

MODERN AGE

A QUARTERLY REVIEW



Henry James and Paradigms of Character

G E O R G E A . P A N I C H A S

READING THE LETTERS of Henry James is always a civilizing experience. One is the better for such an experience as one comes variously and gratefully into contact with the virtues of reverence, loyalty, courage, kindness. James discloses these virtues in relation to others, to his time, to his view of the world, and for us they become standards, paradigms, of character by which to measure and judge our own approximation of civilized life. Indeed, in James' disclosure of these virtues, and in one's response to them, even to their *données*, there is ignited a communion of sensibility, a rare and delicious process. In the letters written in 1883-1895, James' "middle years," one watches, with amazement and awe, a genius of observation, discretion, and taste in his double pursuit of art and public life.¹ Refinement and dignity never fail him; critical intelligence is ever at his command; and the deep spiritual and human essentials that impel and shape vision are, in short, never absent from James' artistic existence, from his "magic spring," as Joseph Conrad imaged his friend's achievement. All these virtues, all these strengths and abundances of commitment and purpose, thrive in James' letters. Magnanimous and vivifying in the feelings they inspire and the lessons they impart, his letters illustrate quality of character as moral impulse and consciousness. Where

other great letter writers communicate harshness and discord, as in the case of Thomas Carlyle ("the prince of letter writers," James called him), or tension and impatient passion, as in the case of D. H. Lawrence, James communicates order and control, proportion and perspective; humaneness, above all.

In reading these letters, each detailing impressions, observations, emotions, griefs, loyalties, and each chronicling the days, events, and persons illuminating, crowding, and pressing a writer's life, one is astonished by the energy with which James fulfills his commitments in the daily business of his work and interpersonal relations. This prodigious, and meticulous, energy belies the ponderous and sacerdotal presence, the portentous massiveness, that one usually associates with the famous portrait of James by John Singer Sargent or with the caricature by Max Beerbohm. The seriousness and importance with which James meets his obligations, personal and professional, exhibit *le trait juste* of one who is concerned not with the job of "getting on" in the world—that most philistine of human habits—but with celebrating (in Dr. F. R. Leavis' apt phrase) "the living principle." To all his life-concerns and relations James was to give of himself completely. Neither opportunist nor shirker he exemplifies by his

words and actions, sensitively and discriminatingly, the truth of what Josiah Royce defines in these memorable words: "...all those duties which we have learned to recognize as the fundamental duties of the civilized man, the duties that every man owes to every man, are to be rightly interpreted as special instances of loyalty."² That for James loyalty meant remaining true to responsibility exemplifies a virtue upon which life rests. "Yours faithfully and constantly" were words with which he often, and characteristically, closed his letters. However favorable or unfavorable the circumstances of life and fate, James' grasp and affirmation of the virtues as forms of moral life never wavered. In his letters it is the voice of "the civilized man" that one hears and comprehends—and admires. No recipient of a letter, regardless of position in life, is ever slighted, and on each James bestows his greatest intentness and most generous interpretation, the very qualities that gave to his genius and work a perfect distinctness of vision. No letter capitulates to the ugly or the devious or the dishonest. A judging intellect and a delicate investigative understanding pervade and permeate James' letters, satisfying, too, that moral criterion to which he responded, and possessed, in his unflinching belief that "One has to be *equal* to things."

The letters reveal cumulatively the measure of James as man and writer, and that measure is ultimately a virtuous one. The ancient Greeks singled out excellence and nobility of character with the word *aristeia*, which connotes both heroic and moral value. This *aristeia* glows in the beauty and symmetry of James' own person. "Character—character is what he has!" words that he applied to Robert Louis Stevenson, can be applied to James himself.³ The classical and not the sentimental temper prompts such an encomium. That is, the Hellenic, more specifically the Sophoclean, quality of character, of poetic vision and critical insight, of instinct for what is good, is what inheres in and stamps James' presence in the letters. One comes to revere James in

