

ROSELLA MAMOLI ZORZI

THE CORRESPONDENCE OF HENRY JAMES
AND ISABELLA STEWART GARDNER

It is quite astonishing that in the gold-mine of letters¹ written by American novelist Henry James (1843-1916), many of those he wrote to Isabella Stewart Gardner (1840-1924) should not have been published until recently.²

The astonishment derives from the fame of the writer, but also from that of his addressee, Isabella Stewart Gardner, a very wealthy New Yorker, who married an equally wealthy Bostonian banker, John Lowell Gardner Jr. (1837-98), in 1860. She was the creator of one of the most important museums in the United States, Fenway Court, or the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, in Boston, which opened to a gala on January 1, 1903, and to the public on February 23.

Mrs. Gardner, often judged in the Boston newspapers and in the more conservative society as an eccentric figure, which she probably enjoyed being, letting all sorts of «legends» grow around her,³ was surrounded by a «court» of musicians, painters, novelists, who revered and blandished her. John Singer Sargent caught the aura of her great power in his famous portrait of 1888, where Mrs. Gardner, in a long black dress by the famous Paris couturier Worth, is shown exhibiting the signs of her wealth: she wears the

¹ The total number of extant letters by Henry James is 10,423; in spite of the various collections, starting with the four pioneering volumes edited by Leon Edel, only a fraction of this number has been published. The huge and wonderful project of *The Complete Letters of Henry James* has started with volumes I and II edited by Pierre A. Walker and Greg W. Zacharias, Introduction by Alfred Habegger, Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press, 2006. For the number of letters, see vol. I, lxviii.

² R. MAMOLI ZORZI (a cura di), *Cara Donna Isabella*, Milano, Archinto, 2004; (English edn. by EAD.: *Letters to Isabella Stuart Gardner*, London, Pushkin Press, 2010. A shorter version of this essay was used as an introduction for this volume.)

³ On the legends of Mrs. Gardner going around with a lion on a leash and such like, see SHAND-TUCCI, 25-7 and *Gondola Days*, 2004.

purest pearls around her neck and waist, rubies attached to the pearls, and rubies glitter also on her black silk slippers. The motif of the golden background seems to crown her within a sort of holy nimbus, symbol of power, while her beautiful white neck and arms underline her feminine attractiveness.⁴ In another famous portrait, of 1894, the Swedish painter Anders Zorn caught her extraordinary vitality, painting her as she stepped into the salon of the Palazzo Barbaro, the magnificent Venetian palace which Mrs. Gardner rented more than once from its owners, Daniel and Ariana Curtis, while the moonlight shines in the background over the Grand Canal, and her open arms and hands are reflected in the window-panes. The Venetian setting is highly significant, as the Barbaro was certainly an important inspiration for Isabella's Fenway Court, her lasting creation, where the simple exterior of the building hides a Venetian courtyard, where gothic windows, partly original ones, look out into a space rich in Roman mosaics, sculptures, statues⁵ and flowers.

«Dearest Queen», «Chère charmeuse», «Dear signora Isabella-donna», «Dear Queen Isabella»,⁶ are some of the different ways in which friends of both sexes addressed Mrs. Gardner in their letters, in adoring tones of total admiration. Isabella was respected and blandished, admired and flattered, in her different decisions and moves, just like a queen.

Henry James's letters to her are different: they are also full of admiration, but they manage to keep a distance, to proclaim the writer's independence in saving his precious time from too imposing and pressing invitations.⁷ James's affection and esteem for Mrs. Gardner are sincere and intense and become stronger and stronger as the years go by; the novelist recognizes openly Mrs. Gardner's vitality and power, but he does not obey possible «orders», even if this can be seen as a lack of faithfulness in their friendship: what is most important for James, in spite of

⁴ On the portrait, painted in December 1887 and January 1888, at Mrs. Gardner's 152 Beacon Street House, in nine sittings, see ORMOND-KILMURRAY, *Sargent. The Early Portraits*, 209-11. For the late watercolours, *Mrs. Gardner at Fenway Court* (probably 1903) and *Mrs. Gardner in White* (1922), see ORMOND-KILMURRAY, 2003, no. 442, 100 and no. 586, 251-2.

⁵ On the collections see GOLDFARB 1995 and *The Eye of the Beholder*.

⁶ These expressions, for instance, were used by Ralph Curtis, painter, son of the owners of the Palazzo Barbaro in Venice, by Mrs. Bronson, an American lady who lived in Venice and Asolo, and a friend of Robert Browning, who sent Mrs. Gardner a lock of the poet's hair.

