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Essay

Dossiê Henry James

Henry James's letters and why they matter

As cartas de Henry James e por que elas importam

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Abstract: "Henry James's Letters and Why They Matter" has three parts: first, an overview of Henry James's letters and *The Complete Letters of Henry James* edition; second, a discussion of strategies for representing James's letters, with attention to the utility of plain-text style; and third, a review the importance and usefulness of James's letters, including long-term letters series and a sudden appearance in the letters from 1889 and 1890 of the language of death and violence.
Keywords: Henry James; Letters; Style

Resumo: "As cartas de Henry James e por que elas importam" possui três partes: primeiro, uma visão geral das cartas de Henry James e da edição *The Complete Letters of Henry James*; segundo, uma discussão sobre as estratégias para representar as cartas de James, com atenção à utilidade do estilo em texto simples; e, terceiro, uma análise da importância e utilidade das cartas de James, incluindo séries de cartas de longo prazo e o surgimento repentino, nas cartas de 1889 e 1890, da linguagem da morte e da violência.
Palavras-chave: Henry James; Cartas; Estilo

Good afternoon. It's a pleasure to be here with you today and to be included in your meeting. My talk has three parts: first, an overview of Henry James's letters; second, a discussion of strategies for presenting them; and third, some notes on the importance and usefulness of James's letters.

Henry James was not only a prolific fiction writer, critic, playwright, and travel essayist. In addition, he wrote a lot of letters, possibly more than 16,000, if his letter writing frequency early in life was similar to that later. Of all the letters he wrote and sent, about 10,500 survive. It is the surviving letters James wrote and sent that *The Complete Letters of Henry James* is publishing. It is safe to say not only that writing mattered for Henry James, but that writing for him was a way of living.

The first known of Henry James's letters was written around 1855, when he was twelve years old, to a friend, Eddie Van Winkle. The last one from 1 December 1915, a few months before his death on 28 February 1916, to his niece Margaret Mary ("Peggy") James.

Many more letters survive from later in James's life, after 1876, when he moved to London from Paris and began working harder at his profession than before. Given his livelihood as a writer

and his record of professional publication, many of the later letters that survive are business letters that negotiate fees for his work, set up schedules for submitting chapters for serial publication, and the like. James's business letters are important not only for understanding his own professional life, but also for understanding more about how the Anglo-American literary marketplace operated during his lifetime. This opening page from James's letter to Clement Shorter, with which James came to terms for the serial version of *The Other House*, represents one such change in the publishing business. Shorter's expectations for James's punctuality nearly sent James into a breakdown during the summer of 1896. Having been referred by Lucy Clifford to Clement Shorter and his sensational weekly, the *Illustrated London News*, James and Shorter agreed on 26 February 1896 that the serial would be "65,000 words," "in thirteen instalments of 5,000 [words] during July, August and September next." James promised Shorter that "I shall endeavour to be thrilling." At the same time that he and Shorter came to their agreement, James was already writing *The Old Things* (the serial version of *The Spoils of Poynton*), which would begin in the *Atlantic Monthly* in two months (April 1896). James was exploiting an opportunity to earn well by writing two novels in less than a year.

Finishing *The Old Things* and beginning *The Other House* made April and May busy months. Soon the continued strain from trying to meet writing and social commitments began to build and produce negative effects on James. On 14 July 1896 he confessed to Mary Augusta Ward that he was in a bad place: "I am in deep waters and need your prayers."

The beginning of August was especially stressful. Shorter, who was responsible for a weekly publication, pressed—even harassed—James with telegrams to meet his deadlines in a more timely way. At that point, James had to choose either to fulfill professional obligations or care for friends. He chose his publication commitments and consequently faced complications from his choice. On 7 August 1896, for example, feeling ashamed for having to cancel their plans in order to meet a publisher's deadline, James wrote to Oliver Wendell Holmes and urged Holmes to "kick" him (James) for his bad behavior towards Holmes, who had come to England from the United States to visit James.

Four days after sending Shorter the last chapter of the last installment and thus fulfilling his contractual obligation, James began to mend friendships. On 28 August 1896, in a long letter to Edmund Gosse, James apologized profusely for his incivility and explained its causes:

> "in an evil hour I began to pay the penalty of having arranged to let a current serial begin when I was too little afraid of it, + when it prove a much slower + more difficult job than I expected. The printers and illustrators overtook + denounced me, the fear of breaking down paralyzed me, the combination of rheumatism + fatigue rendered my hand + arm in torture—+ the total situation made my existence a nightmare [...]."

