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The Many Lives of Henry James – Biographers, Critics and Novelists on the Master

Abstract

The return of life-writing genres, biographical writing in particular, to the heart of present-day literary practices remains one of the most interesting phenomena in contemporary literature written in English. The article discusses a number of narratives (written by biographers, literary critics and novelists) which have emerged in the last decades and which attempt to present and critically analyse the life of Henry James, the master of American fiction at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries. The author recapitulates on the major trends in contemporary biographical practices which address the life of Henry James – especially the conclusions reached by biographers and critics associated with Marxism, Deconstruction, Feminism and Queer Theory. Moreover, the article investigates the phenomenon of the nearly simultaneous arrival of several biographical novels about Henry James.

Keywords: American literature, biographical studies, Henry James, identity, life-writing, Zeitgeist

While reviewing a new selection from the notebooks of Samuel Taylor Coleridge in the *London Review of Books* in 2003, the celebrated critic Barbara Everett made a general, yet pertinent comment on contemporary culture which may serve as an ideal starting point for the present discussion. When pondering over the increasing interest in what we can call the “daily existence” of individuals as well as an endless and insatiable appetite of the public for numerous and diverse forms of life-writing, she declared about our times: “This is an age of biography, not of poetry.”¹ Out of many biographical subjects that have enjoyed resurrection in the last couple of decades (by means of various life writing genres such as autobiography, biography, biographical novel, memoir, letters) Henry James appears to have claimed a special place and enjoyed an unparalleled prominence. The aim of the present article is to discuss various biographical takes on Henry James and,

¹ B. Everett, “Alphabeted,” *London Review of Books*, Issue 25 (2003), pp. 6–10.

further, analyse and contrast different strategies employed by biographers, critics and novelists to narrate the life of the Master. The paper will offer an overview of trends present in James's current biographical studies as well as an inquiry into "appropriations" of James carried out by Marxism, Deconstruction, Feminism and Queer Criticism. It will also discuss the phenomenon of the nearly simultaneous arrival of several biographical novels about Henry James in the last decade.

In Henry James's best known novel, *The Portrait of a Lady*, a crucial question on the nature of one's identity is raised in a discussion between Isabel Archer and Madame Merle, two principal female characters in the novel. It is initiated by Madame Merle's question "What shall we call our self?"² She continues by offering a response to the question she just posed: "Where does it begin? Where does it end? It overflows into everything that belongs to us and then it flows back again. I know a large part of myself is in the clothes I choose to wear... One's self – for other people – is one's expression of one's self."³ In opposition to Madame Merle's judgment, Isabel Archer replies that one has an inner core or self and that one controls one's own self-representations. "I don't know whether I succeed in expressing myself", Isabel says, "but I know that nothing else expresses me. Nothing that belongs to me is any measure of me; everything's on the contrary a limit, a barrier, and a perfectly arbitrary one. Certainly the clothes, which, as you say, I choose to wear, don't express me; and heaven forbid they should!"⁴

The debate is of primary importance to me since it addresses one of the most pertinent issues to life-writing phenomena in general and Henry James in particular. What Madame Merle and Isabel Archer attempt to answer is a philosophical question concerning one's identity. The former, being a constructivist, or anti-essentialist (to use terms from contemporary philosophical and literary discourse), offers a truly postmodern version of identity as fluid, always in motion, constantly changing, never grasped or attainable. What Madame Merle also implies is that one is not to be known or understood since other people have access only to manifestations of self, expressions, representations, which in their very nature are instruments of deception and manipulation that self performs on others. In contrast, Isabel could be described as a supporter of an essentialist view on self. She speaks of an inner core that could be understood as a stable self capable of being revealed and expressed. In other words: there is something that I call "me" which I am capable of knowing and there is a way for others to know "me" as well. However, one can be known not through external superficial manifestations of self but only by means of linguistic and physical participation in the world. Isabel Archer's position on self also principally rejects deception since she believes that self wishes to reveal itself to the world.

The discussion between Madame Merle and Isabel Archer could in fact be read as anticipation of the debate that biographers and scholars of James have been conducting, which necessarily needs to start with uttering and posing the following question: What shall we call Henry James? Should the attempts at describ-

² H. James, *The Portrait of a Lady*, Rockville Maryland: Serenity Publishers, 2009, p. 180.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

ing him be limited to the search of his “inner core” provided by the Master in the manner of one of his favourite heroines, Isabel Archer? Or perhaps the Merle approach should be employed and the “truth” about Henry James ought to be sought in multiple manifestations of his persona, in exploration of the conscious and the unconscious (highly speculative and subjective) in equal measure, in looking for fissures and cracks in the official version of his story?

Henry James is one of the most intriguing subjects for any life-writing scholar, with so much known about his life and, simultaneously, so little about James himself. To illustrate the issue in question, I would like to refer to two visual representations of Henry James which were created during his lifetime.⁵ The first one, produced in 1912, is by John Singer Sargent and shows Henry James as he was often viewed by Marxist critics: a seventy-year-old, pompous and unapproachable figure, a master of the novel, James’s head and eye being the most prominent features, suggesting intellect and vision. The other representation is by Alvin Langdon Coburn and is a series of photographs taken at Rye, in June 1906, only six years before the Sargent’s painting was created. The James one sees here is the exact opposite of the later representation: he appears vulnerable, anxious, and uncertain, in fact, uncomfortable with his body. From Leon Edel’s biography one can also learn that the period was characterised by James’s frequent onsets of self-doubt, and worry as well as a struggle with the new age and modern art.⁶ Which one is the real James? Is there any real James? This could well be used as a definitive argument about the impossibility of arriving at the “truth” of a person’s life since if anyone could entertain the hope for conclusive answers as far as any biographical research is concerned, James would be an ideal subject to pursue. With the help of the five-volume biography by Leon Edel written between 1953 and 1972 as well as his four-volume collection of James’s letters worked on over the period of 1974–1984, James’s life should be fully known. And yet, in spite of the knowledge gained from Edel and other biographers, Henry James remains a mystery, and his personal life, especially his relationships with people, the greatest puzzle for life-writing researchers. A brief look at the initial remarks of the most important biographical studies of James show how problematic James’s identity is for the students of his life and work.