⁷ See also EDEL, *Conquest of London*, 380.

his at times hectic social life, is the possibility to have time to devote to his writing, the real «felicity» of his life.

In the spring of 1884, Mrs. Gardner is approaching Europe and Venice by way of the Suez Canal after a one-year voyage around the world: the Gardners left Boston on May 21, 1883, and crossed the continent to San Francisco, from which they sailed aboard the *City of Tokio* on May 29, to Japan, China, Cambodia, Java, India, and via Aden and Cairo, to Crete, Zante, and finally Brindisi and Venice.⁸ She expects to find James in Venice in May 1884, having written to him from Agra, the seat of the splendid Taj Majal, but her correspondent writes to her that he will not be there. After almost throwing at her face her great power – «You have everything, you do everything, you enjoy everything» – James admits to broken vows, smashed promises, necessary, however, to save something even more valuable than friendship, his own writing. He declares that he knows too well she will not miss him, in her «preposterously pleasant career», and presents himself with the image of the poor patient beast:

I shall be waiting in London, & shall get into harness when you arrive. In the meanwhile have pity on the place where the collar rubbed. I wear a collar always: *que dis-je?* I wear half a dozen. They are piled up round my poor old head, & when you see me you will scarce distinguish the tip of my nose. I am a ruminant quadruped, too, & I turn it over in my mind that, really, I, at least, am too good a friend of yours to lend a further hand – or hoof – in spoiling you.

James develops the metaphor of the poor beast in harness, to contrast his life of hard work with that of the lady travelling from the temples of Kyoto to Shanghai, from *La Sonnambula* in Java to the mountains of Shimla, enjoying life, but at the end he underlines he is not joining the crowd in spoiling her, as a real friend.

A tender irony allows James to save himself from becoming one of Mrs. Gardner's courtiers, even if he entertains with her a very intense relationship, testified also by his constant sending her his books, the first being his long essay on Nathaniel Hawthorne (1880), followed by *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881), the

⁸ All references to Mr. and Mrs. Jack's travels are based on their travel diaries and scrapbooks, courtesy of the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, Boston. For excerpts of Mrs. Gardner's letters from the Orient, see CARTER, 59-86. See also the forthcoming catalogue *Journeys East*.

novel that brings success and some fame to James. Next comes *The Man of Fifty*, with two other stories, which is sent in 1882, and «the dreary little Maisie book», the wonderful *What Maisie Knew* (1897). At the end of James's life, we learn from these letters that he also sent her his autobiography, *Notes of a Son and Brother* (1914).

Not only does James send his works to Mrs. Gardner, but on one occasion he writes to her a long and detailed letter on the misprints in one of his essays, the one of 1882 on Venice, showing with this his care for what he published but also his esteem for the addressee, considered of no less standing than the well-known novelist and editor of *The Atlantic*, William Dean Howells, to whom, in another letter,⁹ he laments the misprints of the same article.

Finally, James writes more than once to Mrs. Gardner about his plays, his dream of success on the stage, something that never happened: while London audiences applauded Oscar Wilde's *Ideal Husband* at the Haymarket, they booed James's *Guy Domville* at the St. James's on January 5th, 1895.¹⁰ In 1882 he writes to her more than once, trying to arrange a visit, in Boston, when he would read to her the play drawn from the short novel, *Daisy Miller, A Comedy in Three Acts*; in 1891 he writes to her from London, still hoping in the success of *The American*, which has finally been put on the stage and is touring the provinces before arriving in London. James and Mrs. Gardner love going to a play, and James invites her to go to the theatre or gives advice on something he saw, in particular the plays performed in Boston in 1883 by the Italian actor Salvini, about whose performance in *Othello* James is quite enthusiastic, even if he finds it odd that audiences should accept Shakespeare spoken in Italian by the great star, and in English by the rest of the company.¹¹

The world encompassed in these letters is vast, in space and time. It includes two continents, Europe and America, since Mrs. Gardner and James see each other on both sides of the Atlantic and correspond across its waters; but it also includes the Far East, where Mrs. Gardner is traveling in 1883-84, and where other friends of both Mrs. Gardner's and James's are, such as Percy

⁹ EDEL, *Letters II*, 392.

¹⁰ EDEL, *Complete Plays*, 469-71.

¹¹ *Scenic Art*, 170.

Lowell or William Sturgis Bigelow; India, which the Gardners visit from north to south and where the Curtises announce they will go; the West Indies and the South Sea islands where Charles Roberts has some official post. Reading these letters one realizes how much, how often, and how far James's circle and generation traveled. Even the Fiji islands were part of the routes, not only for Robert Louis Stevenson but also for Henry Adams. If British friends travel in the British Empire, American friends seem not to have forgotten the whaling routes of their New England forbears.

