

## *Henry James's Book of Changes*

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*Lordly men are to earth o'ergiven — Ezra Pound, Canto LXXIV*

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BETWEEN 1895, the year in which his play *Guy Domville* failed in London, precipitating Henry James's feeling that he had fallen upon evil days and was not "in the least *wanted*, anywhere or by any one," and 1916, the year in which he died, James enacted his own *Book of Changes*. He was to purchase a typewriter in 1897, for example, and start to dictate his writings to a typist: "The use of my hand, always difficult, has become impossible to me; and since I am reduced to dictation, this form of dictation is best. May its distinctiveness make up for its indirectness," he confided to Grace Norton. He was to leave London and to move into Lamb House, Rye, Sussex, in 1898:

I marked it [Lamb House] for my own two years ago at Rye — so perfectly did it [he writes to Mrs. William James], the first instant I beheld it, offer the solution of my long unassuaged desire for a calm retreat. . . . It is the very calmest and yet cheerfullist that I could have dreamed — in the little old, cobble-

stoned, grass-grown, red-roofed town, on the summit of its mildly pyramidal hill and close to its noble old church — the chimes of which will sound sweet in my goodly old red-walled garden.

He was, in the spring of 1900, to shave off his beard, which he had worn since the Civil War. As he announced to his brother William: "I have totally shaved off my beard, unable to bear any longer the increased hoariness of its growth." He was to begin a series of intimate friendships with gifted young men like Hendrik C. Andersen, Rupert Hart-Davis, Jocelyn Persse, and Hugh Walpole: "I not only love him — I *love* to love him," he said of Persse. He was to return to the United States in 1904–5, traveling widely and becoming "the restless analyst" of the "American scene." "Out of the midst of *this* unalterable or incalculable Democracy," he writes, "I don't, I confess, at all ardently democratise! The U.S.A. are prodigious, interesting, appalling." During the first year of the Great War of 1914–18 he was to assist the war effort by working with Belgian Relief, visiting the wounded in hospitals and supporting the American Volunteer Ambulance Brigade: "Horrors encompass us, I mean above all in the

limitless loss of all our most splendid young life, the England of the future; but one seems to make head against them a little in any definite deed done in mitigation of the actual woe," he writes on June 17, 1915. He was to become a British subject on July 26, 1915: "Your good letter makes me feel that you will be interested to know that since 4:30 this afternoon I have been able to say *Civis Britannicus sum!*" he writes to Edmund Gosse. And during his final illness he was to be awarded the Order of Merit by King George V on New Year's Day, 1916. After Lord Bryce brought the insignia of this order to his bedside, James said to his housemaid, "Turn off the light so as to spare my blushes."

James's Book of Changes was to include, then, what he himself termed his "afternoon of life," that is, the twilight phase. The visionary genius, the moral confidence, the personal generosity that identify James's paradigms of character remain, in his last years, untarnished. But one detects in the elegiac mood and tone of the letters written during his last years a distinct troubledness, an underlying nervousness, an anxious solitariness and insecurity as James contemplates old age creeping up on him, undergoes serious and even mysterious illnesses, suffering them with "the last acuteness," duly receives and mourns "the bulletins of the dead," and grimly resigns himself to his lack of popular or critical success. "I remain at my age . . .," James laments in 1915, "and after my long career, utterly, insurmountably, unsaleable." But these anxieties do not finally defeat James the "passionate pilgrim"; do not fix him, bleakly and pitifully, to "the bench of desolation." In their own inimitable way his anxieties make him all the more aware of the need to preserve the order of civilization in all of its human drama: its sacred history, its great traditions, its spiritual glories, which he reveres and celebrates till the end when, inevitably, as James writes in the very last words of his last letter, "the pen drops from my hand."