Leon Edel, James’s greatest scholar and biographer, is responsible for a theory that existed for years as the definitive interpretation of the Master’s life and oeuvre, namely that James’s obstacles in forming any relationship originated in his family and especially his relationship with his mother. In the first chapter of his biography Edel notes:

From the daydreams recorded in his notebooks, from his tales, from his observations in his memoirs, we can fathom the effect on the young Henry of this view of the parental relationship which remained with him throughout his life. At some stage the thought came to him that men derive strength from the women they marry, and that conversely women can deprive men both of strength and life. Men used women, were propped up by them and

⁵ J.C. Rowe, „Prologue” [in:] D. McWhirter (ed.), *Henry James’s New York Edition. The Construction of Authorship*, Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1995, p. XXIV.

⁶ L. Edel, *Henry James: The Master, 1901–1916*, New York: Avon Books, 1978.

sometimes could not go on living after they were dead. Women could control the lives of men, and this he believed had happened to his father. A father demanded the mother's complete attention. Similarly, women could command the abject worship of men.

This led to further considerations. What happens to anyone who gives himself to another? To love – was that not self renunciation? Did not the mother give all of herself? Is the man therefore a threat to the woman in a love relationship? (It was clear enough to Henry that the woman could be a threat to the man). Would the man collapse and become weak (like the senior Henry) if he ever allowed himself to love a woman? To be a man and to take a woman for wife – was that not something to be feared? (...)

Henry James did not reason in this fashion, but these equations emerge as fictional themes: and in particular what we might call the “vampire theme,” elaborated in a number of his works (...). Fear of women and worship of women: the love-theme plays itself out in striking fashion throughout Henry James's work. And usually love in these fictions, is a threat to life itself. In a list of names he set down in his notebooks when he was fifty, James included that of “Ledward”, and then, as was often his custom, he improvised several variants, Ledward-Bedward, Dedward-Deadward. This appeared to be a casual rhyming of led-bed-dead. It was, in effect, a highly condensed statement of the themes of many of his works. To be led to the marriage bed was to be dead.

Henry James accordingly chose the path of safety. He remained celibate.⁷

This interpretation of James's life combines a negative parental example, a Freudian-like justification of hate-love relationship with women originating in the initial fear of the mother and possible castration (to use an appropriate Freudian term) that presents the greatest threat to one's potentials as a man and an artist.

However, Edel's volumes also gave rise to another version of the source of James's handicap as far as personal relationships are concerned, namely his decision to sublimate eros in the service of art. This idea was first articulated by Saul Rosenzweig in his influential 1943 essay “The Ghost of Henry James” in which he framed the issue in the following way: “His various novels and tales written both before and after departure from America acquired their notorious peculiarities – precious overqualification of style and restraint of sexual passion – from the repressed pattern of his life.”⁸ Undertaken by many critics afterwards, the belief in James as a “high priest of art” culminated in the work by Fred Kaplan:

As the brutal Civil war in America came to an end, a young American, slim, handsome, dark-haired, of medium height, with sharp grey eyes, began to write stories. By the literary standards of his time, he had a plain, direct style. He wrote in the alcove of a yellow-toned sunlit room in Cambridge, Massachusetts, where he pretended to study law. He had not fought in the war. His two young brothers were soldiers, still engaged in the most massive conflict since Napoleon had made Europe his empire. The twenty-one-year-old Henry James Jr, preferred to be a writer rather than a soldier. His motives for writing were clear to himself, and they were not unusual. He desired fame and fortune. Whatever the additional enriching complications that were to make him notorious for the complexity of his style and thought, the initial motivation remained constant. Deeply stubborn and persistently wilful, he wanted praise and money, the rewards of recognition of what he believed to be his genius, on terms that he himself wanted to establish. The only battle he thought most

⁷ L. Edel, *Henry James: A Life*, London: Collins, 1987, pp. 15–16.

⁸ S. Rosenzweig, “The Ghost of Henry James,” *Partisan Review II*, Fall, 1944, p. 454.

worth fighting was that of the imagination of artistic expression. The only empire he most coveted, the land that he wanted for his primary home, was the empire of art.⁹

However, in the last two decades of the 20th century, researchers started to question the two possibilities offered by Edel and Kaplan and new answers began to be sought. In 1998 Lyndall Gordon published *A Private Life of Henry James*, a biographical study in which she offered a highly negative view of James's attitude to women – in particular, his cousin Minny Temple and Constance Fenimore Woolson, and his unfair treatment of them through creating an illusion that he could reciprocate their feelings for him. *A Private Life of Henry James* later served as a major source and inspiration for Emma Tennant's novel about Henry James entitled *Felony*. Without concluding whether the portrayal by Gordon was accurate or not (an impossible task in my estimation), the book paid attention to the fact that one can arrive at some new "truths" about Henry James if one inspects the people James was involved with throughout his life. The first to do so was Miranda Seymour, who opened her 1988 study of James with addressing the issue:

When a man has neither wife nor mistress and leads a life which is both orderly and prudent, he does not invite the conventional biographical approach. Henry James was such a man. The richness of his life lies in his words and in his relationships.

