
Henry James as a Small Boy in Rhinebeck

When William James died in 1910, his widow urged William's younger brother, Henry, to gather letters and compose a memoir. Henry was then sixty-seven years old, and what emerged was much more than a memoir of his "ideal elder brother." A Small Boy and Others was published in 1913, and it was quickly followed in 1914 by Notes of a Son and Brother; the composition of a third volume, to be called The Middle Years, was interrupted by the Great War and was still a fragment at the time of Henry's death in 1916. Nevertheless the three together became, with The Education of Henry Adams, one of the two most intricate records of the way the middle years of nineteenth century America registered on the minds of remarkable men who lived into the Twentieth.

The "occasion" which sets the remembrance in motion in the selection which follows from A Small Boy and Others is a "converging of Albany cousinships" (the young Henry lived at 21 Washington Place in New York City) to visit the much admired Gussy who was a cadet at the Institution Charlier, a military academy in Sing Sing. Gussy, or Gus, was Augustus Baker, one of the liveliest, envied Albany cousins. Later history intercedes with the hard fact that he was killed during the War in 1863. James's remembering imagination proceeds up the Hudson to Rhinebeck and a stay at his Uncle Augustus's residence at Linwood in the summer of '54 which, as the established author remembers it, must have played an important part in the formation of the way he learned to apprehend events. 1854 was the year before the fateful return of the James family to Europe which was to have such a momentous consequence on the mind of the future author.

What we have here is a complex glimpse of the early '50's as they impressed the eleven year old: the "great State Prison" at Sing Sing was "vast, bright and breezy," and the Hudson River Railroad in its "grand newness" marks a moment of change: "The time had been when the steamboat had to content

us." At Linwood, composite memories coalesce into a specific "scene." He and his father were there for the final illness of Mrs. Temple, the mother of "Minnie" Temple, so important to James's imagination in the shaping of *A Small Boy and Others* as a whole and in providing a model for his creation of the "American girl." It is, however, when Marie, the daughter of the household, is told by her mother, "Come now, my dear; don't make a scene—I insist on your not making a scene!" that the mind of the boy opens to a new consciousness: "Life at these intensities clearly became 'scenes'; but the great thing, the immense illumination, was that we could make them or not as we chose." He, of course, chose to make many.

Like *The Education*, James's autobiographical writing is strongly determined by the personal qualities of the mind making it. Dictated to Miss Bosanquet, who recorded the ruminative sentences on the typewriter in his Chelsea rooms in London during the winter of 1911-1912, the autobiographical memories are in James's "late late" style, a difficult but marvelously intricate medium for the record of the effort to give form to consciousness, or more precisely here, to the consciousness of remembering. Henry James worked from memory—one might better say he explored the process of remembering—drawing the residual sensibility of the boy into the immensely sophisticated and complex consciousness of the sixty-eight year old author searching for the sensations of an eleven year old riding the steamboat and encountering a convict in the halls of Sing Sing. What we have is at once an insight into the mind of an author in the act of forming and remembering and an evocation of the times and places remembered, the airs and attitudes and manners of the early '50s in the Hudson Valley. The result is an interweaving of a present with a past, and, in that past, of an actual world of nineteenth century America in the Hudson Valley with the particular impressions of a small boy, who, even then, was one of those upon whom little is lost.

—W. W.