The virtue of determination, ever a stur-

dy and steadfast quality in James's life and work, gives him, in the afternoon of life, the will to press on with his creative purposes and personal loyalties. Even in the midst of severe sickness, his periodic bouts "with the black devils of Nervousness, direst, damndest demons, that ride me so cruelly and that I have perpetually to reckon with," James selflessly gives of himself not only to his literary commitments but also to his family and to his friends. His admirers are unsparing in their praise of the "Master": for Hugh Walpole, James is "by far the greatest man I have ever met"; for Joseph Conrad, "the most civilized of modern writers"; for A.C. Benson, a man of "majesty, beauty, and greatness." Doubtlessly such praise could easily be equated with the expected hyperbole of catechumens who enter what James describes as "a temple of the old persuasion." In this connection Sir Almeric Fitzroy reminds us of the Jamesian mystique possibly contributing to the language of praise: "Henry James, anchorite and novelist, who has a hermitage at Rye, and there nurses in spacious reverie his spiritual enchantments, not seldom the fruit of sheer loneliness of soul." But whatever this mystique or even the myth surrounding the great "anchorite and novelist," James discloses in his letters a deep concern for life outside of his own operative center, his so-called hermitage. Self-centeredness is for him a violation of being, or as he writes: "It takes at the best, I think, a great deal of courage and patience to live — but one must do everything to invent, to force open, that door of exit from mere immersion in one's own states." No less than the moral imagination, the moral virtues — truthfulness, gratitude, disinterestedness, understanding, unselfishness — elicit his highest allegiance. His lifelong commitment to standards of discrimination, however fierce and uncompromising it was, never diminished either his acts of magnanimity or his gestures of encouragement, which he gave with generosity. Nowhere are his words more heartfelt than when he writes to Joseph Conrad concerning the latter's

*Mirror of the Sea* (1906):

I read you as I listen to rare music — with deepest depths of surrender, and out of those depths I emerge slowly and reluctantly again, to acknowledge that I return to life. . . . You stir me in fine to amazement and you touch me to tears, and I thank the powers who so mysteriously let you loose with such sensibilities, into such an undiscovered country — *for sensibility*.

Throughout James's letters there is a presiding magnificence of concern and of understanding at its most sensitive, even clairvoyant level. This element in James remains inviolable, despite the wear and tear of life's struggles and changes, and despite, too, the exactitude and the exactation of the creative process. Principles of control and order inform not only James's craft of fiction, but also his interior life, that deeper part of one's being in which mind and soul discourse and render final decisions affecting the meaning and destiny of one's life. James's letters vividly, almost transparently, depict this ongoing tense dialogue and judgmental process. In this binary process one can observe dramatically a pattern of magnificence. And this magnificence is all the more remarkable when one keeps in mind the full extent of what James himself was experiencing in his own life and in the history of his time. It should especially be remembered that he lived on long enough to witness, "disillusioned and horror-ridden," the coming of the Great War of 1914–18, which in the European psyche has always held a place of epochal importance. The "modern age," as we know and live it, begins with the happenings in the summer of 1914 — a "moment of shipwreck" as Karl Jaspers has imaged it. In a letter to one of his oldest friends, the novelist Rhoda Broughton, James responds to the events leading to England's declaration of war on Germany on August 4, 1914. The following words evoke the ruin of order that James associated with the Great War and that would never allow England to recover:

Black and hideous to me is the tragedy that gathers, and I'm sick beyond cure to have lived on to see it. You and I, the ornaments of our generation, should have been spared this wreck of our belief that through the long years we had seen civilization grow and the worst become impossible. The tide that bore us along was then all the while moving to *this* as its grand Niagara — yet what a blessing we didn't know it. It seems to me to *undo* everything, everything that was ours, in the most horrible retroactive way — but I avert my face from the monstrous scene! — you can hate it and blush for it without my help; we can each do enough of that by ourselves.

James's afternoon of life coincides, then, with "the world in the crucible," in short, with the epochal events that were sparked by the Great War and that have become a part of what can be termed the crisis of modernity. Indeed, his letters end, as Virginia Woolf somewhere observes, in the heart of darkness. (James's own death on February 28, 1916, preceded by only a few months the Battle of the Somme with casualties on both sides of a million men.) The "monstrous horror" that had broken into the world ushered in an era of "broken lights," as Nietzsche calls modern times. Clearly, the civilization to which James pays tribute in his letter to Rhoda Broughton was to come to an end on August 4, 1914, even as it brought to its real end the nineteenth century, in which there reigned, as Basil Willey has reminded us, "the unquestioning sense that life has a momentous meaning." The shock of the war, as the letters confirm, fell heavily upon James: "[A]lmost everyone of anything less than my age is, or is preparing to be, in the imminent deadly breach," he writes in one of his most eloquent war letters on November 21, 1914. Certainly the European world of the nineteenth century, as James loved it, and loved its civilization, ended in "the utter extinction of everything that mattered"; and that which was for him "toned and seasoned

and civilized," in Percy Lubbock's words, became raw and crude and ugly.