Without James's letters, it would be very difficult to reconstruct this important series of life events.

As a London resident or frequent visitor from late 1876 until his death in 1916, James had a steady, even active, social life appropriate for his age. Many of James's letters that arrange social meetings and appointments survive, such as his letter is from 23 January 1893 to Lady Wolseley, who had been trying to arrange a dinner with James. As James gained fame, more of those social arrangement letters were probably saved by their recipients.

But the 10,500 letters don't consist only of short, one- or two-page business and social arrangement letters. There are many long letters to close friends and letters of ten, fifteen, even more than twenty pages that detail James's life plans, day-to-day experiences, and hopes for the future. There are other long letters that console and support friends who have had tragic events happen to them or who are suffering for any number of other reasons. James's 26 April 1886 letter to Alfred Lyttleton, whose wife died in childbirth less than a year after their marriage, is only one example. To Lyttleton James wrote:

> My dear Lyttleton.
>
> I cannot bear to write to you—for even the tenderest speech of friends must seem to you today intrusive + almost impertinent. But I can bear still less to keep silent when my heart is full of the constant compassionate thought of you + of the infinitely touching vision, + remembrance never to be lost, of her. We are horribly alone in the hours that count most in our lives—yet let me say that I enter into your sorrow, the dreadful ~~darkened~~ days you must have passed, your changed, darkened future. I measure your loss and I offer you the fullest, kindest sympathy that one man can entertain for another. With all of us your wife's delightful, exquisite image will remain—a beautiful, dear possession, a human link, a constant tender reference, among those who knew her. She was kind to me, + her memory is sweet! No one will hold you both henceforth in a more consecrated association than yours—more faithfully than ever.
>
> Henry James
> (*The Complete Letters of Henry James: 1884-1886*, 2: 89)

This and other letters to friends enable us to witness Henry James's empathy and understanding, which also helped him to become a great novelist.

As of today we've published seventeen volumes in *The Complete Letters* edition. All seventeen earned the "Approved Edition" seal from the Modern Language Association's Committee on Scholarly Editions. Editing and annotation are complete for volume eighteen, which takes us to letters written in April, 1890. Volume nineteen, which includes letters into January 1891, is well

underway. Beyond the nineteenth volume, most extant letters through 1897 are transcribed roughly, with hundreds more transcribed in the same way through late 1915.

Including the letters in the seventeenth volume, the ongoing edition contains 2,032 letters. Of the 2,032 letters in our first seventeen volumes, 1,126 are published for the first time and 906 were published first elsewhere. Most of the previously published letters lacked textual and informational notes before our publication of them. So even previously published letters are represented in our edition with more context than before. For comparison: Leon Edel's four-volume edition, *Henry James Letters* contains about 1,100 letters without textual notes and with spare use of content notes. Ignas K. Skrupskelis and Elizabeth M. Berkeley's *Correspondence of William James* gives its first three volumes to Henry and William letters, with 421 from Henry. *The William James letters* edition includes a full textual commentary and good content notes. I mention these numbers and details to give you a sense of the growth and breadth of our edition.

With the appearance of the edition's seventeenth book, we have edited, annotated, and published about one-fifth of James's extant letters. If future volumes include about 170 letters, as the last few books have, we'll need about fifty more volumes to finish the job. Work, then, has only just begun.

"The Complete Letters" part of our edition's title isn't completely accurate. We aim to include as many of James's letters as we can. But there's no way to include, of course, letters now lost. Inclusion depends first on a letter's survival. Second, including a letter requires our knowledge of it and its location. If we don't know about it and don't know where to find it, we cannot transcribe, annotate, and include it. Steve Jobe's *Calendar of Henry James Letters* made our edition possible. Jobe's *Calendar,* produced as a spiral-bound paper book and now available as a searchable web tool, lists more than 10,400 letters with their date, recipient, location of the letter, and its shelf list number. It registers whether the letter had been published and where (at the time the *Calendar* was produced).

I'd like to talk now a little about our approach to presenting the edited letters, known as plain-text editing, which we adapted from the *Mark Twain's Letters* project.