James's character was full of contradictions. He was witty and melancholy, formidable and vulnerable, suavely brutal and imperiously kind. He was fiercely private and exuberantly sociable, guarded in many of his friendships, overt and demonstrative in his passions.

A man of such a fascinatingly complex character provoked conflicting reactions among those who knew – or thought they knew – him well. My aim has been to uncover and reconcile the many facets of his nature by looking at him through their eyes – and at them through his. The portrait emerges from the mass evasions, omissions, misunderstandings and misrepresentations which surrounded James in his later life and to which he himself contributed.¹⁰

Following in the footsteps of Seymour, Gordon elaborates on the issue of James's complexity of character and suggests that it is the obligation of the biographer: to investigate and research the gaps and refuse to be satisfied with what James wanted us to know about him. It is an act against the idea expressed by Isabel Archer in the extract opening this paper, since it wishes to look for "self" beyond what has been deliberately expressed by the subject. In *A Private Life of Henry James* Gordon writes:

James is the most elusive and unwilling of subjects. He rejected the prospect of biography, not only to protect his privacy, but also, we might guess, because he was so much a biographer himself – he well knew the excitement and dangers of biographical power. He drew out others with intent curiosity. In his attaching way, he "preyed... upon living beings", as T.S. Eliot recognized. (...) His awareness of buried possibilities, the gifts of the obscure, and gaps between the fact, invite the infinite challenge of his own life.

⁹ F. Kaplan, *Henry James: The Imagination of Genius*, New York: William Morrow, 1992, p. 3.

¹⁰ M. Seymour, *A Ring of Conspirators: Henry James and his Literary Circle, 1895–1915*, London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1988, p. 13.

To approach James at precisely the points he screened raised issues of the biographer's right to know. Questionable as this is, it does grant access to a more compelling and dangerous character, as well as a new reading of the major novels and a host of puzzling tales. James was a man of secrets, sunk from the sight a hundred years ago. (...)

James's own letters are, for the most part, too public, too busy, too fulsome, to give much away. Now and then, he casts off this social being with raging impatience. The crowded engagements, the comedies of manners in his letters and their effusion of fondness, were a façade for the private action of this most private of lives.¹¹

As discussed above, biographical studies consequently reveal the many lives of Henry James. Since the 1960s when, after a few decades of eclipse, James's studies enjoyed rejuvenation, we have seen the arrival of multiple personas of Henry James: James inhibited and endangered by women (like several young men in James's early novels who are attracted to certain women but do not seek a full relationship with them due to various doubts and inhibitions, suffice it to mention Winterbourne in *Daisy Miller* or Ralph Touchett in *The Portrait of a Lady*); James the "high priest" of art; James the manipulative egotist who brutally ruins the lives of women who fall in love with him and, subsequently, uses the experience for the sheer purpose of writing fiction; James who shares the culture-wide panic over changing gender and professional roles; James who practices sexual abstinence both to forestall nervous collapse and to conserve energy for work – to enumerate the most important versions created by the biographers of James. But difficulties in establishing the identity of the true Henry James have not only been the preoccupation of biographers or scholars working in the life-writing genres. The same can be said about critics who have been studying James's fiction for decades; which, in a manner identical to that of its originator, is equally prone to re-interpretation and radical judgments. For example, traditional Marxists¹² see James as someone typifying bourgeois mystification. To support their claim, they use arguments from James's works, including fictional concentration on middle-class manners, lack of concrete details, relentless abstraction, and, above all, valorisation of aesthetic experience. James's work is seen as being governed by a single intention, namely justification of the bourgeoisie's right to rule. At the other end of the spectrum, a student of James will encounter a deconstructive James of the Yale school of criticism, especially elaborated on in the studies by J. Hillis Miller, Paul de Man, and Harold Bloom with their insistence on interpreting strategic or systemic verbal ambiguity of James's works and essential indeterminacy of language. More recently, James has also become a subject of investigation for critics associated with Feminism and New Historicism. There is no doubt why the former group should find James among their research interests, since there is probably no other male novelist of the period who created so many memorable female characters.

¹¹ L. Gordon, *A Private Life of Henry James: Two Women and his Art*, London: Chatto & Windus, 1998, p. 5.

¹² Detailed analysis of the 20th century schools of criticism's take on James available in J.C. Rowe, *The Other Henry James*, Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1998.

A keen interest has been taken in James's intimate personal relationship with women (his mother and aunt Kate, sister Alice, cousin Minny and his later female companions, Lady Louisa Woolsey, James's typewriter Theodora Bosanquet, and especially Constance Fenimore Woolson) and James has been accurately recognised as the masculine modern eminently concerned with the problems facing modern women. On the other hand, he has also been defined as the ultimate version of patriarchal aestheticism with so many of his protagonists being led to death, exile or sacrifice in the manner of Daisy Miller, Isabel Archer and Kate Croy respectively. All of this, some feminist critics claim, is in accordance with the dominant cultural rhetoric of the period characterised by feminine abjection, madness and victimisation. For the purpose of exhaustive presentation, I also need to mention that a number of feminist critics also supported and endorsed James's alleged effeminacy,¹³ seeing, in the manner of Wendy Graham, James's incorporation of a feminine identity as a socially mediated act influenced by his desire to avoid unwelcome duties (military service or supporting the family), and upbringing (his father's love being focused on Henry's brother William).¹⁴

New Historicism also undertook the motif of victimisation, but instead of directing its blade at James's heroines, focused on the writer himself. In tune with the principles of the school, New Historicism sees the Master as a man who is held captive within the boundaries of ideological prison of the times in which he lived and worked. Needless to say, James worked in a critically transitional historical period, thus the school shows specific interest in discovering the ways in which social reality has been "textualised" in his works, to borrow the term from Stephen Greenblatt.

