdraw from writing, and has the potential of becoming an artist. Her final position in the story supports her function as an artist. Although her marriage is approaching, she does not seem to hold high expectations of married life.\(^3\) The telegraphist’s thoughts reach Mr. Drake in the last scene as a person who prompts her decision to marry. Mr. Drake’s identity has been obscure for a long time, deceptively sharing the same space with aristocrats. He turns out to be a butler, a figure belonging to the working class. However, he is the one who opens the door for her, precisely because Mr. Drake marks a liminal social type where the aristocracy and the working class mingle. The telegraphist advances the marriage forward, which seems to represent her awareness that “her little home” ultimately may not be different from the aristocrats’ in terms of defining her identity as an artist.

Surely a different cage awaits her after marriage with Mr. Mudge, whose “very beauty” is “the beauty of a grocer” (IC 53). After all, she cannot take romantic flight with him, as she is trapped in his commercial world, but at the same time, the disappointing story about Lady Bradeen and Captain Everard shows her that they also inhabit the cage of the commercial world, where money dominates human relationships, as Everard marries Lady Bradeen because of his debt rather than love. Justifiably, Everard once sends a telegram under the name of “Mudge” (25). The telegraphist’s misreading is derived from her misreading of the other side of the structure, but the experience tells her that the cage and structures are omnipresent. They do not stand independently from other structures. Rather, they are uncontrollably transformative under the influence of one another, just as the telegraphist’s misreading affects the aristocratic couple’s future. The telegraphist’s figure, unmindful of the policeman’s watchful gaze representing the prescriptive force of the dominant “cage,” suggests her potential as an artist for a different mode of reading and writing amongst invisible cages.
5. The Reader in the Cage

Readers of the story, in fact, may find the telegraphist’s emergence from the cage to be unsettling. The unnamed young woman, now out of the cage, blurs the boundary between her and the reader. At the beginning of the story, readers can place themselves outside the cage and observe the telegraphist’s ridiculous misreading. While the reader is not allowed to have a full view of the aristocratic story as the focal consciousness is that of the telegraphist, with the help of the third-person narrator, the reader can “write in” the ellipsis left by the telegraphist’s consciousness. This process serves to dramatise the gap between the reality of the telegraphist and that of the upper classes.

In this sense, the telegraphist’s reading provides the reader with a warning as to how far their reading can deviate from the meaning “the author” intends. The telegraphist’s deviation is promoted by the fact that her telegraph office does not receive telegrams—it only sends them. The reader’s communication with the author is also one-directional in that the reader does not receive any response or approval of their “writing” from the author. Indeed, the telegraphist’s “fenced out” location overlaps with that of the readers themselves. The narrator, at an early stage, warns the reader that the structure between the cage and the rest of the world is the “transparent screen fenced out or fenced in, according to the side of the narrow counter on which the human lot was cast” (2). The outside and the inside of the cage are troubled spaces, and the narrator’s remark makes the implied location of the reader indeterminable. It is not clear that the telegraphist and the reader of the story occupy different sides; they may both be on the same side. The story gives the reader a sense that the telegraphist is no longer merely the reader’s object of observation but may reside right alongside them.

The structure of the telegraph office allows her to be seen from outside as well as to watch others in anonymity. On the one hand, she is visible through the “frail structure” (2). Wicke refers to this system as a “reversal of the panoptical strategy” (146). The telegraphist is always observed and in a way she is under constant surveillance. William B. Stone’s study of the story’s background suggests that the telegraphists of the day were exposed to the eyes of a great number of people as their offices were located in stations in London, including larger telegraph offices located in the railway depots (244). As a captive, the telegraphist endures exposure to the eyes of strangers. Notably, however, the panoptical strategy in In the Cage functions the other way round as well. Indeed, seeing is described as an important
part of the telegraphist’s act of reading. She, on her side, also sees and watches the outside masses. Her power of seeing becomes boundless, along with her firm confidence in her own imaginative faculty, as the narrator adds: “She [the telegraphist] was perfectly aware that her imaginative life was the life in which she spent most of her time” (8). At the same time, however, this structure allows her to keep an eye on the outside world in reverse, without disclosing her identity. Telegraphists were exposed to the eyes of unknown people, but at the same time could elude them and even watch them back.4

The inadequacy of the telegraphist’s reading, and the ridiculous outcome that arises from it, might represent the reader’s own potential inadequacy. The telegraphist becomes the reader’s double, making the reader aware of the possibility that they themselves are the figure in the cage. The figure of the unnamed telegraphist produced by the reader’s reading has the potential to unsettle the reader’s own identity as competent reader, alongside the author, able to understand “the scenic system at play” (AN 157) and to “feel... how the theme is being treated” (AN 158). They might belong to “many readers” from whom James declares he would not expect much.