The letters cover a wide space in time: they span a period of more than thirty years, from 1879 to 1914, a period full of world events, some of which appear in the letters: the Cuba war of 1898, which is a subject amply treated in its menacing power by Henry in his correspondence with his brother William, the famous psychologist and philosopher; echoes of «economic & labour convulsions, rumours of revolution & war» in 1911, announcing the coal strikes of 1912, which left «a couple of million people» out of work, «a number that will be hugely swelled if it goes on much longer»,¹² in James's words; there is no letter for 1900, therefore neither the death of Queen Victoria nor the Boer War, which «drags its daily gloom along»¹³ in Henry James's letters to his brother William and other friends, are present.

The letters show clearly on which side James was in a case that inflamed public opinion, the famous Dreyfus case, where the trial leading to the condemnation to forced labours (1894) of a Jewish French officer charged with treason was re-opened thanks to a famous article by Emile Zola, «J'accuse», in 1898.

Among the great events of the century there was the 1893 Chicago World Columbian Exposition, where the Gardners were invited, having lent a painting, and where Mrs. Gardner saw *The Omnibus*, a picture by Anders Zorn. She bought the painting, and later invited the Zorns to Palazzo Barbaro, where the Swedish painter created Isabella's wonderful portrait. James imagines Mrs. Gardner going to the Exposition, with her own building, «a more barbarous Barbaro», all of her own, among the Federal and the States buildings.

The last letter, dated April 20th, 1914, closes the correspondence, leaving out the great tragedy that made «the whole coun-

¹² Letter of March 21, 1912, to T.S. Perry, 338.

¹³ *The Correspondence of William James, William and Henry*, III, 101.

try» «a huge workshop of war», a few months later, bringing a «tremendous strain».¹⁴

People and letters cross the ocean, Mrs. Gardner and James see each other in London, in Paris, in Venice, but also on the other shore of the Atlantic, in the various homes of Mrs. Gardner, at Beacon Street in Boston, at Beverly on the Massachusetts coast, at Green Hill, in Brookline, near Boston.

Several letters allow us to enter the intense and private world of the deepest family affections: James writes to Mrs. Gardner a particularly intense and moving letter on the death of his mother, other letters regard other family losses, the death of Alice (1848-92), James's sister who died of cancer after a lifetime of psychological invalidism, of William (1842-1910), his closest brother.

To Mrs. Gardner James writes with great sympathy and affection on the sudden death of her husband on December 10th, 1898.

Other personal losses and private tragedies are not recorded or only hinted at: there is no word on the suicide of Mrs. Gardner's nephew, Joe Gardner,¹⁵ on October 16, 1886, while there is an obscure reference to the suicide of Edith Story Peruzzi's son Bindo¹⁶ in 1907, both perhaps linked to the hate for, and persecution of, homosexuals in the late 19th and early 20th century; there is no letter covering the period of Oscar Wilde's trial in April 1895, on which James wrote to his brother William «You ask of Oscar Wilde. His fall is hideously tragic – & the squalid violence of it gives him an interest (of misery) that he never had for me – in any degree – before. Strange to say he may have a “future” – of a sort – by reaction – when he comes out of prison – if he survives the horrible sentence of hard labour that he will probably get. His trial begins today – however – & it is too soon to say».¹⁷ Other private tragedies are mentioned in the letters, such as the suicide of Ellen Hooper Gurney in 1887, that came only two years after her sister, Marian «Clover» Hooper, the wife of Henry Adams, killed herself drinking potassium cyanide

¹⁴ Letter to Thomas S. Perry, January 15, 1915, 347.

¹⁵ See SHAND-TUCCI, 82-4.

¹⁶ See LAWRENCE 2007, 1-20.

¹⁷ *The Correspondence of William James, William and Henry*, II, 359 (letter of April 26, 1895, the day on which Wilde's trial began, finishing on May 25, with the imprisonment of Wilde on May 19, 1897).

on a Sunday morning, on December 6th, 1885. James's sister Alice's illness is mentioned,¹⁸ but no hint appears of the alcoholism and psychological weakness of James's younger brother Robertson.

Across these wide spaces and dramatic times a varied world of artists, writers, public figures, mutual friends crop up. As we shall see amazingly few letters allude to the works of art bought by Mrs. Gardner, and to her final creation, the museum.

