

## Selected letters

*W. James*

December 2 -December 12, 2007

Diaries and letters. Those are the basis in which most biographies are written in a desperate attempt to go behind the surface and try to depict a life as it was experienced from the inside. Of those letters are ordinarily those that are most accessible, and at least in former times more or less universally available. Diaries are private<sup>1</sup> and not always preserved, while letters at least are semi-public, and even if often destroyed, produced in such abundance to make at least some partial survival inevitable. To write a diary is often a somewhat artificial occupation in which an individual tries to split himself into both a writer and a reader, providing an exclusive communication with himself, the idea of it being by its very private and secluded nature absolutely truthful. This ambition, although a worthy one, is bound to be frustrated. True confessions can never be fully internal, they need an independent target and judge, and thus in his letters an individual is often far more likely to achieve the ambitions of a diary. This does not mean that diaries cannot work, there are some truly spectacular exceptions to such pessimistic predictions, one thinks in particular about the diaries of Pepy; but for this to work the diary has to become an obsession, to become almost a substitute for life, rather than a mere recording of it. In short you live for the opportunities of recording which will ensue. Pepy in fact after aborting his first long run, later tried a revival, with sorry results. A true obsession cannot be turned off and on as water from the tap.

Whether William James kept a diary I do not know, but I doubt that any worthwhile one has been revealed. What we have to get an informal view of his life are the letters, all of which most unlikely would have been preserved. What has been preserved has dutifully been edited and collected in a multi volumed work, into which you may dip occasionally, but not be expected to read through. A selection out of a selection, a second order distillation has been provided by Elizabeth Hardwick in 1960 (while one of James sons was still alive) complemented by some biographical snippets. After having read a standard biography of the man, one is naturally both motivated and prepared to read through a chronological collection of his selected epistolary output at one go, as to get a review and a quick reliving of his life. Does it succeed? As most audacious questions, this one admits both a 'yes' and a 'no' . A 'No' as it certainly does not evoke a life lived with all its sights, smells and textures; once again learning to ones dismay how much is really filtered out of a letter, how little of the very feeling of life it usually conveys. One obvious reason is that a letter, especially of an intellectual, is concerned with the matters of the mind, the other kind being taken for granted. What is of concern are the recording of thought, thought which at the time may have seemed portentous not to say momentous, but which may seem rather trite later on. 'Yes' as even if the letters do not have the power to bring forth

---

<sup>1</sup> But of course the distinction between the private and public self is being more and more eroded, as testified by the recent electronic phenomenon of blogs.

a vanished epoch, nor provide capital entertainment, and definitely not fulfill the major purpose of a personal letter, to install in its recipient the gratifying sense of having been in the thoughts of another human being as well as having those thoughts exclusively directed to him, they nevertheless provide occasional wit and striking *obiter dicta*.

They cover a chronological period of an extension almost covering the entirety of James life, except that of his formative childhood, stretching up almost to his death bed. The early letters are written with verve, even if the excessive self-ironic pretension of youth (which seems a rather universal human trait independent of historical epoch) and the somewhat stilted sentimentalism, so typical of the times, in his missives to his parents, do detract. As he gets older, his epistolary power steadily grows, and as a consequence the letters also become more interesting and readable. In fact James in his mature years regrets that he has lost his ability of fluent German, but reflects that this might be more due to the improvement of his own Native tongue and the expectations those invariably will set on his verbal articulation.

Was James a conscientious letter writer, maybe dashing off up to half a dozen letters a day, eventually accumulating a life-time pile of say some 50-80'000 letters, only a fragment of which have been preserved? Hardwick in her selection gives no clue to his epistolary diligence, but the frequent references to delayed replies even to trusted friends indicate that a steady supply must in that case have been exclusively directed to those nearest of kin. In fact he writes apologetically to Wendell Holmes from Dresden in May 1868 (at which time he would still only be twenty-six)

*It is easy to write people whom you have been steadily writing to, for one letter seems to continue the previous ones. But to fire off a letter point blank at a man once in six months has an arbitrary savour. There are so many things of about equal importance for you to tell him that there is no reason for you to begin with any particular one and leave off the rest. Consequently you do not begin at all.*

Some correspondents are of course more frequently appealed to than others, and his brother Henry James seems in many ways to have been one of his steadiest if not closest, which is often the case of siblings touched in age. James did not particularly care for the writing of his brother, although he often read as eagerly as dutifully his continued outputs, regretting that his brother not at least for once threw away his sophistication and thus enlarged upon his loyal core of readers, noting *In this crowded and hurried reading age, pages that require such close attention remain unread and neglected.*