Let me hurry, however, to catch again that thread I left dangling from my glance at our small vague spasms of school—my personal sense of them being as vague and small, I mean, in contrast with the fuller and stronger cup meted out all round to the Albany cousins, much more privileged, I felt, in every stroke of fortune; or at least much more interesting, though it might be wicked to call them more happy, through those numberless bereavements that had so enriched their existence. I mentioned above in particular the enviable consciousness of our little red-headed kinsman Gus Barker, who, as by a sharp revision, snatched what gaiety he might from a life to be cut short, in a cavalry dash, by one of the Confederate bullets of 1863: he blew out at us, on New York Sundays, as I have said, sharp puffs of the atmosphere of the Institution Charlier—strong to us, that is, the atmosphere of whose institutions was weak; but it was above all during a gregarious visit paid him in a livelier field still that I knew myself merely mother'd and brother'd. It had been his fate to be but scantily the latter and never at all the former—our aunt Janet had not survived his birth; but on this day of our collective pilgrimage to Sing-Sing, where he was at a “military” school and clad in a fashion that represented to me the very panoply of war, he shone with a rare radiance of privation. Ingenuous and responsive, of a social disposition, a candour of gaiety, that matched his physical activity—the most beautifully made athletic little person, and in the highest degree appealing and engaging—he not only did us the honours of his dazzling academy (dazzling at least to me) but had all the air of showing us over the great State prison which even then flourished near at hand and to which he accompanied us; a party of a composition that comes back to me as wonderful, the New York and Albany cousinships appearing to have converged and met, for the happy occasion, with the generations and sexes melting together and moving in a loose harmonious band. The party must have been less numerous than by the romantic tradition or confused notation of my youth, and what I mainly remember of it beyond my sense of our being at once an attendant train to my aged and gentle and in general most unadventurous grandmother, and a chorus of curiosity and amusement roundabout the vivid Gussy, is our collective impression that State prisons were on the whole delightful places, vast, bright and breezy, with a gay, free circulation in corridors and on stairs, a pleasant prevalence of hot soup and fresh crusty rolls, in tins, of which visitors admiringly

partook, and for the latter, in chance corners and on sunny landings, much interesting light brush of gentlemen remarkable but for gentlemanly crimes—that is defalcations and malversations to striking and impressive amounts.

I recall our coming on such a figure at the foot of a staircase and his having been announced to us by our conductor or friend in charge as likely to be there; and what a charm I found in his cool loose uniform of shining white (as I was afterwards to figure it,) as well as in his generally refined and distinguished appearance and in the fact that he was engaged, while exposed to our attention, in the commendable act of paring his nails with a smart penknife and that he didn't allow us to interrupt him. One of my companions, I forget which, had advised me that in these contacts with illustrious misfortune I was to be careful not to stare; and present to me at this moment is the wonder of whether he would think it staring to note that *he* quite stared, and also that his hands were fine and fair and one of them adorned with a signet ring. I was to have later in life a glimpse of two or three dismal penitentiaries, places affecting me as sordid, as dark and dreadful; but if the revelation of Sing-Sing had involved the idea of a timely warning to the young mind my small sensibility at least was not reached by the lesson. I envied the bold-eyed celebrity in the array of a planter at his ideas—we might have been *his* slaves—quite as much as I envied Gussy; in connection with which I may remark here that though in that early time I seem to have been constantly eager to exchange my lot for that of somebody else, on the assumed certainty of gaining by the bargain, I fail to remember feeling jealous of such happier persons—in the measure open to children of spirit. I had rather a positive lack of the passion, and thereby, I suppose, a lack of spirit; since if jealousy bears, as I think, on what one sees one's companions able to do—as against one's own falling short—envy, as I knew it at least, was simply of what they *were*, or in other words of a certain sort of richer consciousness supposed, doubtless often too freely supposed, in them. They were so *other*—that was what I felt; and to *be* other, other almost anyhow, seemed as good as the probable taste of the bright compound wistfully watched in the confectioner's window; unattainable, impossible, of course, but as to which just this impossibility and just that privation kept those active proceedings in which jealousy seeks relief quite out of the question. A platitude of acceptance of the poor actual, the absence of all vision of how in any degree to change it, combined with a complacency, an acuity of perception of alternatives, though a view of them as only through the confectioner's hard glass—that is what I

