

Nov. 13, 1991

Memorial:

To do a fraction of justice to the memory of James Day--whose discriminating volubility was, among many astonishments, probably the most astonishing thing about him--we'd need something of his own scope, wit and understanding. It's King Lear who says "When we are born, we cry that we are come/ To this great stage of fools." It is hard to imagine James when he was born (in November 1927) · doing anything except expressing himself in fine, lip-smacking, syntactical periods, startling his auditors into enlightening and subversive ways of looking at the world. Whether this was or was not the case, what we know for a fact is that by a precociously early age he had read his way through all the books in the public library of his home town of McAlester, Oklahoma, feeding that voracious appetite for the written word that would lead him eventually to the Matthew Vassar Chair of Classics at this college, not to mention to the James Day Chair of Oratory, Anecdote, Scandal, Gossip and Dialectic in the Retreat.

For James, *In the beginning was the word* was absolutely the case: his life was a journey charted along the co-ordinates of human language--writing and speech. It was a journey that began in McAlester, where he had known on a small farm the austerities of the Depression--personal relics of which remained in, among other things, his penchant for blue-jean overalls, his resistance to raising his house thermostat above 55 degrees while Hell froze over, and his culinary habit of keeping a stockpot of unimaginable promiscuity always simmering in the kitchen. From McAlester he migrated to the University at Norman, Oklahoma, and from there--after preparing for graduate school by a stint of basic training in the Army and a job in the Library of Congress--he went on to Magdalen College, Oxford, for a year as a Fulbright scholar. At Oxford, he studied with the Medieval Latin scholar, Colin Hardie, met Ronald Syme, and learned the very important lesson that the English--on the hard evidence of methodology and taste--believed in all innocence that coffee was tea. During that time, too, he attended some lectures of F.R. Leavis, and was awakened to the protocols and procedures of the New Criticism, which he would graft with great good effect on his own dealings with classical texts. In 1953 he returned to America and attended Harvard, where he studied with Mortimer Chambers--pursuing *ad fontes* his passion for language, and taking (in 1955) an M.A. in Classical Philology. After this he repaired--as he might say--to Rome for a year, on a travelling fellowship, an experience that, among other things, disillusioned him about the value of travel as a means of truly contacting the ancient world. The texts were, as they would always remain, enough.

During this time, too, James was developing and fine-tuning that skeptical attitude to all institutions that would mark his vexed relations with a number of them (the Army, the

academy, marriage, the State, the professions manned by institutional "experts", the fashionable institutions of the arts, the sprawling institution called New York City, even the modest institution of Vassar College). It was some such Band skepticism that led him from Harvard to the University of Chicago, where (working again with Mortimer Chambers) he received his Ph.D. in Classics in 1960, by which time he was already working at Vassar, where he had begun as a lecturer in 1958.

In the early phase of James's career at Vassar, he and his wife, Susan Hammond, were for some years house fellows in Raymond, where--as baker and music buff, as well as in more conventional roles--James was a source of enlightenment and surprise to the student inhabitants of the house. As a young member of the Classics Department he was influenced during that period especially by Inez Ryberg, as well as by Elizabeth Hazleton Haight and Marion Tate. Julia McGrew of the English Department, exerted another important influence--as friend, fellow-scholar, and ^ neighbour in Avery Hall. James's open, and openly acknowledged, reception of such influences was a sign of his own generosity of mind, as well as the sign of a life under continuous examination, an inner life tuned to change. It was also true, however, that when others moved, James could stay stubbornly still. So when the rest of us more or less gladly abandoned Avery Hall for the refurbished comforts bres of Sanders, James insisted on teaching in his old Avery classroom. Being coaxed to migrate, he put an end to argument--as he often did--with a negative imperative ("No, No, don't even think of it!") and a rhetorical question ("But what would I do without my maps?").