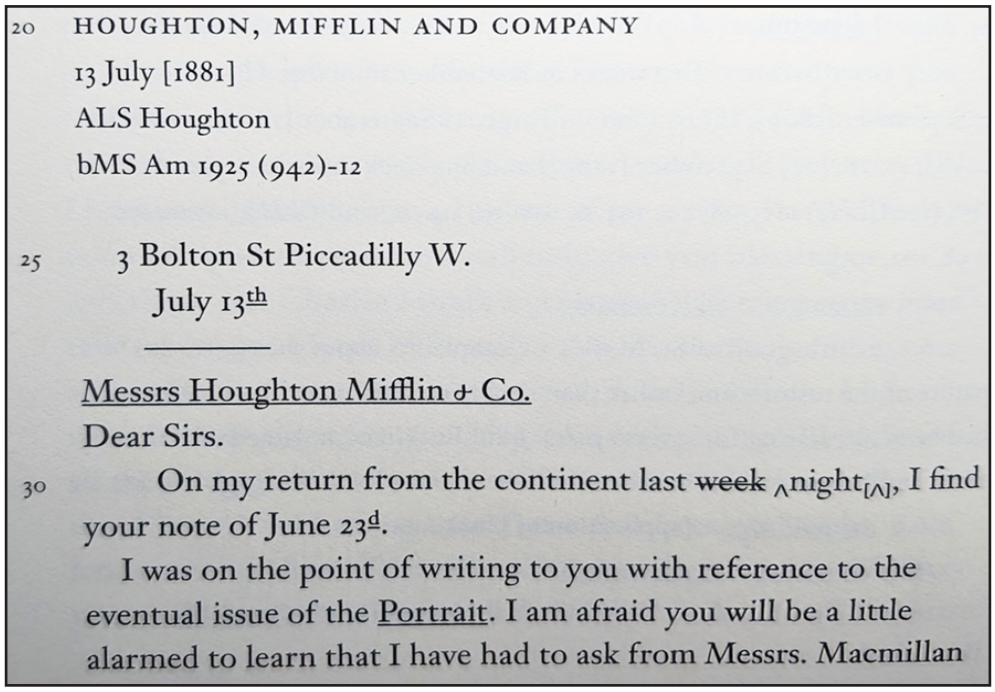
Letters projects, as well as projects of diplomatic and other historical papers, are known as documentary editing projects because they involve documents. All documentary editors must decide at the beginning of their projects where, on a continuum of "reliable" at one end and "readable" at the other, they want their representation of the documents to fall. Here "reliable" implies faithfulness to the original and "readable" implies the ease with which an untrained reader apprehends meaningful elements of the edited document. One cannot represent one's documents simultaneously at both the reliable and readable ends of the edition continuum.

The most reliable edition could be a facsimile edition of high-quality scans or photographs of the documents. The facsimile edition would be extremely faithful to the original. But given James's difficult handwriting, it would be far from easily readable.

The most readable edition would be one in which misspellings and grammar and punctuation errors were corrected and abbreviations expanded by editors so that the letter text read with the finish of a prepared-for-publication document. Such a highly readable way to represent a document is known as "corrected clear text." Corrected clear text represents the editor's determination of the writer's intention, but not, finally, the document.

Leon Edel's version of Henry James's 13 July [1881] letter to Houghton Mifflin concerning *The Portrait of a Lady* (*Henry James Letters* 2: 356-357) illustrates the principle that at the same time corrected clear text is readable, it's not always reliable in terms of the original document. Edel's corrected clear-text version omits the following from James's original letter in its opening lines: part of James's address ("Piccadilly W"); James's addressee, "Messrs. Houghton Mifflin + Co."; James's double struck "week" and careted insertion of "night," a change that marks James's answer to his publisher as virtually immediate rather than a week old; and finally James's formatting via indentations of the letter elements, which are deliberate and may be conventional. All the omissions are also losses of meaning. All this in only nine lines of a much longer letter, a result of the effort to achieve a more readable, but far less reliable version of James's original letter. Our plain-text version, which aims to capture more of the meaningful elements of the original letter, while still being easy to read and use, includes those missing elements (*The Complete Letters of Henry James, 1880-1883*, 1: 228-230).

