

## Books and Things

UNTIL I began to read *The Letters of Henry James* (two vols., Scribner's) my imagination had refused to do much with their writer except to see him as an observer, endlessly curious for his art's sake, of human relations, and as an artist whose anxiety to inspire us with a curiosity equal to his own took too elaborate precautions. Hence my absurd relief at finding here and there in his letters signs that he was not exempt from everyday life, that he once smoked a cigarette and did not look forward to smoking another, that he once composed a telegram only seventy words long about a fire in his house at Rye, that he, too, could sit in his shirt-sleeves on a hot day, could take prizes—for which he honored his gardener—at a flower show, could forget his pyjamas and ask to have them sent after him. In spite of knowing better I had made the mistake of assuming that his life must have lacked whatever his art most ignores. Hence my philistine amusement over these few details which illustrate his exposure to the common lot. While we read we come now and then, too, upon an illustration of something quite different, as when we find him writing to his brother William, in 1901: "We here, on our side, have been gathering close round the poor old dying and dead Queen, and are plunged in universal mourning tokens—which accounts for my black-edged paper." We have, unluckily, no means of knowing what William James thought about this black-edged token of his brother's nearness to being in at so august a death.

Those among us who love Henry James's novels and stories have been reading these letters, I suppose, partly with a hope of getting a clearer notion of his nearness to and his remoteness from experience. "I met Zola at luncheon the day before he left London," he writes to Stevenson in 1893, five years before Zola began to play his noble part in the Dreyfus affair, "and found him very sane and common and inexperienced. Nothing, literally nothing, has ever happened to him except to write the *Rougon-Macquart*." What, beyond the writing of his books, ever happened to Henry James? His life was chiefly, in a phrase of his own, "the wear and tear of discrimination," but what kind of material did life put under his microscope? "We must know, as much as possible, in our beautiful art, yours and mine," so he generously says in 1913 to Mr. Hugh Walpole, "what we are talking about—and the only way to know is to have lived and loved and cursed and floundered and enjoyed and suffered. I think I don't regret a single 'excess' of my responsive youth—I only regret, in my chilled age, certain occasions and possibilities I didn't embrace." Well, excess, even in quotation marks, is a relative term, and one suspects Henry James's standard of excess, like Wordsworth's "standard of intoxication" in the story, of being "deplorably low." Even if we grant that his youth, long choosing and beginning late, may dutifully have achieved an excess or two, we are still justified in guessing that excess brought him no adventure which as an artist he could turn to account.

"I am," he writes to Dr. White in March, 1914, "a votary of the single impression and the imperceptible adventure, picked up by accident and cherished, as it were, in secret." This description of himself is what we return to, after we have finished the letters, after we have had time to forget the degree in which these two volumes are

an altar to friendship. Whatever else did not happen to him, we say as we read, friendship certainly did. To his friends he was not remote, not aloof and shut up in his art. He was generously and imaginatively sympathetic. With him affection at its deepest was a passion. "So I give you," he writes to Miss Norton when William James was dying, "our dismal chronicle of suspense and pain. My own fears are the blackest, and at the prospect of losing my wonderful beloved brother out of the world in which, from as far back as in dimmest childhood, I have so yearningly always counted on him, I feel nothing but the abject weakness of grief and even terror." He sounds the same note a week later, in a letter to Mr. T. S. Perry: "I sit heavily stricken and in darkness—for from far back in dimmest childhood he had been my ideal Elder Brother, 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 the unspeakable vivid and beautiful presence of him."

Such words are for the high moments of life, for the utterance of grief at its intensest, but in expressing the other shades of affection, even the humorous and the playful, Henry James gave of himself as abundantly, although with less unreserve. His lighter devotions, his hails and farewells, are, I think, with all their variety, too uniformly elaborate. A letter which ends like this—"my dear Bruce Porter, ever so clingingly and constantly yours"—is nothing to shudder at, but a procession of letter-endings conceived in the same spirit show a failure to appreciate the convenience, as a short cut, of the handy stereotype.

Now and then I have had, while reading these letters, a slightly irritated sense that Henry James was pinning knots and ribbons on his correspondent's bosom, and then patting them, not unarchly, into place. "Dearest Edward," he writes from Chicago to Mr. Warren, "this is but a mere breathless blessing hurled at you, as it were, between trains and in ever so grateful joy in your brave double letter (of the lame hand, hero that you are!) which has just overtaken me here." The rule seems to be that the more playfully he writes the more extreme is his elaboration. "Well," he says in a letter dated from Rye, "it all sounds delightfully pastoral to one whose 'stable' consists but of the go-cart in which the gardener brings up the luggage of those of my visitors (from the station) who advance successfully to the *stage* of that question of transport; and my outhouses of the shed under which my solitary henchman (but sufficient to a draw-bridge that plays so easily up!) 'attends to the boots' of those confronted with the inevitable subsequent phase of early matutinal departure."