In the world of scholarship, James's book, *Aristotle's History of Athenian Democracy* (written with Mortimer Chambers and published in 1962, a revised version of his Chicago dissertation) was an original and brilliant contribution to Aristotelian studies, establishing the most revealing connections between Aristotle's *Politics* and his *Constitution of the Athenians*, and holding up for close inspection the categorical difficulties inherent in the language Aristotle employed to describe, and prescribe for, the state. As a work of refined and probing scholarship it is assured of its place in the field.

It may be regretted by those who learned so much from James's teaching, as well as from his extempore talk on Homer or the lyric poets, on Herodotus or Tacitus or the labyrinthine dynastic shenanigans of the Romans--that this knower of so much published little. It is not possible to say whether his reluctance to do so was the result of a paralysing conflict between the absolute philological standards he set for himself (and for others) and the remarkable powers of creative imagination he possessed; or whether it was rooted in his feeling that the academy, and his own parish in it, was already too crowded with published works that simply didn't matter--too much of what Yeats called "coughing in ink"--and that he simply didn't want to join that chorus; or whether it was due to some deep-seated skepticism about things being "right" in anything except the most provisional of senses, a conviction of provisionality that disabled the kind of academic certainty often required for

production and publication. We simply cannot say. Happily, however, we can say that as the beginning of his career was marked by a work of distinguished scholarship and intellectual originality, the end of it was marked by the exacting achievement and professional success of the impeccable work of translation and editing that--in collaboration with Ben Kohl--he performed on the Latin texts of the Renaissance humanist, Giovanni Conversini da Ravenna (published under the title *Two Court Treatises* by the Wilhelm Fink Verlag in 1987). For a number of years, James's scrupulous poring over the minutiae of textual possibilities and the vexing questions of emendation and translation were to all of us who witnessed them even in part a humbling spectacle: the standards of exactitude, fluency, scholarship, and sheer knowledge to which he held himself were enough to make most of us quail. In these encounters with the questionable text he was, of course, only showing his reverence for the written word, his sense of responsibility to that which had been written, his sense of duty--if that's the word--that this should not be lost, that it should be correctly transmitted. James's professional career is spanned by the book on Aristotle and the edition of Conversini, and it is on them that his public reputation as an 'authority'--he'd be inclined to shrug off the uncomfortable weight of that word--will rest.

Such acts of scholarly application were the Apollonian side of James's immersion in the world of words. There was also a Dionysiac side. He pursued etymologies, for example, with the passion others might reserve for vintage wines. With a capacious, catholic appetite, he read an astonishing array of novels (from Dickens to Borges to Flann O'Brien, from James to Joyce to Molly Keane), then re-read them, *then read them again--commenting, arguing, learning from them, and dwelling with *?them in a familiarity that could dismay his friends and colleagues in the English department. He read them for the reason others eat: for nourishment. In addition, the purpose of his reading was to make the world more tolerable, more mysterious, more humorous, more bearable, more--in a word--readable. In the end, all novelists, all writers of fiction, were for him the children of the father of lies, Herodotus, who was James's special love, because in them resided the one bit of philosophy that he'd wish to stake his life on--namely, that, in a phrase he often quoted with a mixture of satire and celebration, *le bon dieu est dans les details*, that god--whatever that might mean--lies, in every sense (the pun is his), in the details. It is to this appetite we owe the fact that a great part of the fiction collection of the Vassar Library is marked Ex Libris James Day..

It was the Dionysiac element in his encounter with language that was responsible too for James's passion for the sung and for the spoken word, for speech and song. His collection of recorded song--opera, lieder, rock, folk songs, ballads-- was only as voluminous and discriminating as his own remarkable knowledge of the art, playing over ten different renderings of an aria or a fragment of a cantata so that his friends, trapped in his freezing living-room after midnight, could put a bit of polish on their ignorance. And then there was his constant, unrelenting monitoring of the world via the radio waves. His intense, intensely skeptical fascination with American politics--a public world he saw always through the lens of a classical historian--was sustained by the interviews, news broadcasts and essays he

was forever taping off WBAI, WAMC, NPR, and AM talk shows. All this talk was the raw material of history for him, grist for his historian's mill, and it was all carefully, not to say gleefully, digested, analysed, commented on, much of it preserved--at least for a little while--on miles of magnetic tape. In this profound engagement with the immediate matter of history, with the common culture of the everyday world in its great and small manifestations, James was an instinctive, if heretical semiologist (a piece of praise he would look askance at--"Oh come on now!"). But the world was his unending text, a scroll endlessly unrolling. And his generous impulse to share what he knew, learned, thought, and (to coin a verb) opinionated, allowed his friends to participate in his outrage, his understanding, his pleasure.