In their moral character and attitude, James's war letters reveal him to be "England's chief conservative critic" (to use F.W. Dupee's phrase): a great conservator of the humane graces and beauties of a civilization that he saw a-dying in the year and a half preceding his own death. "No writer was more conscious that he was at the end of a period, at the end of the society he knew," Graham Greene perceptively writes of James. The war was for James, in all of its electrifying drama of moral anarchy, a supreme historical instance of the corruptive process, which is also at the center of his "principal tragedy," *The Wings of the Dove*, in which the "darkest James," with his sense of "the black and marvellous things" and with what he also calls "a sense of the insecurity of life," can be seen. It is this "darkest James" who can also be viewed in the war letters — a witness in terror of the catastrophe that he sees occurring around him and that envelops the civilization and tradition that James treasures and sanctifies. For James the Great War epitomized "a huge horror of blackness," when "nothing exists but the huge enormity."

The death from blood-poisoning of the soldier-poet Rupert Brooke, on a French hospital ship in the Aegean Sea on April 23, 1915, en route to the campaign in Gallipoli, dramatized for James "the limitless loss of all our most splendid young life, the England of the future." Brooke, whom he had met in 1909, was, James writes, one "on whom the gods had smiled their brightest." Upon receiving news of Brooke's death, James wrote almost immediately and plaintively to Edward Marsh, the young poet's patron and friend; for James, Brooke not only symbolized Youth, but also, as Leon Edel observes, remained "a bright vision of another time — another century":

This is too horrible and heart-breaking [James writes to Marsh]. If there was a stupid and hideous disfigurement of life and outrage to beauty left for our

awful conditions to perpetrate, those things have been now supremely achieved, and no other brutal blow in the private sphere can better them for making one just stare through one's tears.

The elegiac mood that one finds in the reaction to Brooke's death also appears on a deeply personal level in the summer of 1910, with the death of William James in Chocorua, New Hampshire, on August 26. The death of his older brother filled Henry with "abject weakness of grief and even terror." "I sit heavily stricken and in darkness — for from far back in dimmest childhood he had been my ideal Elder brother," James writes on September 2, 1910, to his long-time friend Thomas Sergeant Perry, "and I still, through all the years, saw in him, even as a small timorous boy yet, my protector, my backer, my authority and my pride. His extinction changes the face of life for me — besides the mere missing of his inexhaustible company and personality, originality, the whole unspeakably vivid and beautiful presence of him." In a letter to the philosopher Josiah Royce warmly thanking him for giving an address on William's work and influence, Henry was to write nearly a year later: "Strange how with Death and recession a man of genius becomes a *figure* — a representative of two or three stateable things, or things that have to be made *stateable* — to the public at large; save for the few who knew him best and saw the whole complexity, always."

Death, whether the death of loved ones and friends, or the death of civilization, or the death of some promise or possibility, had a prominent place in James's last years. "But the trouble is we are all gone or going — dead or dying," he cries at one point. The death of a tubercular Stephen Crane, not yet thirty years of age, brings this cry of loss from James: "What a brutal, needless extinction — what an unmitigated unredeemed catastrophe! I think of him with such a sense of possibilities and powers." The thought of

death as finality, as the inconsolable *telos*, James often also sees in the context of what he calls the "idea of *Too Late*" — the idea, that is to say, that "the wasting of life is the implication of death." In the journey between life and death, James views human "terminations" with a sympathetic but realistic acceptance. No one, as T.S. Eliot says of James, "has ever been more aware — or with more benignity, or less bitterness — of the disparity between possibility and fact." Eliot's statement is confirmed in the voice of James himself in this passage, radiating as it does felicities of phrase and brave realities:

I am face to face with it, as one is face to face, at my age, with every successive lost opportunity . . . and with the steady, swift movement of the ebb of the great tide — the great tide of which one will never see the turn. The grey years gather, the arid spaces lengthen, damn them — or at any rate don't shorten; what doesn't come doesn't, and what goes *does*.