On December 1875 he writes e.g. apropos 'Roderick Hudson'

*... but I must tell you that I am again struck unfavorably by the tendency of the personages to reflect on themselves and give an acute critical scientific introspective classification of their own natures and states of mind á la G.Sand. Take warning once more!*

His relation to C.S.Peirce was ambivalent. On one hand he could but not recognize his originality and power, probably with no little jealousy; on the other hand he felt exasperation at his ineptitude in the world, which one would think would be the hallmark of a true philosopher. He writes to him and warns him from sticking to formal logic in his lectures, in this way he can only be assured of a handful of students in his audiences, which

are bound to decrease, while of course, as James is well aware, the opposite was usually the case with his. This is a recurrent theme in his correspondence with his colleague. In another letter many years later he admits that he has a non-mathematical mind, which he believes explains his slight interest in logic. He warns him that if he does not make an effort to popularize his lectures, his rare perfume of thought will only be sniffed and appreciated by the highly skilled technicians and only after his death to boot, when he deserves to gain a bigger audience while living. James does intervene on his behalf, but proposes, not without a great degree of condescension, to the University President Eliot on March 1895 that he should consider no less a person than Charles S. Peirce, even if the name may not bound him with eagerness. He freely admits Peirce personal uncomfortableness and that he should not expect a harmonious relationship with the university, but that it would all be counterbalanced by the waves of influence, tradition, and gossip unlikely to die away for a long time. He refers to the recognition of the strengths of Peirce it would entail and which are but justice to the poor fellow. To Schiller in April 1903 he refers to the six public lectures on pragmatism he has managed to arrange for Peirce for his pecuniary and professional benefit. He further writes

*..He is a hopeless crank and failure in many ways, but a really extraordinary intellect. I never knew a mind of so many different kinds of spotty intensity and vigor.*

Clearly we have once again the contrast between a genius and a mediocrity, with the latter having the more solid connection to the real world, as well as its appreciation.

In the same letter he refers to his own sense of impending doom, while there is so much he wants to do, both to read and write, and he fears like he will like Keats be cut off in the bud. And what is budding? His book on philosophy to be initiated by the sentence

*. Philosophy is a queer thing – at once the most sublime and the most contemptible of human occupations.*

Towards the end of his life he starts to voice his premonitions of an impending end. As early as in June 1904 he writes to Pillon and congratulates him on his turning 75, confessing that he is only 62 and wishes that he could expect to have thirteen productive years ahead of him, as his correspondent has just had. He continues

*. I fear I cannot. My arteries are senile, and none of my ancestors, so far as I know of them, have lived past 72, many of them dying much earlier.*

He continues to relate how he has had a very bad winter, with two attacks of influenza, one prolonged, three attacks of gout and then a variety of other ailments, which has cut down his expected output of 400 to 500 pages of his magnum opus on philosophy to a mere 32. He refers to how imperative it is that at least *someone* writes down the elements of a radical pluralistic empiricism, but that he fears that with his recent impairment of working ability the Angel of Death may overtake him before he gets to put down his thoughts on paper, life at the university consisting altogether of interruptions.

The shortness of what remains of life becomes more and more imminent in his letters. In March 1905 he writes to his wife lyrically about the hilly quarters of old Naples remarking that

*. I have come here too late in life, when the picturesque has lost its serious reality. Time was when hunger for it haunted me like a passion, and such sights would*

*have been the solidest of mental food.*

A few months later he confesses to Santayana that his 'absurd bodily fatigue' has turned his attendance at a Congress in Rome a nightmare, agreeable though due to the way he had been caressed and flattered and referred to as "il piu grand psicologo del mondo". About Santayana he also harbors a strong ambivalence. He finds him a paragon of Emersonianism, as he writes to Dickinson Miller, and admits that his special blend of naturalism, materialism, Platonism and atheism is no doubt very deep and well argued, still he finds himself profoundly alienated by his unsympathetic tone of preciousness and superciliousness, and even if he would fully share his beliefs, he would nevertheless be forced to say that he dislikes him.

