REVIEWS

The Perspicacious Pilgrim

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This volume of Henry James' letters, the first of a projected four, should remind readers of a literary genre that, in the modern world of technics and electronics when, as it is proclaimed, a computer can write a poem, is becoming a lost art. A major symptom of this loss, as we can see from any number of examples, is the breakdown of the written word. The English language, particularly in its American form, has become the "language of hurry," to use E. M. Forster's phrase. Too, the barbarization of language is generally concomitant with the barbarization of civilization. One can only begin to wonder, then, what a volume of letters of a contemporary novelist, say Norman Mailer, will be like if and when published a half century hence. It is fairly predictable that it will not be in the class of great letter-writing like that of John Keats in the nineteenth century or of D. H. Lawrence in the twentieth. It must certainly will not have the refining graces, the informing sensibility, the beauty and sensitivity, the opulence and quiet vigor—in short, the character and integrity—that distinguish James' use and command of the English language in his correspondence (and ultimately in all his writings). In a deep sense these letters portray the substantive development of James' sensibility, its education and its discipline, as well as his search for standards of order. Throughout one finds a reverence for civilization, a quality eminently characterizing our most civilized of novelists.

The letters of an imaginative artist can help to explain the birth and the growth of his artistic consciousness. They can reveal the undisguised workings of his mind, the reaches of his intellectual comprehension, the inner terrain of his psyche. Letters can communicate the elemental immediacy of an artist's thought and art. They can help in discovering a writer's impelling pattern of thinking and working; in providing hints, that is to say, as to the ways in which his vision first manifests itself and progresses. Letters of men of genius give clues, record reactions, clarify and amplify what James spoke of as the process of vision. They also disclose a writer's critical process, which plays no small part in the maturation of his creative vision. The force of insight, the intuitive perception of human meaning and truths, the enduring formative power of what James terms "overwhelming impressions," the discriminations of a fertile mind and a creative imagination; these intrinsic facets, indispensable to a writer's rendered vision of man and his world, can be identified, even in their rawest forms and fragments of enunciation, in his letters. A writer's letters thus contain a running commentary with regard to his immediate personal situation, whereby he comments existentially and, above all, spontaneously on his world, on his time, on himself and others, on his public and most private concerns. Such letters contain the infinite reverberations of internal dialogue.

James' letters can be exemplarily approached within these contexts of epistolary criteria. He was convinced that only his finest letters should be published, a wish
that Mr. Edel has honored. A rigorous selectivity is invariably precedent to standards of excellence in all literary forms. What is most impressive about these early letters is the extent of James' connections, his wide range of interests, his intellectual curiosity and depth. "The love of art and letters," he writes, "grows steadily with any growth." An undemonstrative but always discriminatingly powerful vitality is evident in these letters as they describe the people James came to know, the places in Europe to which he traveled and in which he lived for varying periods of time, the books he read and wrote about, the serious matters of civilization to which he gave pious and concentrated attention. Indeed the most evident quality that James discloses is that of a full and consecrated seriousness. And again and again he shows a prescient awareness of his future tasks as his judgmental power, his exploration and measurement of character, his growing recognition of the life of value are viewed in steady development. With enviable and exceptional maturity of critical reflection a twenty-four-year-old James writes:

It is by this constant exchange and comparison, by the wear and tear of living and talking and observing that works of art shape themselves into completeness; and as artists and workers, we owe most to those who bring to us most of human life.

Repeatedly we find a young and privileged James brushing shoulders with people of talent and achievement—e.g., Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Leslie Stephen, William Morris, John Ruskin, George Eliot, Matthew Arnold, Henry Adams. His reactions to his encounters with the great show the independence and acute percipience that belong to genius. Of his meeting with Ruskin he writes:

In face, in manner, in talk, in mind, he is weakness pure and simple. I use the word, not invidiously but scientifically. He has the beauties of his defects; but to see him only confirms the impression giv-

en by his writing; that he has been scared back by the grim face of reality into the world of unreason and illusion, and that he wanders there without a compass or a guide—or any light save the fitful flashes of his beautiful genius.

