

The Correspondence of William James

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The Correspondence of William James. 12 vols. Ignas K. Skrupskelis and Elizabeth M. Berkeley, eds. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1992–2004.

The correspondence of William James has come a long way since his son, Henry James, published the two-volume set *The Letters of William James* in 1920.¹ The recently completed Skrupskelis-Berkeley edition boasts twelve bulky tomes, all carrying the seal of the Committee on Scholarly Editions of the Modern Language Association. The first three volumes cover the correspondence between William and his brother Henry, whereas the remaining nine volumes contain the correspondence with others, arranged chronologically. The volumes include letters to as well as from James. The last volume, which appeared in 2004, covers the period April 1908 to August 1910. James's last letter, of 21 August, is a brief note to Thomas Shackelford in which James confesses he is in no condition to see him. James had been very ill for over a month and had only a few days before returned from London to his Chocorua summer home. His health deteriorated rapidly and he died on the 26th of August.

Notwithstanding its size, the Skrupskelis-Berkeley edition is a selective edition. When work on this edition began, fewer than a thousand letters had been published, many in unreliable or abbreviated form. However, by the time the last volume went to press, close to 9,400 letters to and from James had been identified, enough to fill twenty volumes. With its twelve volumes, *The Correspondence of William James* is said to contain seventy percent of the letters that have been recovered, with the remaining thirty percent being calendared. Calendared letters are listed in the back of each volume, with information about their provenance and a brief summary of their contents.

Immediately after James's death, his widow, Alice Gibbens James, and

¹Henry James (ed.), *The Letters of William James*. 2 vols. London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1920.

his son Henry began working James's correspondence. To some extent the project was inspired by a desire to control James's reputation. Alice went through his papers in what became a mixed affair of preservation and destruction, while Henry James contacted his father's correspondents asking them to lend the letters James had sent them or provide transcriptions. In his own edition of the letters, Henry James proceeded from premises he had derived from his father's philosophy. His father had frequently dismissed the idea that the only way to understand a philosopher is through a painstaking textual analysis of his work. In addition to a study of the author's work one must also get to know the author and find out what excites him in the face of the buzzing and blooming confusion that made the author write what he did. To get a better idea of James's temperament, the bend of his mind, his native instincts, his preferences, and what influenced him, James's correspondence is an excellent resource—though correspondences come with their own limitations and biases as well. However, due to his choice of letters and the freedom with which he treated them, Henry James shaped his father in part after his own image of him, or after the image he wanted the world to see. For instance, Henry James would soften, or even altogether omit, harsh judgments James made about people that were still around. Moreover, apart from such interventions, the letters were reproduced *verbatim* but not *literatim*, as is explained in the foreword. The 1920 edition is moreover too small to adequately represent James's extensive correspondence. It deliberately excludes letters on technical philosophical issues, and, as it includes only letters written by James, the edition reads as if one is listening to only one side of a phone conversation.

The Skrupskelis-Berkeley edition includes significantly more letters, does not shun letters that belabor small philosophical minutiae, publishes the letters in their entirety, includes both sides of the correspondence, and provides a scholarly, responsible transcription with a full record of alterations. It differs as widely from Henry James's as alchemy does from modern chemistry. The new edition seeks to provide a modified diplomatic transcription that faithfully represents the original text with all its idiosyncracies. The only exception is the positioning of the words on the paper, which is not reproduced. The *literatim* approach is defended by Skrupselis on the ground that James "often used misspellings, abbreviations, slang expressions, and sloppy punctuation for humorous effect or to emphasize to the recipients that the letters were written in great haste (xlviii)." To maintain the letter quality of the text, the editors hold, I think correctly, that all this is worth preserving.

Also, James's capitalization (or lack thereof) has been preserved. A complete listing of alterations, both in letters to and from James, is given in the textual apparatus in accordance with the method devised by Fredson Bowers, with the presumed final intention of the author being represented in the letters.

Wherever possible the transcription is made from the original letters. Editorial intervention is strictly limited to the resolution of minor ambiguities. For instance, when a comma was written directly underneath a quotation mark instead of before or after it, the editors decided to follow James's usual practice or the practice he used in that particular letter rather than to faithfully reproduce the actual placement of the comma. There are no emendations. Where editors know of clear slips of the pen or factual mistakes that are likely to escape the reader, information is provided in the historical notes that follow each letter. The editing is well done. Suppressing the youthful urge to improve the text is by far the most difficult trait for the scholarly editor to acquire. In this line of business one does more by doing less, and by doing it meticulously. Paradoxically, this takes a lot of work, something that is hard to understand for the outsider. Skrupskelis and Berkeley have most certainly acquired that trait.