The letter of June 13, 1879, takes us into the world of the theatre, which both James and Mrs. Gardner loved, even if on different terms; but it is the second letter, of July 1879, that takes us into the world of art, so important both for James and Mrs. Gardner, which in the late 1870s and 1880s was strongly focused on the new Grosvenor Gallery in London. The writer sends to Mrs. Gardner the address of Edward Burne-Jones (1833-98), the Pre-Raphaelite painter, whose paintings James had seen in the Grosvenor Gallery, and on which he had written, admiringly, several times. In 1878, for instance, he had written about *Laus Veneris* and *Chant d'amour*, both exhibited in Lady Lindsay's Grosvenor Gallery (1877-90), a gallery that presented itself as a «radical-chic» innovative venue, more open to the new than the more traditional, even if highly respected, Royal Academy, and which, at the same time, was frequented by the Royalty and the upper class, since Lady Lindsay and her husband, Sir Coutts Lindsay, reserved Sunday afternoons for their own friends.¹⁹

Mrs. Gardner is constantly keen to see what is new, to see with her own eyes what she hears of. She goes to see Burne Jones's paintings, even if she eventually will not buy any work by the Pre-Raphaelite painter, not even the stained glass windows which Charles Eliot Norton offers her in 1903.

In the fall of 1886, in London, James takes Mrs. Gardner to Sargent's studio,²⁰ to see one of his masterpieces, *Madame Gautreau*, the portrait presented at the 1884 Paris *salon* as *Madame X*, and immediately recognized as the scandalous portrait of Virginie

¹⁸ For Alice James, see her *Diary*, and STROUSE.

¹⁹ See EVE ADAM (ed.), *Mrs. Comyns Carr's Reminiscences*, London, Hutchinson, 1925, 54.

²⁰ For the photo of Sargent's Paris studio showing Mme Gautreau, see KILMURRAY-ORMOND, 1998, 15. On the painting, 101-3, no. 26. See also ORMOND-KILMURRAY, *Sargent. Early Portraits*, 103-4, 113-8. This is volume 1 of the fundamental *catalogue raisonné* of Sargent's *Complete Paintings* (ORMOND-KILMURRAY eds.), New Haven (CT), Yale University Press, 1998—.

Avegno, an American beauty from Louisiana, married to a wealthy French banker, M. Gautreau.

James recognized the innovative characteristics of the portrait, writing about it first in 1887, and expanding the essay in 1893:

It is an experiment of a highly original kind, and the painter has had in the case, in regard to what Ruskin would call the 'rightness' of his attempt, the courage of his opinion. A beauty of beauties, according to Parisian fame, the lady stands upright beside a table on which her right arm rests, with her body almost fronting the spectator and her face in complete profile. She wears an entirely sleeveless dress of black satin, against which her admirable left arm detaches itself; the line of her harmonious profile has a sharpness which Mr. Sargent does not always seek, and the crescent of Diana, an ornament in diamonds, rests on her exquisite head. This work had not the good fortune to please the public at large, and I believe it even excited a kind of unreasoned scandal – an idea sufficiently amusing in the light of some of the manifestations of the plastic effort to which, each year, the Salon stands sponsor. The picture will always remain interesting to those who follow the artist's career and note its different stages, even though they may not clearly see the light by which some portions of it are painted. It is a work to take or to leave, as the phrase is, and one in regard to which the question of liking or disliking comes promptly to be settled. It is full of audacity of experiment and science of execution; it has singular beauty of line, and certainly in the body and arms we feel the pulse of life as strongly as the brush can give it.²¹

The visit to Sargent's studio to see *Madame Gautreau* was surely of great importance for Mrs. Gardner, and perhaps made her think of having her own portrait painted by Sargent, as happened in 1888. Witness to the fact that she must have been highly impressed by this particular portrait is the fact that, very late in life (1919) she also bought an oil study by Sargent, *Madame Gautreau drinking a toast* (1882-3).²² Of course Sargent's *El Jaleo*,²³ of 1882, is even now one of the most important modern paintings of Fenway Court, in the East Cloister. A very late portrait of Mrs. Gardner by Sargent, *Mrs. Gardner in White*, a watercolour painted in

²¹ «John S. Sargent» in *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, October 1887, 690-1. In the 1893 version, James added the following sentences: «This superb picture, noble in conception and masterly in line, gives to the figure represented something of the high relief of the profiled images on great friezes. ... The author has never gone further in being boldy and consistently himself» (*Painter's Eye*, 225).

²² ORMOND-KILMURRAY, *Sargent. Early Portraits*, n. 116, 117-8; KILMURRAY-ORMOND, 1998, 100, no. 25; GOLDFARB, 31.

²³ The painting was given to Mrs. Gardner in 1914 by Mr. T. Jefferson Coolidge; see *The Eye of the Beholder*, 159.