John Cowper Powys once declared that "James has the most reverence of all the great novelists." And certainly James's reverence for the past, for the discipline of continuity, as it shapes both personal and social history, informs the spirit of his letters, as it does autobiographic writings like *A Small Boy and Others* (1913) and *Notes of a Son and Brother* (1914). In the new age that he saw coming, James detected "the abatements and changes and modernisms and vulgarities" that he repeatedly condemns in his letters. "There is no happiness in this horrible world," he writes to Leslie Stephen, "but the happiness we have *had* — the very present is ever in the jaws of fate." To a nephew, Edward Holton James, he writes: "We live in a frightfully vulgar age; the twaddle and chatter are much imposed upon us. Suspect them — detest them — despise them." And to Hendrik Andersen, the young sculptor, he sends this warning: ". . . I would beseech you to return, to sound and sane Reality, to recover the proportion of things and to dread as the

hugest evil of all the dark danger of Megalomania." In the letters, in style and tenor, there appears a Virgilian stress on piety and courage in the face of adversity and social decay. Thus, in a letter to Edmund Gosse, dated October 15, 1914, James affirms man's need to speak for life and growth in midst of deaths in belief. But such an affirmation is not easy when a society scorns the law of measure and murders the idea of order and value of life:

I myself [James tells Gosse] find concentration of an extreme difficulty: the proportions of things have so changed and one's poor old "values" received such a shock. I say to myself that this is all the more reason why one should recover as many of them as possible and keep hold of them in the very interest of civilization and of the honour of the race; as to which I am certainly right — but it takes some doing!

Characteristically, James's letters disclose a sacramental act in which the mystery of existence is ultimately evoked in relation not only to spirit of place but also to the nature of man. "Everything is treated sacramentally," Powys says of James's approach to life and art. The letters written between 1895 and 1916 flesh out James's increasing apprehensions of the desanctification of the idea of man. This process ordains an inorganic conception of man and the universe and dramatizes the crisis of modernity as it infiltrates and assaults all levels of human consciousness and systems of value. Two major casualties of this reductionist process are the symbolic imagination and intelligence that, for James (as for Hawthorne and Melville), are sacrosanct ontological entities, especially as he treats them in later "metaphysical" novels like *The Wings of the Dove* (1902) and *The Golden Bowl* (1904). Austin Warren, who sees the major theme of the latter novel as "the discovery that evil exists in the forms most disruptive to civilization: in disloyalty and treason," rightly warns that we must not ignore "the inner James who never leaves the sanctuary, where are the

altars of literature, the dead, and the Good."

The sacramental constituents of James's art obviously irritated socialists like H.G. Wells and Bernard Shaw. Thus an irascible, piping Wells, in a savage parody in *Boon* (1915), compares James's fiction to

a church lit but without a congregation to distract you, with every light and line focused on the high altar. And on the altar, very reverently placed, intensely there, is a dead kitten, an egg-shell, a bit of string. . . . And the elaborate, copious emptiness of the whole Henry James exploit is only redeemed and made endurable by the elaborate, copious wit.

After reading Wells's attack — "it has naturally not filled me with a fond elation," he confesses — James firmly and dignifiedly protested against his "bad manners" and defended his conception of life and literature against Wells's sociological predilections and utilitarianism: "It is art that *makes* life, makes interest, makes importance, for our consideration and application of those things, and I know of no substitute for the force and beauty of its process."

This remonstrance to Wells crystallizes James's long and unyielding adherence to the moral vision. It also shows that in "questions of art and truth and sincerity" one must seek as a "critical critic" to go beyond "the mere twaddle of graciousness," and at the same time maintain indifference to "Academics and Associations, Bodies and Boards . . . really caring . . . for nothing in the world but lonely patient virtue, which doesn't seek that company." Though he sees "the faculty of attention" much diminished in a world in which "newspaperism and professionalism [have] gone mad," he also insists that, "in our condition, doing anything decent is pure disinterested, unsupported, unrewarded heroism; but that's in a day's work." Against a Shaw who believed that art should be didactic, James defended not only an "adventurous and speculative imagination" but also works of art that "are

capable of saying more things to man about himself than any other 'works' whatever are capable of doing." To Wells, whose "rude talent" he admired but whose "anarchic" view of literature he unconditionally rejected, he writes: "No talent, no imagination, no application of art . . . is able not to make much less for anarchy than for continuity and coherency much bigger than any disintegration." The imperatives of order, James maintained, must not be ignored, not even by creative geniuses like Leo Tolstoi, about whom James writes in protest: "He doesn't *do* to read over, and that exactly is the answer to those who idiotically proclaim the impunity of such formless shape, such flopping looseness and such a denial of composition, selection and style. He has a mighty fund of life, but the *waste*, and the ugliness and vice of waste, the vice of a not finer *doing*, are sickening."