Regrettably, no facsimile reproductions of any of James's letters have been included in the volume to give the reader a few specimens of James's handwriting at the time, or to give the reader an idea of what a James letter looks like. It seems to me that if James's idiosyncratic spelling or capitalization has an informative value high enough to warrant scrupulous preservation, periodic examples of his handwriting would be worth including as well. Nothing beats the immediacy of a direct iconic confrontation with the look of the handwriting. Is it easy to read? Do the letters flow easily or are they cramped and angular? Is it written hastily or with slow deliberation? The manner in which a letter is written may tell us much more about the mental state of its author, or his relation with the addressee, than his occasional spelling mistakes or capitals at places where one would not expect them. In fact, a facsimile may do this better than the original, as with the original one would be all too easily distracted by a romantic reverence for its age, marked by the fragility and musty odor of the paper or the visible concern in the eyes of the archivist or owner when the document is handed to you.

James's correspondence is a rich mine of historical detail and philosophical insight. For instance, restricting ourselves to the concluding volume: James's public distaste of formal logic is shown to be in part the result of him considering himself a "slow witted logical waddler (30)." Bertrand Russell's

objections to James's pragmatism are shown to have their roots in Russell's own hostility to religion. As Russell wrote James: "The pragmatic difference that pragmatism makes to me is that it encourages religious belief, & that I consider religious belief pernicious (294)." The letters in this volume further contain valuable discussions of James's *A Pluralistic Universe*, which appeared in 1909. They include both informed readers' reactions—like those of Ward, Lovejoy, and Montague—and authorial replies. In the latter, James for instance confesses he is closer to Hegel than he lets on in *A Pluralistic Universe*.

Some critical remarks can be made regarding editorial choices. Dedicating the first three volumes to the correspondence between William James and his brother the novelist Henry James is an understandable choice, but is unfortunate in that it isolates their exchange while creating gaps in the general correspondence volumes. Notwithstanding the interest in Henry James within literary circles, a wholly integrated chronological edition would have been preferred, especially since the special interest in the exchange between the two brothers can also be served differently, as is done in fact with the single-volume *William and Henry James: Selected Letters* (Charlottesville, 1997), which Skrupskelis and Berkeley extracted from these three volumes.

Questions can be asked also about the policy of calendaring. What rationale is used to determine which letters to include and which letters not to include? The editors have chosen to calendar only those letters by James that have little literary value and are merely informational in content, so that they might as well be summarized; these include, for instance, routine refusals to lecture invitations. Regarding the letters sent to James, the selection is more severe. Previous publication may be sufficient ground for non-inclusion, and the focus is on those letters that have a direct bearing on James's intellectual development or personal life. Not included are letters addressed to James but never sent. Hence, the Skrupskelis-Berkeley edition does not include Charles Peirce's numerous draft letters to James, no matter how informative they are with respect to their personal relation or to Peirce's view of James's philosophy. Personally, I would have preferred to have the summaries for the calendared letters interspersed with the letters themselves, rather than seeing them exiled to the back of the book. It would be easier for the reader to have them presented together with the letters in a single chronological run.

Realizing how much material is missing, it is tempting to call for a com-

plete electronic edition that is free from the limitations of printed volumes. Such an edition could include all 9,400 letters and more. There is surely something to be said for that, but one should be very careful. It is often all too easily assumed that making an electronic edition is far cheaper and easier. However, I am not so sure that the printing and distribution expenses add that much to the overall cost of the edition, as the number of hours spent searching for letters, transcribing them, meticulously proofing them, editing them, building the apparatus, and providing the notes is enormous, and the costs of setting up an electronic edition are also significant. As with having your house professionally painted, it is the labor and not the materials that make it an expensive undertaking. And to those who say that there are plenty of willing volunteers, one can only reply that willing volunteers are about as dangerous to a text as acidic paper.

Should this have been a complete electronic edition instead of a selective print edition? I would say that the answer to this is a definite no. Printed on paper that is designed to withstand the teeth of time one might expect to find highly reliable copies of the Skrupskelis-Berkeley edition six or seven centuries from now, if not beyond that, and as such it will outlive many of the letters it contains. With an electronic edition that is based on a technology that is still very much in its infancy, I fear that within one or two centuries all the work will need to be redone—the old-fashioned corruption by scribes having been silently replaced by random decay.