the same way that the ancients came to revere their greatest tragedian. For no less than Sophocles, Athenian gentleman of the fifth century B.C., James, civilized man of the modern age, transmits a note of human sympathy and comprehension that, incidentally, makes H. G. Wells, —the Wells who claimed that James was a novelist of "nothingness," a "leviathan retrieving pebbles," —appear the vulgar pragmatist and the even more vulgar "satyr-cupid" of Fabian socialism that he was.⁴ (Wells correctly consigned his worth when, in 1938, he wrote his own epitaph: "He was clever but was not clever enough.")⁵ Clearly, in his personal life and relations James left a large impression of majesty, beauty, and greatness. "He is beyond words. I cannot speak about him," the novelist Hugh Walpole said of his friend and encourager.⁶ "The only thing is to be there," we hear James pleading, "to wait, to sympathise, to help if necessary." His words (spoken to a young friend, A. C. Benson) could serve as the epigraph to all his letters. Even in the midst of the most unpromising or distressing situations James sustains his courage of faith by a steady commitment to what he thinks he has to do: "I have plenty of work, thank heaven, in view—I say thank heaven because I don't on the whole tire of it, but find it the indispensable movement that keeps up vital heat."

During this period of "vital heat," James wrote such major novels as *The Bostonians*, *Princess Casamassima*, *The Tragic Muse*, as well as an assortment of tales. But it was also a period of profound disappointments for James. Financial matters triggered some of these disappointments. Though James was prolific and though his writings were always published, he was never in his lifetime a popular and critically acclaimed writer and his books had "depressingly small" sales. (From the *Bostonians* and the *Princess*, he confessed to William Dean Howells, he "expected so much and derived so little.") Insofar as he had to make his living as a writer he had to depend on his royalties; he had no private fortune, it should be remembered, having

turned over to his invalid sister, Alice, the income from his legacy. One will detect in the letters that, beneath his persistence and confidence, James was often anxious as to how to reconcile the demands of economic necessity and artistic excellence. Still, his life-style, as instanced by an active social life, recurrent travels on the Continent, the fashionable London flats in which he lived, and the other material comforts generally associated at that time with a man of his station and reputation, was not too adversely affected by financial importunities. His ordered bachelor life no doubt worked in his favor in this respect. In any case the severe financial deprivations that one sees stalking a Dostoevsky, a Conrad, or a Lawrence do not loom large in James' life.

In all things he remained a master of control and form—and phrase. (Even when close to death itself, in the first days of his last illness, James said, describing an attack of angina pectoris: “‘So it’s come at last’—I said to myself—‘the distinguished thing!’”) Possibly one could even theorize that James' attention to finances was a way of covering up—artists, he declared, are “well-advised to cover their tracks”—the deep hurt to his authorial pride resulting from his awareness of the absence of public and critical recognition of his achievement. The “serious writer,” he nevertheless claimed, should not be bothered by “the imbecility of babyish critics,” “should move in a diviner air.” But the deeper psychological import of these strictures is made much clearer when read in the light of an author, of “an old and honourable reputation,” having to confront “the hostile majority” as Ortega y Gasset has termed it, that found James' writings not only unpopular but also antipopular. The line of descent, as we know to our horror, from “the awkward age” to the age of the rabble is irreversible.

James' concern with the craft of fiction, with the principles of writing and the critical function as a whole, radiates with integrity in his letters. His advice to Vernon Lee, “Cool first—write afterwards. Morality is hot—but art is icy!” epitomizes