6. James in the Cage

This story is also suggestive of a conflict residing in James’s writing. On the one hand, James’s telegraphist warns the reader of the potential risk entailed in reading, the risk of misreading, and of the proliferation of meaning introduced by various “framed” readers from different “structures.” By having the reader witness the telegraphist’s reading and writing produce a ghostly reality from the texts of the authors in the upper classes, James prompts the reader to try to follow the underlying intention of the author himself. Otherwise, the reader’s reading would develop in a threatening manner to James’s writing just as the telegraphist begins to write in her own way in the original author’s place.

On the other hand, the meaning of the story is dependent on the telegraphist’s filling in the ellipses. Similarly, James’s writing can never be completed without the reader’s reading, and James’s authorial independence is dependent on the filling in of his elliptical narrative by the reader. The proliferation of meaning and the subversive power of the reader are essential elements of James’s writing. James’s elliptical narrative has allowed the identity, or the meaning, of many of his stories to remain unclear. The threat posed by the reader’s reading and writing
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constitutes an inevitable aspect of James’s writing as the meaning arises through the reciprocal workings between them.

James’s anxiety about reading and writing, that is, the threatening but inevitable role of the reader in his authorial identity, is repressed in this story. Written in 1898, about ten years before the publication of the New York Edition that involved significant revision of his own earlier works, *In the Cage* is deeply concerned with issues surrounding the construction of the identity of the author and the text, issues of reading, writing, and revision. The telegraphist, the figure in the cage, reveals different identities as reader, writer, and artist. This figure is a site of negotiation between reading and writing, and therefore, its identity is not self-sufficient and static. Rather, it is ghostly, formed and transformed, depending on the changing structures brought by different actors—the reader, writer, and artist.

“The figure” is alive, as Vereker’s words show, and transformative. Bell demonstrates this well when she writes that she does not intend to assert that “the meaning of all or any one of Henry James’s works has at last been isolated from the complex figuration of his [James’s] carpet” (ix). Meaning is alive and eludes the effort of enclosure by any single intention, including the author’s. In the end, the author is a bird or cheese in a cage, both a captive and a trap, who awaits the reader’s reading. The author ceaselessly negotiates with the readership that brings the threatening force of writing and revision, depriving the author of his authorial control. James’s writing, and its authority, stands on these unstable boundaries where negotiations between reader and writer take place.

In this sense the outcome of the negotiation between reading and writing is productive beyond the specifics of historical moment or spatial location. David McWhirter quotes the following statement by William Troy, written in 1931:

What James meant to the readers of Harpers and the Atlantic in the eighties and nineties, what he meant to the generation of Mr. H. G. Wells, or to the generation of Mr. T. S. Eliot and Mr. Ezra Pound, was probably not any of the things he means, or may come to mean, to the generation in which we are naturally much interested—the present one. (Troy 45; McWhirter 168)

James’s work produces various versions of his stories beyond time and place, while resisting and delaying any kind of final version. McWhirter considers the “fate” of Jamesian studies in “the globalized, digitalized, for better or worse post-
literary postmodern culture of our new century” (169). After discussing new approaches, including “James and race; James and ethnography; the lesbian James; postcolonial James” (174), McWhirter mentions the potential of a “non-English language criticism” (185), where the study of James has developed differently from Anglo-American scholarship. Nabae Hitomi investigates the historical development of James studies in Japan and suggests that Japanese translation functions as criticism. Translation functions as an act of filling in the gap left in James’s language. Also, the film adaptations of many James’s stories could show the compatibility or incompatibility between James’s stories and the future. Philip Horne in “The James Gang” addresses a question about cinematic adaptation that could “write in” or “translate” James’s “elliptical narrative” (16).