For, of course, the sheer pleasure of it all was a central motive. The pleasure of it-- of the music, of Greek, of grammar, of translation, of the intricacies of history, etymology, philosophy--was the reason for his engagement. And what in the world other reason could there be, we can hear him say, as he whips off his glasses with a baseball-catcher's gesture, and drives his eyes closer to the text--the more sharply and scrupulously to see it, hear it, share it.

It was this love of the voice, too, that impelled James to Ireland, on a number of trips that contributed greatly to his store of pleasure, anecdote, and mania. Wilde was fond of saying that the Irish were "the greatest talkers since the Greeks". In the literary pub where James spent much of his time in Dublin, he was quickly known as "the Greek professor with the twisty beard," who earned the admiration and affection of the local intelligentsia and literati not only from the way he could hold his drink, but also hold his own with the best talkers among them. In Ireland, in the company of strangers whose life was, often, all talk, he felt at home.

The connection between these various strands of James's life resides in their common anchoring in the word, in the human voice, in James's profound sense that it was here we were--the Ancient Greeks as well as his Vassar students and the whiskey drinkers in Grogans--most human. And it was this sense of what made us most human--the languages we use, the languages we may come to understand with ever *more* finesse and humility--that made him the great teacher he was. For it was in the classroom that the various strands in James's life came together: the anecdotal, the scholarly, the serious, the humorous, the sympathetic and the severe, the comradely and the bullying, the wielder of high standards and the understander of the value of authentic effort, the knower most of all of how the text can be understood simply by being peeled piece by piece from the page: "Take it as it comes off the page", was what he never tired of telling his students. As a teacher what he prized was genuine attention: "God wants nothing but our attention," was a quotation he was fond of repeating. And the high but insistently human standards he set by his own unflinching attention inspired a love of the subject in the students who were

able to respond to the challenge of such enthusiasm and such intensity of commitment.

When he retired, in May of 1990, many of those former students paid generous testimony to how he affected them. Among the many sentences of praise, affection, and gratitude for what had obviously been for many the most formative and important experience of their educational career, one sentence in particular stands out as a summary of what the great teacher can do: it says, quite simply, "What you taught me, in the end, was how to begin." Simple as they are, these words seem exactly right, the perfect phrase to capture that enabling power possessed and communicated by a teacher of James's caliber. He loved teaching-- loved the Socratic method of which he was mischievously skeptical, loved the classroom, the performance, the craft, loved using the language as an instrument of provocation and coaxing, of illumination. His love of the craft may be seen in the fact that in spite of a number of debilitating crises in his physical and mental health-- times when many of us thought he would never come back to the classroom--he did return, to startle, intimidate, and earn the love and respect of students right up to his final semester. For so many of those who went through one or more of his classes, his name is a synonym for 'education' For his friends this is certainly true. For us, too, he embodied a synonym for the word 'teacher', and that is the word 'student'. For he never stopped being one and the other. To a sophomore he once remarked, "The first five minutes in the morning are the best time to learn. Did you know that about yourself, Miss Goodwin?"

The happiest thing to remember about James, in our loss, is that over and over--with humour and generosity, and in spite of the reclusive, solitary life he chose for himself--over and over he was letting us see by his own example, by the ways in which he remained a student and therefore was always the consummate teacher, what we did not know about ourselves. His life was various and complicated, difficult and often at risk by all the standards of conventional behaviour and conventional wisdom. It was a life that at times of crisis tested the patience *of* his friends, required (and, it must be said, received), the humane and generous understanding of the senior officers of this college, and pushed his own powers of endurance to the limit. A mighty effort of intelligence and will was needed to make sense of all the haphazard accumulations of this complex life. But make sense--and articulate communicable sense--of them James did.