a major Jamesian literary judgment. Moral concern, he stresses with an ascetic purity, should not be confused with moral passion: exaggerations, overstatements, tactless insistences should be restrained. Life for the novelist should mean moral and intellectual and spiritual life, “not the everlasting vulgar chapters of accidents, the dead rattle and rumble, which rise from the mere surface of things.” Though much admiring Stevenson's novel *Catriona* (that “so reeks and hums with genius that there is no refuge for the desperate reader but in straightforward prostration”), he goes on to observe with critical acuteness, even starkness, “The one thing I miss in the book is the note of *visibility*—it subjects my visual sense, my *seeing* imagination, to an almost painful underfeeding.” Elsewhere, and no doubt having in mind the newspaper reviewers of his day, he remarks with prophetic relevance, “To tell the truth, I can't help thinking that we already talk too much about the novel, about and around it, in proportion to the quantity of it having any importance that we produce.” Characteristically, when invited by a London newspaper, the *Pall Mall Gazette*, to send his list of the hundred best books, James (along with Matthew Arnold), refused to do so: “I have but few convictions on this subject—and they may indeed be resolved into a single one, which however may not decently be reproduced in the columns of a newspaper and which for reasons apart from its intrinsic value (be that great or small) I do not desire to see made public. It is simply that the reading of the newspaper is *the* pernicious habit, and the father of all idleness and laxity.” Characteristically, too, he shunned literary gamesmanship; declining Edmund Gosse's invitation to attend the funeral of Walter Pater, James wrote: “But I was deterred by considerations—that of my very limited acquaintance with Pater, my non-communication with him for so long, and above all by (what I suppose would be) the compact Oxfordism of it all; in which I seem to feel myself to have no place.”

The years 1890-1895 brought further disappointment,—“the humiliations and

vulgarity and disgust, all the dishonour and chronic insult incurred,"—as he devoted slavish efforts to the writing of plays. "My books don't sell," he wrote to Stevenson, "and it looks as if my plays might.... I feel as if I had at last *found* my form—my real one—that for which pale fiction is an ineffectual substitute." The dramatization in 1890 of his novel, *The American* (1877), in the provinces in England and Ireland had some early successes. But the London production, after lasting seventy nights, failed, "with circumstances of public humiliation," as James remarked. "The papers slated it without mercy, and it was—by several of its interpreters—wretchedly ill-played; also it betrays doubtless the inexperience of its author and suffers damnably from the straight-jacket of the unscenic book." Undoubtedly, even though he denounced the "saw-dust and orange-peel" of the theatre, he was challenged by a need to master the dramatic form itself. "The whole odiousness of the thing lies in the connection between the drama and the theatre. The one is admirable in its interest and difficulty, the other loathsome in its conditions." Yet James innerly knew that, in laying down his "critical pen" and in turning to drama, he was doing so only temporarily, just long enough "to dig out eight or ten rounded masterpieces and make withal enough money to enable me to retire in peace and plenty for the unmolested business of a *little* supreme writing." He wrote a number of plays but only *The American* and *Guy Domville*, which was written in 1893 but not produced until 1895, were seen on the stage. Of this latter play, with its lack of a "happy ending," James was aware of its unsuitability as "theatre-stuff," or as he was to declare (in words that bring to mind Ortega's warning, "Whenever the new Muses present themselves, the masses bristle"):⁸

I have a general strong impression of my constitutional inability to (even in spite of intense and really abject effort) *realise* the sort of simplicity that the promiscuous British public finds its in-

terest in—much more, after this indispensable realisation, to *achieve* it. Even when I think I am dropping most diplomatically to the very rudiments and stooping, with a vengeance, to conquer, I am as much "out of it" as ever, and far above their unimaginable heads.

Guy Domville appeared for the first time at the St. James Theatre, London, on January 5, 1895. "Thrown into the arena—like a little white Christian Virgin to the lions and tigers," as James said, the play ran exactly a month—and then vanished, to be replaced by Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest*. In the production of this play James worked "with unremitting zeal and intensity," with an implicit honesty and habit of discrimination, which "the roughs" in the gallery, as James wrote in "disappointment and depression" to his brother William, rewarded with "hoots and jeers and cat-calls" and the "papers," for the most part, with "ill-natured and densely stupid and vulgar" notices. The entire spectacle, "one of the most detestable incidents of my life," filled James "with horror for the abysmal vulgarity and brutality of the theatre and its regular public." "The stupid public is the big public and the perceptive one the small, and the small doesn't suffice to keep a thing afloat." But neither "the shipwreck of *Guy Domville*" nor the "roars...of the howling mob," phenomena that made James terribly aware of "evil days," robbed him of his great resources of "courage and patience." A new resolution and a reaffirmation of his vocation as a poet-novelist—*The Awkward Age*, *The Sacred Fount*, *The Wings of the Dove*, *The Ambassadors*, *The Golden Bowl* remained, after all, to be written—stirred his imagination and strengthened his determination not to surrender to the *ressentiment* of the masses or to fall into "traps, abysses and heart-break." To his notebooks, then, James confided: "I take up my *own* pen again—the pen of all my old unforgettable efforts and sacred struggles. To myself—today—I need say no more. Large