What is surely observed while discussing different approaches to the Master's work in the last thirty or forty years is a considerable shift. James is no longer seen as simply a wilful inheritor of the great tradition of American and English letters and the master of modern novel. The image we get instead from the critical studies shows him as a conflicted man, often baffled, who struggles with the complex realities that his age offers to him. Consequently, my brief overview of the contemporary discourses on James necessarily needs to include the most recent attempts at re-interpretations of his life and oeuvre. It should not be surprising that in the last couple of years the enigmatic nature of Henry James has particularly attracted the exponents of the centrality of human sexuality to both literature and human condition – these scholars have found in James a particularly interesting case for their deliberations. I would like to devote a few pages to the speculations of the so-called Queer Criticism, focusing on forms of sexuality traditionally considered deviant or transgressive as far as James's life and work are concerned. The reason for this is that at the turn of the 20th and 21st centuries, James became not

¹³ R. Hall, "An Obscure Hurt: The Sexuality of Henry James. Part I," *New Republic*, April 1979, pp. 25–31 and R. Hall, "An Obscure Hurt: The Sexuality of Henry James. Part II," *New Republic*, May 1979, pp. 25–29 and H. Feinstein, *Becoming William James*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984.

¹⁴ W. Graham, *Henry James's Thwarted Love*, Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1999.

only the school's central research interest,¹⁵ but also the fact that what has been declared by its critics has dominated contemporary studies of James.

The task that the critics of Queer Studies have taken to heart is to prove that James was a repressed homosexual and that his sexuality played a crucial role in both his life and art. This belief was originated by Edel who believed that James was a closeted gay who, neither admitted this orientation explicitly to himself, nor acted it out in a physical relationship. For the first time the claim about the Master's sexuality was explicitly stated by the biographer Richard Ellmann. In his 1983 essay entitled "Henry James Among the Aesthetes" devoted to aestheticism, i.e. the literary and artistic movement that flourished in Britain and America between 1870 and 1900 and that advanced art for art's sake in opposition to the utilitarian doctrine of moral or practical usefulness, thus liberating art from ethical consideration, Ellmann discussed James's reactions to Pater and Wilde suggesting his sexual fear of them. He elaborated on the subject, namely James's panic and loathing of Wilde, in his acclaimed biography of Wilde of 1987:

We must imagine Henry James revolted by Wilde's kneebreeches, contemptuous of the self-advertising and pointless nomadism, and nervous about the sensuality. He informed Mrs. Adams [who had called Wilde a "noodle"] that she was right. "'Hossscar' Wilde is a fatuous fool, tenth-rate cad", "an unclean beast." The images are so steamy as to suggest that James saw in Wilde a threat. For the tolerance of deviation, or ignorance of it, were alike in jeopardy because of Wilde's flouting and flouting. James's homosexuality was latent. Wilde's was patent. It was as if James, foreseeing the scandal, separated himself from this menace in motley.¹⁶

The idea about James's latent homosexuality was immediately picked up in the works of other critics, such as Jonathan Freedman, Joseph Litvak, Richard A. Kaye and, above all, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, who is responsible for the powerful theoretical articulation of "homosexual panic,"¹⁷ i.e. "the most private, psychologised form in which western men experience their vulnerability to the social pressure of the homophobic blackmail."¹⁸ In her famous reading of "The Beast in the Jungle" Sedgwick notes: "To judge from the biographies of Barrie and James, each author seems to have made erotic choices that were complicated enough, shifting enough in the gender of their objects, and, at least for long periods, kept distant enough from *éclaircissement* or physical expression, to make each an

¹⁵ The titles of critical studies devoted to James reveal scholars' primary interest in James sexuality: M. Mendelssohn, *Henry James, Oscar Wilde and Aesthetic Culture*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007; S.E. Gunter, S.H. Jobe (eds.), *Henry James, Dearly Beloved Friends: Henry James's Letters to Younger Men*, Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 2001; E. Haralson, *Henry James and Queer Modernity*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003; W. Graham, *Henry James's Thwarted Love*, Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1999; H. Stevens, *Henry James and Sexuality*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998.

¹⁶ R. Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde*, London: Hamish Hamilton, 1987, pp. 170–171.

¹⁷ E. Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosexual Desire*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1985, p. 89.

¹⁸ E. Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990, p. 185.

emboldening figure for a literary discussion of male homosexual panic.”¹⁹ Even if her theories were not assimilated and developed by other critics, Sedgwick would single-handedly revolutionise the studies of James, “an emboldening figure for a literary discussion of male homosexual panic,”²⁰ and extend their boundaries.