If corrected clear text is most readable and facsimile is most reliable, with uncorrected clear text a little more reliable than corrected clear text, then plain-text editing, which we use for *The Complete Letters of Henry James*, is somewhere towards the middle of the reliability/readability continuum. Plain-text aims to represent all significant elements of James's letters, including cancellations and corrections, through a reader-friendly apparatus in the edited letter texts. Such writing details are markers of Henry James's thinking and consequent language choices he made as he wrote. For example, in the plain-text version of the 13 July [1881] letter to Houghton Mifflin, we represent James's caret marked insertion with a caret mark. We represent a word struck once, twice, three times, and so on, with a representation of that word similarly struck. We approximate the relative spaces of letter indentations, and so forth.



20 HOUGHTON, MIFFLIN AND COMPANY
13 July [1881]
ALS Houghton
bMS Am 1925 (942)-12

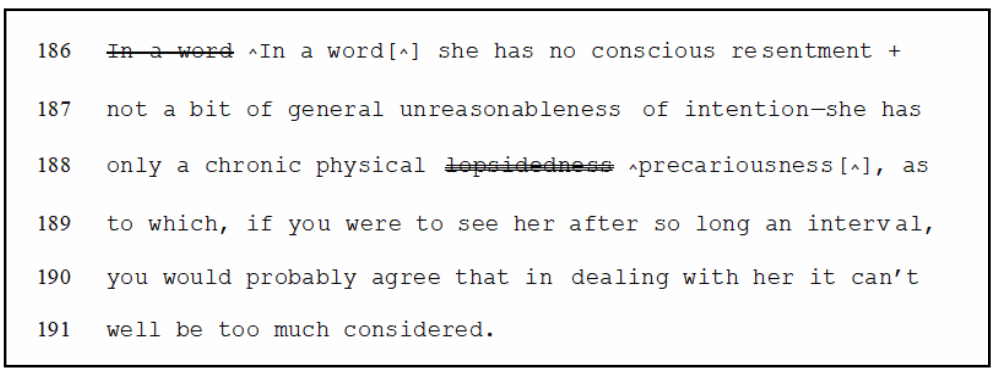
25 3 Bolton St Piccadilly W.
July 13th

Messrs Houghton Mifflin & Co.
Dear Sirs.
30 On my return from the continent last ~~week~~ ^night[^], I find your note of June 23d.
I was on the point of writing to you with reference to the eventual issue of the Portrait. I am afraid you will be a little alarmed to learn that I have had to ask from Messrs. Macmillan

Source: James, Henry. **The Complete Letters of Henry James**, 1880–1883. Ed. Michael Anesko and Greg W. Zacharias. Vol. 1. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2016.

To provide the richest context possible, we provide after each letter a full textual commentary to assist readers in the reconstruction of the details of the original, if that should be in the reader's interest and list of informational notes to help readers understand the letter more nearly as James's reader did.

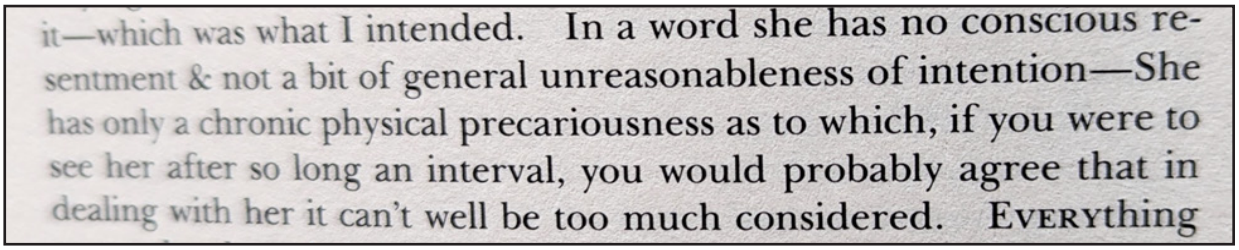
In Henry James's 13 June 1889 letter to William James, Henry describes the state of their sister's health. In the midst of that description is a word struck not with one cancellation mark and not with two, but with three. He evidently didn't want William or anyone else to see the struck word. But after some manipulation of the image, I read the struck word as the slightly indecorous "lopsidedness," which Henry James substituted with the milder "precariousness."