And it is this same will to know, to understand, to make coherent shapes, to be ultimately responsible for his professional and personal life, that enabled him-- having secretly taken himself off his prescribed lithium for a year--to cure himself or at least effectively control his devastating illness, his manic depression. He did all this, as he performed his work as scholar, teacher, reader, listener, talker, and editor of his friends' works (to which task he devoted many of his skills in his later years), with imagination. The unexamined life is not worth living; the life examined, as James's was, with a continuously self-reviving act of imagination, is cause for celebration. It's impossible to avoid the thought that--with his

idiosyncratic, skeptical, non-participatory relationship to certain aspects of this community (like Socrates he could detach himself from the institution but give all of himself to the education of its citizens)--an event such as this would have evoked from James himself a few choice, unflattering descriptions. (In fact it is hard not to hear, behind these sentences I am speaking, a continuous bass note of editorial suggestion and emendation in a familiar, persistent voice--reasonable, sympathetic, Man dismayingly right.) Impatient and anarchic as he may have been, however,

James's deeper instincts were all tilted to acknowledge what was decorous and proper--just as long as the occasion was an authentic expression of human feeling, was not merely a hollow form. And it is in just such a spirit we remember him in to these few valedictory minutes. What we savour in his memory is the knowledge he left us of his genuine regard for the craft we are all apprenticed to, a craft he raised to the level of an art, becoming as he did a true philologist, a lover of the word. Such a memory has to be--in spite of the premature nature of his passing (only six months into a retirement he was thoroughly enjoying, at home with his tapes, his films, his books, his friends)--such a memory has to be for us a cause for celebration. As we trust it has to be, in the richer and vastly more complicated ways of family, to his children--Regan and Kevin and Colin--love for, pride in, and continuous preoccupation with whom occupied a distinct and deeply pervasive part of his life.

In a letter of response to the testimonials that came from former students on the occasion of his retirement, James utters his surprise that so many of them found what they did together in courses in Greek history and language and literature 'fun' (his word). He then goes on to say, in cadences, allusions, and a mixture of tones that seem to catch exactly his inimitable self, his voicé:tim

"Now it was one thing for me to be enjoying myself in the classroom as I have done; another, to gather, on the present handsome showing, the pleasure of your pleasure in it all: there's a chance to be surpris'd by joy. Occasion, then, for my Pod favorite tense in Greek, the one special to the shock of recognition: the imperfect of recent realization:dar

ἶδος ἄρ' ἦν
μοι
ένθαπερ χαριζόμενος θ'
υπήρχον
εὔ τ' ἐμοῖς χαίρων, φρεσὶν αὐτὸς αὐένα
εἶδος, το

That was James's own sweet, metrical Greek. Here is the English: "There was my --delight, there where I was continually offering an receiving/ the mind's pleasure."

Like the surprising contents of his green book bag, James's experience adds up to what in the end must be seen as a philosophic life all the parts caught--in his own
www.description--as "bits gathered over time into a makeshift emergency kit against the hemorrhaging of experience". He died suddenly, unexpectedly, too soon, just after his sixty-third birthday, and it is in his own favorite tense, that imperfect of recent realization that we measure the loss of our colleague, and our friend. His closest colleagues, the other members of the Department of Classics, paid tribute to him on his retirement with these words of Pindar. It was not in our mind then that they would have to serve, so soon, as a sort of epitaph:

εἰ δ' ἀρετὰ κατάκειται πᾶσαν ὀργάν ἀμφότερον δαπάναις τε καὶ πόνοις. χρή νιν ευρόντεσσιν ἀγάνορα κόμπου μὴ φθονεραῖσι φέρειν γνώμας.

"He who adds to his store of excellence with the effort and expense of every passion, must win generous praise without envy, when his achievement finds its goal."

(Signed)

Eamon Grennan, Robert Brown, Robert De Maria, Rachel Kitzinger, Ben Kohl,
Robert Pounder.