The spread of gay criticism aimed at James was so wide that John Bayle, while reviewing Fred Kaplan’s *Henry James: The Imagination of Genius*, stated with apparent relief: “Was James ever homosexually active? Did his military and mental gaiety go with his being gay in the modern sense? Fortunately, it is a question impossible to answer...”²¹ Sedgwick’s most apt pupil, the critic Hugh Stevens, continues the revisionary approach to James by simply substituting Sedgwick’s panic with a phenomenon of “homosexual self-loathing”²² in his *Henry James and Sexuality*. According to Stevens, the self-loathing is a phenomenon of “queers who hate other queers for the particular reason that they are queer”, he also continues with the juxtaposition of “latent” vs. “patent,” first introduced by Ellmann, stating that “the discreet loathes the blatant.”²³ In these views there is no place for eros since all has been overtaken by phobia.

I remain sceptical about the abovementioned theories and their reading of gaps and silences in James’s life and oeuvre. First of all, I refuse to accept them on the basis of their totalising energies and gross over-simplifications, since by means of rejecting other contexts they apply homosexual panic as a panacea for the explanation of difficult relationships. Moreover, they turn a deaf ear to the expression of sympathy and complicity – critics being extremely hostile to James for not joining Wilde and others in becoming icons of the liberation movement, which naturally results in the researchers’ works being biased and deprived of indispensable objectivity. Needless to say, the absurdities beset the pages of James’s queer criticism, a notable example being the claims made by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick: according to her the images of anal fisting could be discovered in the Prefaces to the New York Edition of James’s *Novels and Tales*.²⁴ The theories of Sedgwick and Stevens were also severely castigated by Michèle Mendelssohn, who in her study of James, Wilde and aestheticism offers a hypothesis that James could only engage with other men as a homosexual, and that his interaction was dominated by a form of same-sex desire as a “notion as absurd as it is reductive.”²⁵ Secondly, Mendelssohn argues against the hypotheses of Queer theorists claiming that panic and loathing were not the keynotes of James’s relationships. As an example of this, she indicates the relationship between James and Wilde – evidenced by James’s letters to Robert Ross, a declared homosexual and Wilde’s first lover, who supported Wilde in his legal battles against Lord Alfred Douglas, hence, demon-

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 195.

²¹ J. Bayle, “The Master at War,” *New York Review of Books*, January 28, 1993, p. 9.

²² H. Stevens, *Henry James and Sexuality*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998, p. 131.

²³ Ibid., p. 141.

²⁴ E. Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*, Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2003, pp. 35–65.

²⁵ M. Mendelssohn, *Henry James, Oscar Wilde and Aesthetic Culture*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007, p. 5.

strating James sympathy and ability to associate with other homosexual men in a carefree and open manner.

Recently, one observes a new move in the study of James that works against the speculations of Sedgwick and her followers. The vision of James as a supreme connoisseur of pain, a man of practically no knowledge of desire's more positive features, whose haunted and frozen sexuality resulted from permanent anxiety and panic, has started to be rejected in favour of the view that James's relationship with both men and women were more complex, perhaps with the possible incorporation of eros. From this perspective, the answer to the question posed by Mendelssohn, namely "Must we cast James's fictions east of Eden without granting them the lingering taste of the apple?"²⁶ could shortly be answered "no."

Although his writings suggest that James was deeply conflicted in his sexuality, there is some evidence that men were a possible love interest to him. There were several men in James's life towards whom the Master revealed inclinations bordering on homoeroticism. Paul Joukowsky, Hugh Walpole, Jonathan Sturges, Morton Fullerton and Hendrik Andersen are the names of the males that played a special role in his life as both James's letters and Edel's biography show. Howard Sturgis was a socialite and author of a novel entitled *Tim: A Story of School Life* published in 1891 and which is dedicated to James with the following words: "thy love to me was wonderful passing the love of women."²⁷ There exists a series of very affectionate letters that James wrote to Sturgis which are full of playful and erotic allusions, e.g. "our so happy little congress of two", or more overt declarations: "You have the art of writing letters which make those who already adore you to the verge of dementia slide over the dizzy edge and fairly sit raving their passion."²⁸ In one of the missives the Master says: "I repeat, almost to indiscretion, that I could live with you."²⁹ Perhaps, the best documented expression of James's affection towards men is the correspondence between him and Morton Fullerton, a journalist for *The Times* and Edith Wharton's lover, a bisexual himself. On September 21, 1900 James wrote: "I'm alone and I think of you. I can't say fairer... I'd meet you at Dover – I'd do anything for you."³⁰ And a few days later he continues with his missives, writing: "I want in fact more of you. You are dazzling; (...) you are beautiful; you are more than tactful, you are tenderly, magically tactile."³¹

Also, James's letters to Hendrik Andersen, a Norwegian painter and sculptor whom James befriended in Rome, provide further irrefutable "evidence"³² of

²⁶ Ibid., p. 12.

²⁷ S.E. Gunter, S.H. Jobe (eds.), *Henry James, Dearly Beloved Friends: Henry James's Letters to Younger Men*, Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 2001, p. 118.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 125.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 139.

³⁰ H. James, letter to M. Fullerton, September 21, 1900, Houghton Library [in:] G. Buelens (ed.), *Enacting History in Henry James. Narrative, power, and ethics*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997, p. 4.

³¹ H. James, letter to M. Fullerton, September 26, 1900, Houghton Library [in:] G. Buelens (ed.), *Enacting History in Henry James*, op. cit., p. 4.

