ALICE JAMES

A BIOGRAPHY

JEAN STROUSE

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Jean Strouse

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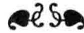
Introduction

Why Alice James?



WHEN I AM GONE," Alice James wrote to her brother William as she was dying, "pray don't think of me simply as a creature who might have been something else, had neurotic science been born."

By neurotic science she meant the science of nervous disorders, since her existence had long been dominated by mysterious illnesses for which no organic cause could be discovered and no cure found. Her prescient plea to William insisted that her life be judged on its own terms, without apology or excuse. At the same time, it recognized the temptation her friends and posterity would feel to explain her somehow, to imagine what she might have been. And in recognizing that temptation, Alice acknowledged that her life appeared to have been a failure.

By conventional measures, it was. Alice James did not produce any significant body of work. She never married. She did not have children. She was not socially useful, particularly virtuous, or even happy. Her interests and talents might have led her to become the "something else" she referred to in her letter to William — perhaps (to ignore her injunction for a moment) a historian, or a writer on politics, a pioneer in women's education, or the leader of a radical movement. Instead, she became an invalid. Like a great many other nineteenth-century women, she was "delicate," "high-strung," "nervous," and given to prostrations. She had her first breakdown at the age of nineteen, and her condition was called, at various points in her life, neurasthenia, hysteria, rheumatic gout, suppressed gout, cardiac complication, spinal neurosis, nervous hyperesthe-

sia, and spiritual crisis. "Try not to be ill," wrote her brother Henry in 1883, " — that is all; for in that there is a failure."*

Alice would have liked to put her mind to use in ways the world could recognize. She knew she was intelligent. When she was not incapacitated, she held salons in Boston and London and taught correspondence courses in history to women all over the United States. She had considerable power as a writer, though it was undisciplined: all her life she wrote lively, detailed letters to relatives and friends, and her diary, published after she died, presents a wide range of original reflections on society, politics, literature, history, and the people she knew. An avid reader and an energetic thinker, she formulated a radical philosophy that helped her bear a difficult life and meet an early death with remarkable courage. But these activities were private. They marked no worldly success.

Success, however, had unconventional measures within the James family. And though Alice's life can be seen in several contexts — including the history of nineteenth-century women, the science of nervous disorders, and the literature of private life — it was in the family group that she lived with greatest intensity. The Jameses, isolated during her childhood by money, travel, and the particular chemistry of their personalities, constituted a self-consciously "special case," self-enclosed and self-referring. William was, in a sense, describing them all when he told Alice in 1889 that Henry Jr. was really "a native of the James family, and has no other country."

Two of Alice's brothers possessed real genius, and their work met with tremendous public acclaim during her lifetime. William, the eldest, a physician by training, is probably the most important psychologist in American history and one of its most interesting philosophers. Her second brother, Henry, ranks among the greatest novelists in the English language. Their father, too — Henry James, Sr. — achieved renown as a writer and lecturer on religion, although his ideas did not earn him a place in the pantheon of history's thinkers.

Henry Sr. adored his two brilliant oldest sons and took great pride in

* "HJ wrote 'future' but fairly obviously meant failure," writes Leon Edel in a note to this letter as published in his *Henry James Letters*. It is also possible that James meant "there is no future," but the meaning would be the same. James's mistake did contain a certain truth, however, for within the James family there *was*, oddly enough, a "future" in illness. But that is getting ahead of the story.

their accomplishments, but he did not equate writing novels and teaching at Harvard with success. He urged on all five of his children a strenuous individualism that stressed *being extraordinary* no matter what one chose actually to do. In fact, he encouraged them not to make narrowing career choices, but "just to *be* something," recalled Henry Jr. in his autobiography, "something unconnected with specific doing, something free and uncommitted, something finer in short than being *that,* whatever it was, might consist of." Success in this rather murky scheme had nothing to do with the temporal rewards of laurels, lucre, and fame. Its indices were internal. "I am not sure indeed," continues Henry Jr.'s autobiography, "that the kind of personal history most appealing to my father would not have been some kind that should fairly proceed by mistakes, mistakes more human, more associational, less angular, less hard for others, that is less exemplary for them (since righteousness, as most understood, was in our parent's view, I think, the cruellest thing in the world) than straight and smug and declared felicities." In the eyes of this novel parent, an interesting failure seemed far more worthy of appreciation than any "too obvious success."

James encouraged his children to "convert and convert" the raw data of experience into interesting forms of communication (explained Henry Jr.), "success — in the general air — or no success; and simply everything that should happen to us, every contact, every impression and every experience we should know, were to form our soluble stuff . . . the moral of all of which was that we need never fear not to be good enough if we were only social enough: a splendid meaning indeed being attached to the latter term."