recover as the nearest approach to an apology, in the soil of my nature, for the springing seed of emulation. I never dreamed of competing—a business having in it at the best, for my temper, if not for my total failure of temper, a displeasing ferocity. If competing was bad snatching was therefore still worse, and jealousy was a sort of spiritual snatching. With which, nevertheless, all the while, one might have been “like” So-and-So, who had such horizons. A helpless little love of horizons I certainly cherished, and could sometimes even care for my own. These always shrank, however, under almost any suggestion of a further range or finer shade in the purple rim offered to other eyes—and that is what I take for the restlessness of envy. It wasn’t that I wished to change with everyone, with anyone at a venture, but that I saw “gifts” everywhere but as mine and that I scarce know whether to call the effect of this miserable or monstrous. It was the effect at least of self-abandonment—I mean to visions.

There must have been on that occasion of the Sing-Sing day—which it deeply interests me to piece together—some state of connection for some of us with the hospitalities of Rhinebeck, the place of abode of the eldest of the Albany uncles—that is of the three most in our view; for there were two others, the eldest of all a half-uncle only, who formed a class quite by himself, and the very youngest, who, with lively interests of his own, had still less attention for us than either of his three brothers. The house at Rhinebeck and all its accessories (which struck our young sense as innumerable,) in especial the great bluff of the Hudson on which it stood, yields me images scarcely dimmed, though as the effect but of snatches of acquaintance; there at all events the gently-groaning—ever so gently and dryly—Albany grandmother, with the Albany cousins as to whom I here discriminate, her two adopted daughters, maturest and mildest of the general tribe, must have paused for a stay; a feature of which would be perhaps her juncture with the New York contingent, somewhere sociably achieved, for the befriending of juvenile Gussy. It shimmers there, the whole circumstance, with I scarce know what large innocence of charity and ease; the Gussy-pretext, for reunion, all so thin yet so important an appeal, the simplicity of the interests and the doings, the assumptions and the concessions, each to-day so touching, almost so edifying. We were surely all gentle and generous together, floating in such a clean light social order, sweetly proof against ennui—unless it be a bad note, as is conceivable, never, *never* to feel bored—and thankful for the smallest aesthetic or romantic mercies. My vision loses itself withal in vaster connections—above all in my general sense of the then grand newness of the Hudson River

Railroad; so far at least as its completion to Albany was concerned, a modern blessing that even the youngest of us were in a position to appraise. The time had been when the steamboat had to content us—and I feel how amply it must have done so as I recall the thrill of docking in dim early dawns, the whole hour of the Albany water-side, the night of huge strange paddling and pattering and shrieking and creaking once ended, and contrast with it all certain long sessions in the train at an age and in conditions when neither train nor traveller had suffered chastening; sessions of a high animation, as I recast them, but at the same time of mortal intensities of lassitude. The elements here indeed are much confused and mixed—I must have known that discipline of the hectic interest and the extravagant strain in relation to Rhinebeck only; an *étape*, doubtless, on the way to New York, for the Albany kinship, but the limit to our smaller patiences of any northward land-journey. And yet not the young fatigue, I repeat, but the state of easy wonder, is what most comes back: the stops too repeated, but perversely engaging; the heat and the glare too great, but the river, by the window, making reaches and glimpses, so that the great swing of picture and force of light and colour were themselves a constant adventure; the uncles, above all, too pre-eminent, too recurrent, to the creation of a positive soreness of sympathy, of curiosity, and yet constituting by their presence half the enlargement of the time. For the presence of uncles, incoherent Albany uncles, is somehow what most gives these hours their stamp for memory. I scarce know why, nor do I much, I confess, distinguish occasions—but I see what I see: the long, the rattling car of the old open native form and the old harsh native exposure; the sense of arrival forever postponed, qualified however also by that of having in my hands a volume of M. Arsène Houssaye, *Philosophes et Comédiennes*, remarkably submitted by one of my relatives to my judgment. I see them always, the relatives, in slow circulation; restless and nervous and casual their note, not less than strikingly genial, but with vaguenesses, lapses, eclipses, that deprived their society of a tactless weight. They cheered us on, in their way; born optimists, clearly, if not logically determined ones, they were always reassuring and sustaining, though with a bright brevity that must have taken immensities, I think, for granted. They wore their hats slightly toward the nose, they strolled, they hung about, they reported of progress and of the company, they dropped suggestions, new magazines, packets of the edible deprecated for the immature; they figured in fine to a small nephew as the principal men of their time and, so far as the two younger and more familiar were concerned, the most splendid