³² W. Graham, *Henry James's Thwarted Love*, op. cit., p. 48.

his homoerotic inclinations. One letter written after Andreas, Andersen's brother, died, reads: "I return to Rye April first, and sooner or later to have you there and do for you, to put my arm round you and make you lean on me as on a brother and a lover, and keep you on and on, slowly comforted or at least relieved of the first bitterness of pain – this I try to imagine and as thinkable, attainable, not wholly out of the question."³³ Ellmann characterises James's passionate correspondence with Hendrik Andersen as "an affair, or an approximation of an affair."³⁴

Finally, in Sheldon M. Novick's 1996 biography of Henry James entitled *Henry James: The Young Master* there is a claim that in 1865 James enjoyed a sexual act with Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr. Novick's only evidence for this is a passage in James's notebooks from 1905. At that time James was staying in California, gathering materials for *The American Scene* (to be published in 1907). In the relevant entry, he recalled an experience during his 1865 visit to Cambridge to see the Temple family, in particular his three cousins. The notebook reads:

How can I speak of Cambridge at all (...). The point for me (for fatal, for impossible, expansion) is that I knew there, *had* there, in the ghostly old C. that I sit and write of here by the strange Pacific on the other side of the continent, *l'initiation première* (the divine, the unique), there and in Ashburton Place (...). Ah, the "epoch-making" weeks of the spring of 1865!³⁵

This could, of course, sound as if the Master referred to sexual experience, but I agree with David Lodge that taking into account James's language this could easily refer to discovering his vocation as a writer.³⁶ The only fragment in James's personal writing which could offer any answer to the question of James's identity remains inconclusive.

As evident from the overview that the present paper offers, Henry James remains an enigma despite all the efforts made by researchers to arrive at some conclusions concerning his identity. No matter what ideological position is assumed, whether one wishes to prove that James was celibate, a repressed homosexual, an active homosexual, a diligent researcher of James has to conclude that it is impossible to give a conclusive answer to the question of who Henry James *really* was. Supporters of various biographical options find their evidence but the pieces are always prone to be challenged, questioned and refuted. James is a mystery and to a great extent he chose to be one. He authored only three autobiographical pieces, namely *A Small Boy and Others*, *Notes of a Son and Brother* and *The Middle Years*. The first two published during his lifetime record the defining experience of James's boyhood and early manhood from a small boy's naïve experience; yet, they employ the critical vocabulary of the late James as well as a point of view of the adult making sense of his youthful longings. The last volume appeared

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ R. Ellmann, "Henry James Among the Aesthetes" [in:] *Proceedings of the British Academy* 69, 1983, p. 228.

³⁵ S.M. Novick, *Henry James: The Young Master*, New York: Random House, 1996. Full extract available in F.O. Matthiesen, K.B. Murdock (eds.), *The Notebooks of Henry James*, Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1981, p. 319.

³⁶ D. Lodge, *The Year of Henry James. The Story of a Novel*, London: Penguin Books, 2007, p. 102.

posthumously, but its major preoccupation is the novelist's vocation and quest, technique and regret about not reaching a wider audience. Again, Henry James the writer deliberately concealed Henry James the man. Gaps in James's life are far more numerous and in no way should be limited to his sexual identity.

In James's play entitled *Guy Domville*, the major issue addressed is exactly that of identity – giving voice to the unspeakable and to transgression in particular. In one scene the principal character Guy Domville declares himself overcome by “things I can't tell you – words I can't speak.”³⁷ Identity in much of James's writing is in crisis. Self could be created by and through destabilisation. Eric Haralson, one of the more contemporary critics of James, claims that the crisis of the stable and fixed self is applicable not only to James's characters but to the writer himself. The Master's own valorisation of the role of an aesthete and an attempt at internalisation of the role is understood as his struggle to articulate a modern self, a modern manhood “apart from the normative script of a fixed national identity, a vulgarising, homogenising career in business and commerce, a middle-class philistinism, and puritanical asceticism in the reception of beauty, and crucially a mature life of heterosexual performance as spouse, physical partner, and paterfamilias.”³⁸

This view brings me back to the initial debate between Isabel Archer and Madame Merle on the nature of one's identity. As much as James associated himself with Isabel Archer, the current biographical challenges that James's life presents result in acknowledgement of Madame Merle's expertise on the concept of self, at least as far as the life-writing practices are concerned. Identity is opaque and difficult to discern, some philosophers would say – and I am fairly sure that the same can be said about James. The Master's identity as we know it from available sources is opaque and difficult to discern. The problems biographers have had with James lies in the fact that James never revealed his identity himself, never expressed himself, as Isabel Archer would suggest. He remained an enigma that defies any conclusiveness and, consequently, has left his students with a set of versions of himself. As proved by an overview of Jamesian criticism, students of the Master's life behave as if they were individual versions of Madame Merle, constructivists trying to pick up the pieces and arrive at their own vision of Henry James. A perfect illustration of the paths which the contemporary James's studies have taken is an excerpt from Ronald Barthes's own semi-autobiographical piece in which he declares: “once the paradigm is blurred, utopia begins (...) liberated from the binary prison, will achieve a state of infinite expansion.”³⁹

As a writer, James was hailed the master of realism, subsequently: of modernism and most recently: of postmodernism. As a critic, the Master was claimed by New Critics, phenomenological and reader-response critics, structuralists and deconstructive theorists, each time reflecting changing intellectual trends and lit-

³⁷ L. Edel (ed.), *The Complete Plays of Henry James*, London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1949, p. 494.

³⁸ E. Haralson, *Henry James and Queer Modernity*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003, p. 3.