This elaborateness that I rather complain of seems, however, from one end of Henry James's life to the other, never to have been used as an escape from an obligation to say what he thought and felt. I wonder whether a more truthful man ever wrote letters in such abundance, whether any other man ever wrote to his friends so exactly as he wrote of them? A rare virtue, which he missed but once, and then by ever so little, when he speaks of Mr. H. G. Wells to Mr. Gosse with a thought more severity than he turns, charmingly courteous as always, upon Mr. Wells himself. In these volumes we find Henry James, with a poetic that grew narrower, that shut more and more doors and made more and more exclusions as he

grew older, writing about their books to the many novelists he knew well, writing always with the most critical frankness, almost indeed destroying upon one occasion a new novel by Mrs. Humphry Ward, and yet never, one feels, offending any of his correspondents, except possibly, and in this context negligibly, Mr. Wells. How much courtesy gains in persuasiveness when it comes from a man like Henry James, who had nothing ungenerous in his makeup, no jealousy or pettiness anywhere, and whose friendships were means to no end except friendship itself! His later friends, one guesses, were mostly chosen because in the possession of these intrinsic qualities they resembled the earlier friends he never forgot in this country, Howells, Charles Eliot Norton and the rest.

But in one sense friendship, although his life was rich and happy in it, cannot be counted as an adventure by which Henry James's art obviously profited. That his books are not rich in pictures of friendship, though the fact be plain enough, is not of course what one means. While reading the letters one looks for hints and tips, for glimpses among his many friends of some few who might have suggested to him the kind of men and women and the kind of human relations that he spent his later years in imagining. One seeks and does not find. Perhaps the explanation is that such men, such women, such relations do not exist, that profoundly true though they are to his own "originator's law" they are not true to the law of any conceivable reporter of this world's appearances. The distinction between the two laws is his own. He never forgot it, he remembered only too well his faith that "the two laws can with no sort of harmony or congruity make, for the finer sense, a common household." To what lengths this faith was capable of leading him is revealed when he defends certain changes he had made in the text of some of William James's early letters, quoted in *Notes of a Son and Brother*. "I may mention however," he tells his nephew, "that your exception that particularly caught my eye—to 'poor old Abraham' for 'poor old Abe'—was a case for change that I remember feeling wholly irresistible. Never, never, under our Father's roof did we talk of Abe, either tout court or as 'Abe Lincoln'—it wasn't conceivable: Abraham Lincoln he was for us, when he wasn't either Lincoln or Mr. Lincoln (the Western note and the popularization of 'Abe' were quite away from us *then*:) and the form of the name in your Dad's letter made me reflect how off, how far off in his queer other company than ours I must at the time have felt him to be. You will say that this was just a reason for leaving it so—and so in a sense it was. But I could *hear* him say Abraham and couldn't hear him say Abe, and the former came back to me as sincere, also graver and tenderer and more like ourselves, among whom I couldn't imagine any 'Abe' ejaculation under the shock of his death as possible. . . ."

Such a light as this upon his method one gets very often from his letters, and oftener as he grew older. It is in 1912 that he says to Mr. Walpole: "Form is substance to that degree that there is absolutely no substance without it." One gets, besides, many a five and ten-line masterpiece of criticism, always of his contemporaries, almost always of novelists. References to older writers are few, about as few as the references to contemporary history in the letters written before the war. The lovely little landscape touches are not many. His "later manner" first appears in its maturity about 1898, according to my notion,

and the ease with which he adapts it to the saying of the simplest things tempts one, perversely enough, to revise one's opinion that this "later manner" gained upon him because the things he wished to say in his later novels became more and more intricate. His release from the stricter bondage of playwriting, that experiment which brought him so much discomfort, but which gave us the story called *Nona Vincent* and the essay on the younger Dumas—didn't this release perhaps aggravate his tendency, when he turned again to novels, to abound in his own sense rather exorbitantly?

Our explanation of the interest of these letters is the unexpected frequency with which they keep raising questions of just this kind. Yet this is not their main interest, which lies most of all in our sense of contact with an extraordinary human being, sincere, highminded, generous, humorous, affectionate. Mr. Percy Lubbock's introduction and prefaces do much to make this sense of contact still more vivid. Nobody's letters have had a more discerning editor.

Incidentally, and if his only object were to give information, and to correct here and there a false impression, he paints such a portrait of the letter-writer as no one is likely to better. We feel that we have been often in the same room with Henry James, have witnessed "his pondering hesitation as he talked, his search over the whole field of expression for the word that should do justice to the picture forming in his mind." In his letters, whether written or dictated, this hesitation gave place "to a flow unchecked, one sonorous phrase uncoiling itself after another without effort." Mr. Lubbock assures us that except for this difference the letters, especially some of the later ones, "exactly reflect the color and contour of his talk—his grandiose courtesy, his luxuriant phraseology, his relish for some extravagantly colloquial turn embedded in a Ciceronian period." Mr. Lubbock reminds us also that Henry James "knew very well that in all he most cared for, in what was to him the heart and essence of life, he remained solitary to the end." And here, I think, we come upon the most general impression that the letters leave—of a great loneliness in the midst of so much affection received and given.

P. L.

## Auction: Anderson Galleries

"Lot 65: John Keats to Fanny Brawne.  
A beauty, gentlemen, and in the best  
Condition. Four leaves, scarcely pressed.  
What am I bid? Five hundred . . . Five . . . Come on.  
Who'll make it Six? Six hundred. . . ." (*Pale and drawn,  
I dreamed forever in a sweet unrest  
Of your warm, lucent, million-pleasured breast*)  
"Six hundred . . . Now Six fifty . . . Are you done?"  
"Seven . . . A half . . . Did I hear eight? . . . Eight . . .  
Eight . . .  
Who'll make it Nine?" (*Would that I could survive  
The horrors of a brutal world. I hate  
All men and women, saving one, alive.*)  
"Nine fifty . . . Going . . . Sorry, sir; too late.  
Sold to this party for Nine sixty five."

LOUIS UNTERMAYER.