The end approaches and in a letter to Flourney in February 1906 when he is lecturing and consulting at Stanford, he refers to the ultra-sudden death of Hodgson, who had recently bragged that he could reasonably expect another twenty-five years of life, being so active and athletic. Hodgson had in fact been felled when playing a violent game of hand-ball. This incident, apart from the inconvenience of the vast Nachlass of the man probably going to rot, must have been both chastening as well as gratifying. The most interesting part of the letter concerns his stay at Stanford and his description of the place. He finds the climate perfect, the proximity to San Francisco a point in its favor, and the landscape exquisite. In short a perfect place for an intellectual to write and teach, would it not be for the social insipidity, and the appalling historical vacuity and silence. He notes that with more foresight the authorities could build up something truly distinguished if they offered great men substantial stipends to come here to work and teach, instead they miserly support to young man chafing at their isolation and their wives worn down by domestic drudgery. The place could be Utopian, as it is, it is only half-Utopian. Noting that this is a characteristic American affair.

A little bit later a jocular wish of being treated to a little earthquake as part of the local experience is being fulfilled, and James gives a very vivid report on it to a Mrs Morse in a subsequent letter. He finds it a rather exciting affair, and apologizes to his brother Henry, who had been fraught with worry back in London, that he had not immediately cabled their well-being.

*. For all the anguish was yours; and in general this experience only rubs in what I have always known, that in battles, sieges and other great calamities, the pathos and the agony is in general solely felt by those at a distance; and although physical pain is suffered most by its immediate victims, those at the scene of action have no sentimental suffering whatsoever.*

James probably found the experience of the earthquake invigorating and part of the memorable experience of the West, he found the intermediate West awful, a sort of penal doom to have to live there. He now felt entitled to live wherever he wanted to, but first of all a desire to escape the treadmill of teaching, which he purported to hate. A subsequent visit to New York and the accolade he finds at Columbia, invigorates him further, and he confesses to his brother that his usual repulsion at the clangor, disorder and permanent earthquake conditions of the city, this time was turned into the opposite through his catching the pulse of the machine, taking up the rhythm and simply vibrating *mit*. In fact he finds an *entirely* new New York, no doubt because of the superbly powerful and

beautiful subway having just been opened. In May 1907 he confesses in another letter to his brother, his relief and happiness at having thrown off the nightmare of his professorship, and that as a "professor" he always felt as a sham, one of the chief duties of it being a walking encyclopedia of erudition. Further he excels on finally being his own man, after having been owned for thirty-five years. Later in the fall he refers to the almost incredibly delightful prospect of being at Cambridge with no lecturing and no students to nurse along with their thesis-work. He also notes his joy in having been able to walk uphill at his beloved Keene Valley with no ill effects.

Praise, especially unqualified such, meant a lot to James, and in an adulatory letter to Bergson in June 1907, he wonders whether he has praised him enough.

*What every genuine philosopher (every genuine man, in fact) craves most is praise – although the philosophers generally call it 'recognition'. If you want still more praise, let me know, and I will send it, for my features have been on a broad smile from the first page to the last, at the chain of felicities that never stopped. I feel rejuvenated.*

Concluding his letter with expressing his thankfulness to have witnessed the Russo-Japanese war and Bergson's new book, the two great modern turning-points of history and thought.

As he travels in Europe towards the end of his life, he notes with dismay the Americanization of London, and idealizes the Britons and their land, where one does not meet one unwholesome man or woman for every 250 of such one meets in America. But special interest for the student of Psychology is the meeting 1909 at Clark University, where James went for a day in order to satisfy his curiosity as to what Freud and his disciples were up to. He writes to Flournoy in the end of September 1909, that he wished that they push their ideas to their outmost limits, so we can all learn what they are. His impression of Freud though was not that positive, the man struck him as one obsessed with fixed ideas. He could personally make no headway with his dream theories and he cautioned that the obvious symbolism involved was obviously a most dangerous method. Yung [sic] on the other hand made a more congenial impression on him.

In May 1910 he is desperately seeking treatment for his rapidly worsening heart condition. To Pillon he refers to the dilation of the aorta causing anginoid pains of the bad kind whenever he makes any exertion, be it muscular, intellectual and social, and in particularly prevented him from facing the four flights of stairs a visit to Pillon himself in Paris would have necessitated.

In a very late letter to Henry Adams he discusses the laws of increasing entropy of physics, noting that

*In short, the last expiring pulsation of the universe's life may be, " I am so happy and perfect that I can stand it no longer".*

Two months later he was dead.