and full and high the future still opens. It is now indeed that I may do the work of my life. And I will."⁹

Death is another unflinching enemy of James during these years, and repeated cries of grief, *de profundis*, echo in the letters. The elegiac tone that he strikes (and accentuates in his parabolic tale "The Altar of the Dead" [1895], which, it is claimed, can be thought of with *Lycidas* and *In Memoriam*) is often soul-shaking in its emotional reaches and exquisite in its poetry. He duly records and laments, and yet comments incisively on, the loss of relatives, friends, inspirers, supporters. Sympathy and tenderness coalesce warmly and genuinely in his expressions of sorrow and also mitigate necrolatrous and melancholy elements. Of the death, in 1883, of his younger brother Garth Wilkinson, he writes: "But it was a dark end for such a gentle, genial, sociable soul for whom the world should have been easy, as he was easy (too easy) for it and for everything." Of his friend James Russell Lowell's death, in 1891, he says: "My soul is grieved indeed for dear old J. R. L. and for the painful, darkened, unhelpable *end*—from which, always, he seemed to me—as I knew him and saw him—personally far." Of the death, in Samoa, in 1894, of Stevenson, he states with unabashed feelings: "What can one think, or utter or dream, save of this ghastly extinction of the beloved R. L. S.? It is too miserable for cold words—it's an absolute desolation.... One feels how one cared for him—what a place he took; and as if suddenly *into* that place there had descended a great avalanche of ice.... He lighted up a whole side of the globe and was in himself a whole province of one's imagination." Of the death, in Italy, in 1894, of Constance Fenimore Woolson, an American writer with whom he had a close friendship, he reports: "I had known Miss Woolson for many years and was extremely attached to her—she was the gentlest and tenderest of women, and full of intelligence and sympathy. But she was a victim to morbid melancholia, and one's friendship for her was always half anxiety." James' perceptive solicitude and refine-

ment of delicacy reveal an unimpeachable sincerity of character and make completely justifiable Edith Wharton's words of tribute to him: "We who knew him well know how great he would have been if he had never written a line."¹⁰

Of his fictive hero George Stransom, in "The Altar of the Dead," James says: "He had perhaps not had more losses than most men, but he had counted his losses more; he hadn't seen death more closely, but had in a manner felt it more deeply." These words describe James himself and are crystallized in his letters telling of the death in 1892 of his gifted but neurasthenic sister Alice. Alice James first joined her brother in England in 1884, staying in separate lodgings until her death. Increasingly, however, he assumed a responsibility for her welfare, for which she was to be deeply appreciative as this entry in her remarkable diary shows: "I have given him endless care and anxiety but notwithstanding this and the fantastic nature of my troubles I have never seen an impatient look upon his face or heard an unsympathetic or misunderstanding sound cross his lips."¹¹ (James himself counted his sister's presence in his life as a great blessing: "...she contributed constantly, infinitely to the interest, the consolation, as it were, in disappointment and depression, of my own existence.") There is no more agonizing letter than that in which he gives his brother William a first-hand account of Alice's death from cancer. James renders the details of the death-drama—"They were infinitely pathetic and, to me, most unspeakable hours"—with pathos and consummate artistry, bringing to mind (even in some of the astonishing similarities) what is perhaps the most vivid scene of death in the modern novel, D. H. Lawrence's description of the mother's death in his first great novel, *Sons and Lovers* (1913). Epistolary art certainly attains a dramatic apex in this excerpt from James' letter that portrays Alice's end:

Her face then seemed in a strange, dim, touching way, to become clearer. I went to the window to let in a little more of

the afternoon light upon it (it was a bright, soundless Sunday), and when I came back to the bed she had drawn the breath that was not succeeded by another.... I have sat many hours in the still little room in which so many months of her final suffering were compressed, and in which she lies as the very perfection of the image of what she had longed for years, and at the last with pathetic intensity, to be. She looks most beautiful and noble—with *all* of the august expression that you can imagine—and with less, than before, of the ghastly emaciation of those last days.

Taking “the silent roll-call of the Dead” was not, of course, James’ final occupation, or preoccupation. Rather, he addressed himself, with the same gravity, consistency, and dignity that he admired in Sainte-Beuve, to forging “some expression of a total view of the world” and acquiring a comprehensive vision of things through “the wear and tear of living and talking and observing.” His letters amply corroborate both the ambition and the process of the creative and critical spirit. “I have my head, thank God, full of visions,” he wrote in his notebooks.¹² His dedication to what he called the exercise of his art was complete and exceptional. But James learned to have no illusions about his “popularity” as a writer, even as he had no illusions regarding the reconciliation of possibility and fact. “Mr. Henry James, great artist and great historian, never attempts the impossible,” Conrad iterates.¹³

¹*The Letters of Henry James: 1883-1895, Vol. III*, edited by Leon Edel (Cambridge, Mass., 1980). ²*The Philosophy of Loyalty* (New York, 1908), p. 139. See also Romano Guardini, *The Virtues: On Forms of Moral Life* (Chicago, 1967). ³“Robert Louis Stevenson,” *The Century*, Vol. XXXV (April 1888), 869. ⁴*Henry James and H. G. Wells: A Record of Their Friendship, Their Debate on the Art of Fiction, and Their Quarrel*, ed. Gordon N. Ray and Leon Edel (Urbana, Ill., 1958), p. 249. ⁵Quoted in “Herbert George Wells (1866-1946),” *The Dictionary of National Biography, 1941-1950* (London, 1958), p. 949. ⁶Quoted in Rupert Hart-Davis, *Hugh Walpole, A Biography* (New York, 1952), p. 68. ⁷Quoted in *The Diary of Arthur Christopher Benson*, ed. Percy Lubbock (New York, 1926), p. 262. ⁸*The Dehumaniza-*

tion of Art (Princeton, N.J., 1968 [1925]), p. 7. ⁹*The Notebooks of Henry James*, ed. F. O. Matthiessen and Kenneth B. Murdock (New York, 1947), Entry dated January 23, 1895, p. 179. ¹⁰Quoted in Leon Edel, *The Life of Henry James: The Master, 1901-1916* (Philadelphia and New York, 1972), Vol. 5, 560. ¹¹*The Diary of Alice James*, ed. Leon Edel (New York, 1964), Entry dated March 25, 1890, p. 104. ¹²*The Notebooks of Henry James*, Entry dated February 14, 1895, p. 187. ¹³*Joseph Conrad on Fiction*, ed. Walter F. Wright (Lincoln, Nebraska, 1964), p. 88. ¹⁴*The Letters of Henry James*, ed. Percy Lubbock, Vol. II (New York, 1920), Letter dated March 21, 1914, 361. ¹⁵Quoted in “Adams, Henry,” *The New Encyclopaedia Britannica, Macropaedia*, Vol. 1, 74.

To the end he remained a “lover and interpreter of the fine amenities, of brave decisions and generous loyalties” (to quote words inscribed on the James memorial tablet in the Chelsea Old Church in London). He and his work, in their reciprocal totality, contain inexhaustible paradigms of character and remind us of how much we are in need of those “artists of consumption,” as Max Scheler describes them, who can guide our uncertain taste and define and defend the hierarchy of values and of men.