If the moral of all of that seems somewhat obscure, it is not more so in Henry's account than it was in real life. The indirection that serves as the hallmark of Henry's late style (he was nearly seventy when he wrote his autobiography) has parallels in the opacity of what all the Jameses had to say about their past. Henry's "moral" pointed toward perception and the conversion of perception into articulate communication as the principal ingredients of a Jamesian success.

These preoccupations fostered in some of the Jameses a highly articulate self-awareness. But there were, inevitably, great holes in what they could see about the experiences that shaped their lives — particularly about the nature and dynamics of the family itself. Most families generate myths about themselves, but few place the kind of premium the

Jameses did on simultaneously reinforcing the myths and presenting private perceptions of truth for public consumption. More often than not, myth and perception conflicted, and the James children grew adept at giving eloquently ambiguous voice to the way things were supposed to be: they learned to see and not see, say and not say, reveal and conceal, all at the same time.

The notion that communication ranked as the ultimate value in human experience grew out of a painful awareness of all one could *not* share. The intense, close-knit family group bred within itself a profound sense of individual solitude. "Perhaps the greatest breach in nature," wrote William in 1890, is "the breach from one mind to another." He went on to describe two brothers waking up in the same bed, each reaching back into the stream of his last conscious thoughts before sleep, each unable to enter the other's consciousness except by being told. Peter cannot *feel* Paul's last drowsy state of mind; he can only imagine or hear about it. Only through words can the brothers cross that breach in nature. Words marked the intersection of public and private experience.

Not all the James children excelled in the lessons of this unusual catechism. William, Henry, and Alice learned — at different times and in very different ways — to pay acute attention to their perceptions and convert this "soluble stuff" into words. The two middle boys, Garth Wilkinson and Robertson, never mastered the alchemical art; both felt they had missed out on the family genius, and Robertson once said he thought he was a foundling.

Henry Jr. put the principles of conversion to their fullest imaginative use, adapting them, in the process, to his own larger definitions of what it meant to "succeed" at the private business of life. In the world of his novels, moral vision counts for far more than action. Everything depends not on what a character does, but on how much he (or, more often, she) *sees* in life, other people, tradition, art, nature, the possibilities of the absorbing, reflecting mind. James's great theme was the confrontation of two worlds — American and European — one, innocent, fresh, unabashed, energetic, relatively simple; the other, rich, dense, knowing, intricately subtle and complex. The novels' protagonists, who start out in relative innocence, slowly take in the full breadth, range, and depth of experiences larger than anything they could have previously imagined. It was the process and consequences of learning to see that fascinated James, and it was the ability to open out one's imaginative vision as far as

possible — to take in all the simpler dichotomies of good and evil, innocence and knowledge, new world and old — that constituted, for him, living in the largest sense.

William, too, though by nature of a more practical and scientific bent than Henry, adapted these family themes to his own professional ends. He spent long years unable to work, struggling with questions about the nature of good and evil in the universe and his own soul. Later, his psychological and philosophical work asked, in effect, what exactly one can *know* about good and evil, the mind and the body, feeling, perception, expression, religious faith, the process of thought itself. He conducted exhaustive examinations of these questions, never hesitating to experiment on himself, and wrote up his ideas in straightforward, energetic prose.

To "succeed" as a person, then, in the broadest Jamesian interpretation, meant to achieve a complex identity forged out of all these ideas about morality, consciousness, perception, and communication — a sense of self that had to do with a quality of being and the ability to see life steadily (as Matthew Arnold put it) and see it whole. Of the five, Henry appears to have gone the farthest toward living out this ideal — it is virtually, in fact, his definition. William made forays, asked questions, had flashes of insight, but he stopped at the borders of psychology and religion — he did not push on to the profound understanding of himself and others exacted by this description of success; he might not even have agreed with it.

And Alice? How did she measure up to a recondite standard in which interesting failure had more value than too-obvious success? That is the principal question to be kept in mind throughout the course of her story, and it has no simple answer. "In our family group," wrote her novelist brother, "girls seem scarcely to have had a chance." There was only one girl in the family, which made her a particular kind of "special case" within the rarefied circle. Her father viewed women as personifications of virtue, innocent purity, holy self-sacrifice. Boys had to learn to be good, through suffering and the interesting uses of perception, but girls were good by nature and could dispense with interesting ideas. To be a James and a girl, then, was a contradiction in terms. And it is Alice's struggle to resolve that essential contradiction, her attempt to find something whole and authentic in her own experience, that gives her life its real stature and interest.

Virginia Woolf wondered, in *A Room of One's Own,* what would have happened if Shakespeare had had a "wonderfully gifted sister . . . as adventurous, as imaginative, as agog to see the world as he was." The girl would not, guesses Woolf, have been sent to school, or given a chance to learn grammar, logic, Horace, and Virgil. She would have "picked up a book now and then, one of her brother's perhaps, and read a few pages." But then her parents would have come in and told her to do something practical "and not moon about with books and papers. They would have spoken sharply but kindly, for they were substantial people who knew the conditions of life for a woman and loved their daughter — indeed, more likely than not she was the apple of her father's eye. Perhaps she scribbled some pages up in an apple loft on the sly, but was careful to hide them or set fire to them." Eventually, however, the time came for her to marry, and to avoid that "hateful" fate she ran away to London, to the stage door, where the actor-manager finally took pity on her. Soon "she found herself with child by that gentleman" and in the end killed herself one dark winter's night.