³⁹ R. Barthes, *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, Berkeley, Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1994, p. 133.

erary concerns. Each time he was represented differently from the way in which he had hitherto been perceived. Perhaps the only critic so far capable of grasping James's phenomenon has been John Carlos Rowe who concluded his introduction to *The Other Henry James* with hailing multiple Henry Jameses:

The Jameses we discover in his place are anxious, conflicted, marginal, sometimes ashamed of themselves, utterly at odds, it would seem with the royal "we" that James assumed in his last deathbed dictations, slipping in and out of Napoleonic delusions. The new Henry Jameses are instead full of life and interest, not only in their times, but for our own, which as we begin to understand it continues to wind its way back to its early modern origins as it unfurls into our new century. We recognize belatedly that this is the path of the Jamesian sentence, whose serpentine coils still grip us and yet more than ever offer the possibility of a grateful embrace.⁴⁰

What should a James researcher do when the sheer fact of embarking on a biographical research seems to violate James's unshakable belief in the rights of privacy? How to portray James, his life and genius, when there are as many variants of James as there are critics and biographers writing about him? How to write about a life when the life itself, a hypotext, is veiled in ambiguity and uncertainty? In what way should the gaps be filled or what explanations ought to be provided? Should one follow the Master or rebel against him? In the last decade a number of novelists have followed the biographers and, by means of addressing the above posed questions, embarked on their own fictional pursuits of Henry James.

Zeitgeist which could be read as "the spirit of the age" or "the spirit of the times," is a term introduced by the German Romantic writers, Johann Gottfried Herder in particular, and popularised by Hegel's philosophy of history. In *The Oxford English Dictionary* we read that *zeitgeist* is the "spirit or genius which marks the thought or feeling of a period or age."⁴¹ I would like to refer to the term because it was deliberately used by David Lodge in the "acknowledgements" part of his novel *Author, Author* in relation to (non)coincidental appearance of several novels which dealt, with the life and oeuvre of Henry James.⁴²

Taking into account a considerable increase in the interest in life-writing genres in contemporary writing practices, there seems to be no doubt that this trend, without precedence in the whole history of literature, could be referred to as *zeitgeist* – the general intellectual and cultural climate which resurrects the concepts of life, self, identity and authorship – previously expelled from the literary discourse by the preachers of Deconstruction and Post-structuralism. But, on a much smaller scale, *zeitgeist* could be used in an attempt to describe and understand the specific situation of the publishing market in 2004 when the literary world was offered multiple resurrections of Henry James in the form of James-based or James-influenced novels. David Lodge devoted an entire chapter of his 2007 book *The Year of Henry James. The Story of a Novel* trying to unveil the mystery of so many novels about James appearing at the same time. Though partly unsuccessful

⁴⁰ J.C. Rowe, *The Other Henry James*, Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1998, p. XII.

⁴¹ J.A. Simpson, E.S.C. Weiner (eds.), *The Oxford English Dictionary 2nd ed.*, vol. XX, *Wave-Zyxt*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991, p. 798.

⁴² D. Lodge, *Author, Author*, London: Secker & Warburg, 2004, p. 389.

in providing plausible conclusions (primarily due to Lodge's obsession with the commercial and critical failure of his own version of James's life), in his study Lodge lists a number of logically incomprehensible concatenations of incidents which, having an entirely coincidental character, reveal a simultaneously shared fascination with Henry James's life. It seems to me that the mystery behind such a fascination can be grasped only by applying a cryptic term of *zeitgeist* to the phenomenon.

The year of 2004 – the hundredth anniversary of the publishing of *The Golden Bowl* – could not have been named anything but the year of Henry James. In March, the Irish writer Colm Tóibín published, to great critical acclaim, his biographical novel *The Master* which introduces episodes from James's life between January 1895 and October 1899 with many flashbacks covering James's childhood, adolescence and youth.⁴³ A month later, Alan Hollinghurst saw the publication of his fourth novel entitled *The Line of Beauty*, which, in spite of not having James as its character, was understood by most critics as a homage to James.⁴⁴ What needs to be emphasised is that *The Line of Beauty*, which was ultimately awarded the Booker Prize for Fiction, is an act of homage on numerous levels. Not only is the major character, Nicholas Guest, writing his postgraduate thesis on Henry James and writing a script for the film adaptation of *The Spoils of Poynton*, but both stylistically (the use of periphrasis and the orotund style of James's late novels) and thematically (the panorama of British society with the focus on a young hero, both insider and outsider, entering the world of money and privilege) the novel is perhaps the closest to what James himself might write if he were our contemporary. One of the scenes shows a dinner guest asking Nicholas Guest, "What would Henry James have made of us, I wonder?", to which Nick replies: "He'd have been very kind to us, he'd have said how wonderful and how beautiful we were, he'd have given us incredibly subtle things to say, and we wouldn't have realised until just before the end that he'd seen right through us."⁴⁵ Hollinghurst's achievement in *The Line of Beauty* is his ability to perform the same operation on his own characters – to see through them all and reveal the pain, tension, flaws and imperfections of the 1980s Thatcherite Britain.

In September of the same year the Secker & Warburg Publishing House released the novel by David Lodge entitled *Author, Author* which, apart from the opening and closing pages presenting the dying James in December 1915, concentrates on Henry James's middle years, the last two decades of the 19th century. Robert McCrum in *The Guardian* anticipated that "come September, when David Lodge's new novel *Author, Author* is published, James will have scored

⁴³ *The Master* was Tóibín's first attempt at biographical fiction, followed by a portrayal of Lady Augusta Gregory in one of his short stories entitled "Silence" in the collection *The Empty Family* of 2010.