For James, as it has been noted, "the esthetic pattern *is* the moral pattern," and in this pattern form has a quintessential function both as an esthetic value and a life value emerging from reality: "Form alone *takes*, and holds and preserves, substance — saves it from the welter of helpless verbiage that we swim in as in a sea of tasteless tepid pudding, and that makes one ashamed of an art capable of such degradations." James's devotion to the sanctities of "dignity and memory and measure," of "conscience and proportion and taste," and his belief that "the moral sense and the artistic sense lie very close together," never waned. He had absolute confidence in the integrity of his craft even when he had to face his brother's caustic criticisms of *The Golden Bowl*. "Why don't you, just to please Brother," pleaded William, "sit down and write a new book, with no twilight or mustiness in the plot, with great vigor and decisiveness in action, no fencing in the dialogue, or psychological commentaries, and absolute straightness in style." Henry's reply rings with the courage that Nietzsche equates with "anchorite and eagle courage":

I mean . . . to try to produce some un-

canny form of thing, in fiction, that will gratify you, as Brother — but let me say, dear William, that I shall greatly be humiliated if you *do* like it, and thereby lump it, in your affection, with things of the current age, that I have heard you express admiration for and that I would sooner descend to a dishonoured grave than have written.

The formlessness that James decried in art he also decried in the United States. He returned in 1905, a “restored absentee,” after an absence of more than twenty years to find “the immense incoherence of American things.” In the course of his travels to New England, the South, the Middle West, the whole Pacific coast, he discerned an “unattempted, impossible maturity.” He was homesick for his “tight anchorage . . . in the ancient world — a secret consciousness that I chink in my pocket as if it were a fortune in a handful of silver.” During a stay in Chicago he writes that he feels “rather spent and weary, weary of motion and chatter, and oh, of such an unimagined dreariness of *ugliness*.” New York City convinced him that “to make so much money that you won’t, that you don’t, ‘mind’, don’t mind anything, is absolutely the American formula.” During his visit to Washington, D.C., James attended a “quite pompous function” at the White House, and along with the sculptor Augustus Saint-Gaudens, he sat next to President Theodore Roosevelt, whom he found “a really extraordinary creature for native intensity, veracity and *bonhomie* — he plays his part with the best will in the world and I recognize his amusing likeability.” But James’s intuitive and probing insight into men of power and political influence was never wanting. “Theodore Rex,” he writes to Edith Wharton, also impressed him as “being, verily, a wonderful little machine: destined to be overstrained perhaps, but not as yet, truly, betraying the least creak. It functions astoundingly, and is quite exciting to see. But it’s really *like* something behind a great plate-glass window ‘on’ Broadway.” Washington and the “Ameri-

can scene” as a whole left him cold and unimpressed: “There is no ‘fascination’ *whatever*, in anything or anyone: that is exactly what there *isn’t*. It is a quality that belongs to another order altogether.”

Perhaps the best way to recall Henry James in his Book of Changes is to study John Singer Sargent’s famous portrait of him, commissioned by James’s friends for his seventieth birthday, April 15, 1913, and now in the National Portrait Gallery, London. James had known Sargent since 1884 and had found him “civilized to his finger-tips.” He had also written on his “exquisite” productions and had used him as a model for painter-figures in some of his later stories. Of Sargent’s “high talent” James says: “. . . [he] sees deep into his subject, becomes patient with it, and almost reverent, and, in short, elevates and humanizes the technical problem.” These general qualities are very much there in Sargent’s portrait. Solidity of body and authority of bearing join in this portrait to convey a wonderfully vital and vigorous projection of the Master who had “domiciled uninterruptedly in England for forty years” but had never surrendered his “New England conscience.” The slightly closed eyes with their penetrating gaze, the delicately proportioned nose, the firm mouth, the lips as if ready to speak, the handsome, essentially unlined fleshiness of the large domed head accentuate power of vision, not a mystical or prophetic vision, but one that has the substance of reality: a humanistic vision with an “emotional center” ever in contact with the living world.

Sargent’s portrait registers an intrinsic, unerring honesty. It communicates a powerfully humane presence and a civilized sensibility protesting mightily against “all sorts of petty tyrannies and petty coercions at close range,” as Ezra Pound once wrote of the novelist. It depicts an “ancient contemplative man,” as James described himself, in search of guiding moral principles. It commemorates the dignity of a “Lordly man” in an age “of prose, of machinery, of wholesale production, of coarse and hasty processes.”