186 ~~In a word~~ ^In a word[^] she has no conscious resentment +
187 not a bit of general unreasonableness of intention—she has
188 only a chronic physical ~~lopsidedness~~ ^precariousness[^], as
189 to which, if you were to see her after so long an interval,
190 you would probably agree that in dealing with her it can't
191 well be too much considered.

Source: James, Henry. **The Complete Letters of Henry James**, 1888–1891. Ed. Michael Anesko, Greg W. Zacharias and Katie Sommer. Vol. 1. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2025.

Compare our representation of that part of the 13 June 1889 letter to Skrupskelis and Berkeley's uncorrected clear text version (Correspondence of William James 2: 114), which omits the interesting cancellation of "lopsidedness" and revealing substitution, "precariousness.".


it—which was what I intended. In a word she has no conscious resentment & not a bit of general unreasonableness of intention—She has only a chronic physical precariousness as to which, if you were to see her after so long an interval, you would probably agree that in dealing with her it can't well be too much considered. Everything

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

Each form of editing has its own audience. Which would be best for you?

Being able to have an understanding of meaningful elements of the original manuscript via the edited letter is important. But it's not the only reason for a large edition of letters. In addition to textual reliability, some readers want an edition that attempts to represent all known letters of a particular author so that they can read the various life and artistic arcs in that author's life that are drawn through those letters and all their meaningful details. James's letters to his parents and to Grace Norton offer examples that are representative of the value of extensive letter series to individual correspondents.

Henry James's parents supplemented his income into the 1870s, that is until James was some thirty-four or so years old. Without their help, he could not have frequented the quality of hotels he did, for example, while abroad before 1875 or so. James's letters to his parents and family members at home, which would usually be shared with parents, are among the most detailed he wrote. The two factors—quality of letter details and parental financial contributions—are related. As long as his parents were financing his travel, James wrote highly detailed long letters home describing his experiences in a way that only he only could. In those letters, Henry James carried out deliberate writing performances. Thus these family letters amounted to payments for his parents' financial support. His 10 and 12 March [1869] letter to his sister, Alice, is filled with brilliant descriptions. It is also typical of James's earlier letters home. Thus James wrote:

> I may say that up to this time I have been crushed under a sense of the mere magnitude of London—its inconceivable immensity—in such a way as to paralyse my mind for any appreciation of details. This is gradually subsiding; but what does it leave behind it? An extraordinary intellectual depression, ^as[^] I may say, + an indefinable flatness of mind. The place sits on you, broods on you, stamps on you with the feet of its myriad bipeds and quadrupeds. In fine, it is anything but a cheerful or a charming city. Yet it is a very splendid one. (*The Complete Letters of Henry James* 1855-1972, 1: 233-234)

For all the spectacle he assures readers and listeners that he has taken in, all the experience he shows he's gained, there is more. James went on to describe how Leslie Stephen, then an important literary man who later became the father of Virginia Woolf, took young Henry James for a Sunday afternoon around London: to the zoo; on the new underground railroad (imagine!); and to tea. Other meetings with the famous and distinguished are outlined without gushing or fanfare. Clearly, this 26-year-old is doing what his parents sent him to England to do: to take it all in and to report back to them. Clearly, he was earning his money.

Reading James's relationships with friends over the course of dozens or hundreds of letters in a comprehensive edition is a benefit that a selective letters edition can't match. Henry James had known Grace Norton, the sister of James's mentor Charles Eliot Norton, since at least 18 November 1868, the date of his first surviving letter to her when he was twenty-five and she thirty-four. Their friendship lasted until his death. James's letters to Grace Norton expose the nuances, compromises, and life adjustments needed to care for such a friendship. In a letter we've been able to date only as [18 February-12 August 1883] (when James was back in Boston following the death of his father), and following a Saturday evening dinner party at which Grace, upset that Henry wasn't paying enough attention to her, either left the party, went home, drank a tumbler of whisky or, upset, drank a tumbler of whiskey at the dinner, and later wrote James a note about what he had caused her to do. This is how he responded on Sunday morning to the incident the night before:

> Your note finds me on the point of writing to you. I will dine tomorrow with great pleasure—but only on condition that you are in some decent sort of health. The state my unhappy dinner threw you into—you drank a tumbler of whiskey!—fills me with rage + shame—for myself. (*The Complete Letters of Henry James* 1883-1884, 1: 57)

While some might ridicule Grace's behavior, James never did.