The supposed transparency of reading and writing, or communication in a wider sense, is dramatised and undermined in In the Cage. James interrogates this communication gap through the modern medium of the telegram. Exploring the impact of new technologies on language as a medium of communication in Victorian society, Richard Menke describes the shift from the mid-Victorian era to the late-nineteenth century, including such developments as telegraphy. The telegraph seemed to ensure transparency, as a medium that allowed “instantaneous communication” (“Telegraphic” 978). However, this transparency was an illusion and Menke suggests that James turned a “more skeptical eye” towards the telegraph (“Telegraphic” 988). Menke finds this suggestive of the communication gaps that potentially reside in any electronic communication. Menke critiques this “new” technology, though “routine” and “mundane” by the end of the nineteenth century (Telegraphic 194), as the telegraphist’s liberty to misread in In the Cage highlights its lack of transparency.

The front cover of the first UK edition of the novella carries a design of two telegraph poles and cables running through and between them. Above one of the poles, the title “IN THE CAGE” is written in three lines, and above the other, “BY HENRY JAMES” is written again in three lines. Between the two groups of words is placed some blank space, as if to represent the communication gap that the story intends to foreground and the book’s invitation and anticipation of the reader’s reading.

The troubled communications between the reader and the writer in fin de siècle stories seem to overlap with those that social networking services seem to provide for its users in our postmodern globalized era. In the age of the Internet, and of a
variety of SNS media platforms, we find ourselves in a time when we are reading telegram-like text. Just like the telegraphist in the cage, we are flooded with countless short messages, from tweets to instant messaging. These writings posted by online writers, or “friends,” or “friends of friends,” whose contexts are more or less difficult to track, expand in the absence of offline relationships, regardless of their writers’ intentions. Tweeted messages proliferate without the necessity of establishing their truthfulness. The significant role that SNS media played in the 2016 U.S. Presidential campaign, for example, is still fresh in our memory. Just as the telegraphist eventually processes words differently from the way “the sounder” mechanically does, our reading ability is always tested by whatever, and however, new technology arrives to accelerate communications in time and space. In the Cage offers us a clue to James’s fin de siècle insight into the rapidly changing and shifting social structure along with new developments in technology, and into more universal questions of communication: the act of reading and writing, and “the figure in the carpet” left by known, or unknown, writers.

Notes

This article is based on a paper presented at the national conference of the American Literature Society of Japan on October 11, 2008.

1 The italics in the quotations in this paper are by respective authors.

2 Walton is of the view that the telegraphist stops writing, while she considers Maggie Verver in The Golden Bowl to be a “reviser” and “the true artist” (160).

3 This scene contrasts with a short story originally published in 1877 by Anthony Trollope, also about a female telegraphist. Trollope’s impoverished telegraphist, Lucy Graham, struggles to keep up with the technological shift taking place in the telegraphy of her day. She seems to retreat behind a curtain once her engagement with a wealthier engineer is settled, getting ready to move out of London with him, while James’s telegraphist comes even more decisively into the foreground by postponing her already arranged marriage.

4 James’s awareness of the real conditions of working-class female telegraphists has been an issue among critics. He has been criticised as an elitist lacking historical understanding in the Marxist sense. However, James’s knowledge on the “lived” lives (AN 156) of “confined and cramped and yet considerably tutored young officials” (AN 154) should be acknowledged to a sufficient extent. Nixon associates the cage with a prison, comparing it to Oscar Wilde’s poem, and indicates that In the Cage involves
some naturalistic attributes. Also, while stating that “we are presented no detailed, naturalistic description of wages, hours, and working conditions” (243), Stone provides some contemporary data of James’s time to support James’s awareness of the actual situation of the telegraphist. He attributes “James’s deviation from literal reality” to his craft as an artist (246).

5 The role of media, including written letters and telegrams, was one of James’s subjects from an early stage. In the opening chapter of *The Portrait of a Lady* in 1880, Mrs. Touchett’s telegram appears and it both declares and obscures Isabel’s independence, which eventually obscures the signification of Isabel’s final decision in the novel.

6 James also mentions telegraphy as “one of the commonest and most taken-for-granted of London impressions” (*AN* 154). Both Menke (*Telegraphic* 194) and Adrian Poole (82) quote this James’s comment on contemporary telegraphy.

7 Intriguingly enough, when George Corvick, another literary critic in “The Figure in the Carpet,” notifies his fiancé that he has successfully determined Vereker’s “figure” by telegram, “Eureka. Immense” (296), the fiancé is willing to wait for the details to follow in letters, not in telegrams, which surprises the narrator, who wants them instantly.

8 Poole, when exploring Henry James’s view towards the boundary between public and private life, also associates the telegram with the contemporary text-message.

**Works Cited**


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