as to aspect and apparel. It was none the less to the least shining, though not essentially the least comforting, of this social trio that, if I rightly remember, I owed my introduction to the *chronique galante* of the eighteenth century.

There tags itself at any rate to the impression a flutter as of some faint, some recaptured, grimace for another of his kindly offices (which I associate somehow with the deck of a steamboat:) his production for our vague benefit of a literary classic, the Confessions, as he called our attention to them, of the celebrated "Rousseau." I catch again the echo of the mirth excited, to my surprise, by this communication, and recover as well my responsive advance toward a work that seemed so to promise; but especially have I it before me that some play of light criticism mostly attended, on the part of any circle, this speaker's more ambitious remarks. For all that, and in spite of oddities of appearance and type, it was Augustus James who spread widest, in default of towering highest, to my wistful view of the larger life, and who covered definite and accessible ground. This ground, the house and precincts of Linwood, at Rhinebeck, harboured our tender years, I surmise, but at few and brief moments; but it hadn't taken many of these to make it the image of an hospitality liberal as I supposed great social situations were liberal; suppositions on this score having in childhood (or at least they had in mine) as little as possible to do with dry data. Didn't Linwood bristle with great views and other glories, with gardens and graperies and black ponies, to say nothing of gardeners and grooms who were notoriously and quotedly droll; to say nothing, in particular, of our aunt Elizabeth, who had been Miss Bay of Albany, who was the mother of the fair and free young waltzing-women in New York, and who floats back to me through the Rhinebeck picture, aquiline but easy, with an effect of handsome high-browed, high-nosed looseness, of dressing-gowns or streaming shawls (the dowdy, the delightful shawl of the period;) and of claws of bright benevolent steel that kept nipping for our charmed advantage: roses and grapes and peaches and currant-clusters, together with turns of phrase and scraps of remark that fell as by quite a like flash of shears. These are mere scrapings of gold-dust, but my mind owed her a vibration that, however tiny, was to insist all these years on *marking*—on figuring in a whole complex of picture and drama, the clearest note of which was that of worry and woe: a crisis prolonged, in deep-roofed outer galleries, through hot August evenings and amid the dim flare of open windows, to the hum of domesticated insects. All but inexpressible the part played, in the young mind naturally even though perversely, even though inord-

inately, arranged as a stage for the procession and exhibition of appearances, by matters all of a usual cast, contacts and impressions not arriving at the dignity of shocks, but happening to be to the taste, as one may say, of the little intelligence, happening to be such as the fond fancy could assimilate. One's record becomes, under memories of this order—and that is the only trouble—a tale of assimilations small and fine; out of which refuse, directly interesting to the subject-victim only, the most branching vegetations may be conceived as having sprung. Such are the absurdities of the poor dear inward life—when translated, that is, and perhaps ineffectually translated, into terms of the outward and trying at all to flourish on the lines of the outward; a reflection that might stay me here weren't it that I somehow feel morally affiliated, tied as by knotted fibres, to the elements involved.