James' reaction to George Eliot is equally compelling for its visual and analytical powers of observation:

To begin with she is magnificently ugly—delicately hideous. She has a low forehead, a dull grey eye, a vast pendulous nose, a huge mouth, full of uneven teeth and a chin and jaw-bone qui n'en finesse pas. . . . Now in this vast ugliness resides a most powerful beauty which, in a very few minutes, steals forth and charms the mind, so that you end as I ended, in falling in love with her. . . . An admirable physiognomy—a delightful expression, a voice soft and rich as that of a counselling angel—a mingled sagacity and sweetness—a broad hint of a great underlying world of reserve, knowledge, pride and power—a hundred conflicting shades of consciousness and simpleness—shyness and frankness—graciousness and remote indifference—these are some of the more definite elements of her personality.

But whether it is on an individual or a collective basis James displays strength of insight and comprehension, as instanced in his view of the American traveler who is incapable of "possessing" Europe:

There is but one word to use in regard to them—vulgar; vulgar, vulgar. Their ignorance—their stingy, grudging, defiant attitude towards everything European—their perpetual reference of all things to some American standard or precedent which exists only in their own unscrupulous wind-bags—and then our unhappy poverty of voice, of speech and of physiognomy—these things glare at you hideously.

Order and proportion and control are virtues that James especially revered in art
as in life. Yet his affirmation of humanizing restraints is not without the firm support of an underlying compassion and sympathy, which appear in this passage of a letter to Charles Eliot Norton, James’ first mentor, whose wife had recently died:

One thing however by this time you know a good deal about—the mysteries of sorrow and what the soul finds in it for support as well as for oppression. The human soul is mighty, and it seems to me we hardly know what it may achieve (as well as suffer) until it has been plunged deep into trouble. Then indeed, there seems something infinite in pain and it opens out before us, door within door, and we seem doomed to tread its whole infinitude; but there seems also something infinite in effort and something supremely strong by its own right in the grim residuum of conscious manhood with which we stand face to face to the hard reality of things.

A reticent romanticism often appears beneath the surface, particularly in James’ evocation of spirit of place, in this respect prefiguring one of the most enchanting features of his novels. Unlike his brother William, who preferred Germany, he was profoundly attracted by Italy as he shows in this portentous passage:

But the atmosphere is nevertheless weighted—to infinitude— with something that forever stirs and feeds and fills the mind and makes the sentient being feel that on the whole he can lead as complete a life here as elsewhere.—Then there is the something—the myriad somethings—that one grows irresistibly and tenderly fond of—the unanalysable loveableness of Italy. This fills my spirit mightily on occasions and seems a sort of intuition of my learning how to be and do something, here.

Nobility and generosity are personal qualities that one inescapably meets in the letters. One does not detect any sense of that impoverishing malaise,—the hysteria, the anger, the despair, the dread, the hatred,—which some modern novelists have suffered from and enshrined in their art, overcoming James. Evenness of temperament, fully comprehending but not surrendering to the “modern temper,” informs the education of James’ sensibility. Steadiness, honesty, dignity, a refining conception of right and wrong: these attributes are there in the early letters. Nowhere are these better or more cogently seen than in his (relevant) appraisal of critics:

There is such a flood of precepts and so few examples—so much preaching, advising, rebuking and reviling, and so little doing: so many gentlemen sitting down to dispose in half an hour of what a few have spent months and years in producing. A single positive attempt, even with great faults, is worth generally most of the comments and amendments on it.

Dedication to craft and to excellence is explicit in these letters. “To write a series of good little tales,” James declares, “I deem ample work for a life-time.” There is no easy formula for finding one’s best form of expression; writing requires hard, steady work as James informs William Dean Howells: “I know I’m too ponderous. But the art of making substance light is hard.” The need for standards cannot be compromised by an artist who is genuinely committed to a great moral responsibility and who, in the end, writes not only in a “great tradition,” with an undeviating emphasis on cultural continuity, but also for a minority culture. “The multitude, I am more and more convinced,” he states, “has absolutely no taste—none at least that a thinking man is bound to defer to. To write for the few who have is doubtless to lose money—but I am not afraid of starving.” In the last and prophetic letter of this volume, dated November 1st, 1875, James announces his retreat from the “American scene.” The “passionate pilgrim” returns to England. “I take possession of the world—I inhale it—I appropriate it.”

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