That, surmises Woolf, is how the story might have gone, since "any woman born with a great gift in the sixteenth century would certainly have gone crazed, shot herself, or ended her days in some lonely cottage outside the village, half witch, half wizard, feared and mocked at."

William and Henry James did have a sister gifted with fine intelligence, and through her it is possible to look closely at the scenario Woolf imagined. Although Alice James lived a good 300 years after the hypothetical "Judith" Shakespeare, her intellectual life was bound by many of the same strictures. The moral and philosophical questions that Henry wrote up as fiction and William as science, Alice simply lived. Her private quest for a sense of her life's integrity offers a special, personal angle of vision on the past. Not the past of great men and historical events, nor the past of the unknown masses who left no record of their thoughts, but the past of a sentient, articulate person whose particular history makes vivid the ideas, personalities, and social conditions of her time.

Alice James is not a representative figure in any obvious sense. She was too much a part of the peculiar Jamesian universe to "stand for" something larger than her own experience. Still, the general outlines of her life parallel those of a great many other women of her period and social class. Mysterious nervous ailments, ranging from occasional "sick head-

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aches" and a becoming Victorian delicacy to screaming hysterics and bizarre psychotic episodes, dominated the lives of vast numbers of American women. Taken all together, these illnesses, with their distinct personal origins, can be seen as a collective response to the changing shape of late nineteenth-century American life, in particular to the changing social positions and functions of women. Industrialization had altered the nature of housework, for example, leaving some women with leisure time to use their minds and others with a heightened commitment to motherhood as a perfectable science and the apotheosis of femininity; the Civil War proved that women could do men's jobs if necessary, and abolitionism intensified agitation for women's right to vote; the increasing democratization of education in the postwar years included new possibilities for the education of women. Some women addressed themselves to these changes directly, trying to encourage or thwart them. Others turned inward, making their private lives the battleground for what Woolf called their "own contrary instincts."

Alice took the latter route, registering social change and personal conflict in the dramatic wars that raged through her body and mind. She did not see it that way. She made no claim to have carried on an exemplary struggle or to have achieved anything beyond the private measure of her own experience. To make her into a heroine (or victim-as-heroine) now would be seriously to misconstrue her sufferings and her aims. Nonetheless, her experience has a unique value, and it is no sacrifice to take her at her word and not dwell on who she might have been. Because she fought to define for herself what it meant to be Alice James, she gave posterity a way to think about who she was.

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Part I

An Accidental Childhood

How grateful we ought to be that our excellent parents had threshed out all the ignoble superstitions, and did not feel it to be their duty to fill our minds with the dry husks, leaving them *tabulae rasae* to receive whatever stamp our individual experience was to give them, so that we had not the bore of wasting our energy in raking over and sweeping out the rubbish.

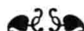
— Alice James, *Diary,* December 31, 1890

What enrichment of mind and memory can children have without continuity & if they are torn up by the roots every little while as we were! Of all things don't make the mistake which brought about our rootless & accidental childhood. Leave Europe for them until they are old eno' to have *the* Grand Emotion, undiluted by vague memories.

— Alice James to William James, November 4, 1888

Chapter One

Divine Maternity and a Calvinist God



INTERESTING PERCEPTIONS are preferable to marketable achievements only when there is enough money to go around. The money that paid for the unusual freedom of the James family had been earned long before Alice's parents were married.

On both sides, her forebears had been Calvinist for several generations. Her mother's maternal grandfather, Alexander Robertson, brought a strong Scottish strain into a lineage that was otherwise Irish. He came to New York City from Reading Parish, Palmont, Sterling County, Scotland, in 1761, at the age of twenty-eight. Two years later he married a Philadelphian, Mary Smith, whose father was also Scottish. They had eleven children before Mary died. In 1890, one of Alice's cousins told her that the Robertson descent could be traced back to Robert Bruce, King of Scotland. "I asked how," reported Alice. " 'Oh, why Robert*son*, son of Robert — er, er, — Bruce!' She showed me the coat-of-arms, but whether it was of the house of Robertson, Bruce, or 'Er — er,' I couldn't clearly make out." Whether or not there was royal blood in Alexander Robertson's veins, he appears to have been a wealthy man even before he emigrated, and by the 1780s he was a highly successful merchant in New York.

His tenth child, Alice James's grandmother Elizabeth, was born in 1781. At the age of twenty-five, she married James Walsh, a young tobacco and cotton merchant, the oldest son of her father's Irish friend

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