One of these was assuredly that my father had again, characteristically suffered me to dangle; he having been called to Linwood by the dire trouble of his sister, Mrs. Temple, and brought me with him from Staten Island—I make the matter out as of the summer of '54. We had come up, he and I, to New York; but our doings there, with the journey following, are a blank to me; I recover but my sense, on our arrival, of being for the first time in the presence of tragedy, which the shining scene, roundabout, made more sinister—sharpened even to the point of my feeling abashed and irrelevant, wondering why I had come. My aunt, under her brother's roof, had left her husband, wasted with consumption, near death at Albany; gravely ill herself—she had taken the disease from him as it was taken in those days, and was in the event very scantily to survive him—she had been ordered away in her own interest, for which she cared no scrap, and my father, the person in all his family most justly appealed and most anxiously listened to, had been urged to come and support her in a separation that she passionately rejected. Vivid to me still, as floating across verandahs into the hot afternoon stillness, is the wail of her protest and her grief; I remember being scared and hushed by it and stealing away beyond its reach. I remember not less what resources of high control the whole case imputed, for my imagination, to my father; and how, creeping off to the edge of the eminence above the Hudson, I somehow felt the great bright harmonies of air and space becoming one with my rather proud assurance and confidence, that of my own connection, for life, for interest, with such sources of light. The great impression, however, the one that has brought me so far, was another matter: only that of the close, lamp-tempered, outer evening aforesaid, with my parent again, somewhere deep within,

yet not too far to make us hold our breath for it, tenderly opposing his sister's purpose of flight, and the presence at my side of my young cousin Marie, youngest daughter of the house, exactly of my own age, and named in honour of her having been born in Paris, to the influence of which fact her shining black eyes, her small quickness and brownness, marking sharply her difference from her sisters, so oddly, so almost extravagantly testified. It had come home to me by some voice of the air that she was "spoiled," and it made her in the highest degree interesting; we ourselves had been so associated, at home, without being in the least spoiled (I think we even rather missed it:) so that I knew about these subjects of invidious reflection only by literature—mainly, no doubt, that of the nursery—in which they formed, quite by themselves, a romantic class; and, the fond fancy always predominant, I prized even while a little dreading the chance to see the condition at work. This chance was given me, it was clear—though I risk in my record of it a final anticlimax—by a remark from my uncle Augustus to his daughter: seated duskily in our group, which included two or three dim dependent forms, he expressed the strong opinion that Marie should go to bed—expressed it, that is, with the casual cursory humour that was to strike me as the main expressional resource of outstanding members of the family and that would perhaps have had under analysis the defect of making judgment very personal without quite making authority so. Authority they hadn't, of a truth, these all so human outstanding ones; they made shift but with light appreciation, sudden suggestion, a peculiar variety of happy remark in the air. It had been remarked but in the air, I feel sure, that Marie should seek her couch—a truth by the dark wing of which I ruefully felt myself brushed; and the words seemed therefore to fall with a certain ironic weight. What I have retained of their effect, at any rate, is the vague fact of some objection raised by my cousin and some sharper point to his sentence supplied by her father; promptly merged in a visible commotion, a flutter of my young companion across the gallery as for refuge in the maternal arms, a protest and an appeal in short which drew from my aunt the simple phrase that was from that moment so preposterously to "count" for me. "Come now, my dear; don't make a scene—I *insist* on your not making a scene!" That was all the witchcraft the occasion used, but the note was none the less epoch-making. The expression, so vivid, so portentous, was one I had never heard—it had never been addressed to us at home; and who should say now what a world one mightn't at once read into it? It seemed freighted to sail so far; it told me so much about life. Life at these intensities clearly

became “scenes”; but the great thing, the immense illumination, was that we could make them or not as we chose. It was a long time of course before I began to distinguish between those within our compass more particularly as spoiled and those producible on a different basis and which should involve detachment, involve presence of mind; just the qualities in which Marie’s possible output was apparently deficient. It didn’t in the least matter accordingly whether or no a scene *was* then proceeded to—and I have lost all count of what immediately happened. The mark had been made for me and the door flung open; the passage, gathering up *all* the elements of the troubled time, had been itself a scene, quite enough of one, and I had become aware with it of a rich accession of possibilities. □



Lopuch Farm along Schoharie Creek (facing east).



Middle Schoharie Valley from Vromen's Nose (Onistagrawa "Corn Mountain"). Schoharie Creek along base of trees in distance (facing east).