In James's 28 July 1883 letter to Grace Norton, he reaches out to her to affirm his empathy and friendship in response, in seems, to her battle with depression:

> Don't melt too much into the universe but ~~we~~ ^be[^] as solid + dense + fixed as you can. We all live together, + those of us who love + know, ~~life~~ ^live[^] so most. We help each other—even unconsciously, each in our own effort, we ~~help~~ ^lighten[^] the effort of others, we contribute to the sum of success, make it possible for others to live. Sorrow comes in great waves—no one can know that better than you—but it rolls over us, + though it may almost smother us it leaves us on the spot + we know that if it is strong, we are stronger, inasmuch as it passes + we remain. (*The Complete Letters of Henry James* 1883-1884, 1: 196)

Even this short excerpt from the long letter conveys the humanity that letter after letter to James's many long-term friends and colleagues contain and offer their readers. More, the intimacy

and honesty of the excerpt to Grace Norton represents so many of the long-duration exchanges between James and his most committed correspondents.

There is something new in James's letters from 1889 and 1890, which is worth mentioning and which shows itself rather suddenly in our most recent volume: a darkening of James's language, especially his use of the language of killing and violence. Let me give some examples. In his 26 March 1890 letter to Frederick Macmillan, James bargains hard for better terms for publication of *The Tragic Muse*. Such hard bargaining is not new. However, James's language during the bargaining now includes the language of killing and dying, which he used twice in the same letter, once about himself and once about Macmillan. To Macmillan James wrote, "What I desire is to obtain a sum of money 'down'—+ I am loth to perish without a struggle—that is without trying to obtain one." But James's figurative sacrifice of his own life in such a bout of haggling wasn't enough. He reserved the same for his correspondent, finishing the letter to Macmillan thus:

> "I gather that the terms you mention are an ultimatum excluding, for yourselves, the idea of anything down—which is why I make this declaration of my alternative. But I should be sorry to pursue that alternative without hearing from you again—though I don't flatter myself that I hold the knife at your throat."

Two days later, not having received an acceptable offer and coming close to what would be a break in his professional relationship with Macmillan, James returned to extreme language. This time it's not about separating from life itself, but instead about James cutting himself off from both Macmillan and the English literary marketplace. Thus he wrote to Macmillan,

> "Unless I can put the matter on a more remunerative footing all round I shall give up my English "market"—heaven save the market! + confine myself to my American. But I must experiment a bit first—+ to experiment is of course to say farewell to you" (Letter to Frederick Macmillan 28 March 1890).

Even with the intervention of his agent, A. P. Watt, who rescued the contract with Macmillan for the English edition of *The Tragic Muse*, James would not publish another novel with Macmillan after *The Tragic Muse* until 1896 (US edition of *The Other House*).

On 21 March 1890, James wrote to Robert Louis and Fanny Stevenson, who were in the South Pacific, asking them to return to England. He told them that their return was one of the three great subjects then being discussed in London. The other two were "the eternal Irish" and "Rudyard Kipling." The matter of Irish Home Rule needed no elaboration. That of Kipling did. Wrote James parenthetically, "(We'll tell you all about Rudyard Kipling—your nascent rival,—he has killed one immortal Rider Haggard—the star of the hour, aged 24 + author of [...] Tommy Atkins-tales.)" While Kipling's rise in popularity was sudden and threatened Haggard's fame, eventually, of course, neither Haggard's nor Kipling's career was killed.

James again used the language of death and killing facetiously on 20 April 1890 to Henrietta Reubell as he apologized for not having written to her more often:

> "Now that I have my pen in my hand + feel once more the full privilege of conversing with you, the full horror of the figure I must have presented to you quite takes my breath away. Never mind—I consent to be breathless, bafoué, trodden under your Louis Quinze heel or even under the wheels of your hospitable chariot from round the corner."

Mock self-humiliation as an element of apology was part of James's performative writing self. But his extension of self-humiliation to death or serious injury under the wheels of a carriage is a new feature.

I'm not sure why James turned to this language. One motivation could have been his penchant for drama and emotion. But drama and emotion can be achieved without the language of violence and killing. Perhaps the language of violence and killing was just a more effective but different way for James to elevate drama and emotion in his letters. I'll need to track this and think more about it. It seems to be a new feature in James's letters and it's worth paying attention to.

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