⁴⁴ See for example R. McCrum, "Could Henry James scoop up the big prizes this year?" available at <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2004/apr/25/henryjames>, G. Dyer, "The last summer" at <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/3614486/The-last-summer.html> and A. Quinn, "The Last Good Summer" at <http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9E07E4DA113AF932A05753C1A9629C8B63> [accessed on June 9, 2010].

⁴⁵ A. Hollinghurst, *The Line of Beauty*, London: Picador, 2004, p. 140.

a remarkable posthumous hat trick as the subject of three contemporary novels,⁴⁶ while Peter Kemp began one of the first reviews of Lodge's new book with the following remark: "If anyone deserves to win this year's Man Booker Prize, it is Henry James. During 2004, he has been the originator of no fewer than three outstanding novels."⁴⁷

But the students of *zeitgeist* were offered more to satiate their appetite for the resurrection of James. In the spring of 2004, almost simultaneously with Tóibín's and Hollinghurst's, Emma Tennant's novel *Felony* was reissued in paperback. Published in 2002, the book was a first attempt at a biographical novel on James with special attention paid to the relationship with the American novelist Constance Fenimore Woolson and to the origin of James's novella *The Aspern Papers*. The book is by no means a successful novel (another one in a series of her minor biographical works; the story about James and Woolson was preceded by her 2001 novel on Ted Hughes and Sylvia Plath entitled *The Ballad of Sylvia and Ted*), yet it deserves to be mentioned since it was the first time that James appeared under his own name as a principle character in a novel.⁴⁸

Today, thanks to research conducted by Lodge in his study *The Year of Henry James*, it is known that two more novelists showed interest in Henry James around 2004. Firstly, precisely in 2004, the South African writer Michiel Heyns submitted to London publishers his new novel entitled *The Typewriter's Tale*, set in the first decade of the 20th century and dealing with James's involvement in a love affair between Edith Wharton and Morton Fullerton. The title refers to a narrative mode in which the story is told from the point of view of James's secretary. The British publishing houses refused to release Heyns's work on the basis of bad timing ("I am so sorry but timing is all – and there has just been a spate of fiction based on the life of Henry James published here. I don't know how these coincidences happen... something in the atmosphere? So regretfully I must say no")⁴⁹ and the book was ultimately published a year later by South African Jonathan Ball earning limited acknowledgment of both critics and readers (though it bears mentioning that it was shortlisted for the Commonwealth Writers' Prize, Africa region). The book remains unpublished in the UK and the United States. Secondly, according to Lodge,⁵⁰ in the spring of 2004 the American novelist David Leavitt was expected to offer to his publishers his new novel that was supposed to address the life of Henry James. Henry James also featured prominently in "The Master at St. Bartholomew's Hospital, 1914–1916" from Joyce Carol Oates's 2008 collection entitled *Wilde Nights!* – a series of fictional representation of the last days of famous writers, i.e. Edgar Allan Poe, Emily Dickinson, Mark Twain,

⁴⁶ R. McCrum, "Could Henry James scoop up the big prizes this year?," op. cit.

⁴⁷ P. Kemp [in:] D. Lodge, *The Year of Henry James*, op. cit., p. 3.

⁴⁸ As far as I am aware Henry James's first appearance in fiction is in Gore Vidal's 1987 historical novel *Empire*.

⁴⁹ Heyns wrote an article about his being the last in the procession of James-inspired novels and problems with the publishing houses in *Prospect* magazine in September 2004. M. Heyns, "The curse of Henry James," *Prospect*, September 2004, available at <http://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/2004/09/thecurseofhenryjames/> [accessed on June 9, 2010].

⁵⁰ D. Lodge, *The Year of Henry James*, op. cit., p. 5.

Henry James and Ernest Hemingway (in order of appearance). Cynthia Ozick's life-long fascination with Henry James (she wrote her master's thesis on James's late novels) resulted in two Jamesian works: the 2008 novella entitled *Dictation* which depicted the friendship between Henry James and Joseph Conrad and the 2010 novel *Foreign Bodies* which is an act of retelling James's 1903 novel *The Ambassadors*. Finally, in 2010, Henry James appeared as a character in two works of fiction: a short story "Silence" from Colm Tóibín's collection *The Empty Family* and a novel by Paula Marantz Cohen entitled *What Alice Knew*.⁵¹

How should one explain this unprecedented convergence of novelistic attention on Henry James? *Zeitgeist* is a useful philosophical term that surely describes the phenomenon but at the same time does not explain it. As I cannot in any way find a good reason for five or six⁵² authors working on Henry James simultaneously, I can only attempt to answer the question why James turned out to be the subject of their inquiry and why the authors, without any previous experience in life-writing genres, embarked on writing a biographical novel.

It is definitely a much easier task to answer the latter question first. What the novels clearly show is that at the turn of the 20th and 21st centuries biographical fiction proves one of the most popular and fashionable genres that attracts writers of any provenance. It is accompanied by interest in subjectivity (against objective representation that by means of a discourse based on evidence governed the realm of life-writing) and a tendency to explore creatively and imaginatively a real person, other writers in particular, and their history.

The answer to the former inquiry, i.e. why James out of all other writers was chosen as a literary subject, is surely more complex and unequivocal. There is, of course, enough evidence in the works of Hollinghurst, Tóibín and Lodge to suggest why these writers specifically showed interest in James's life and oeuvre. One could easily trace a number of parallels between the precursor and his ephebes, and even for a researcher of average knowledge of the latter's works there is no difficulty in naming which version of James the aforementioned writers are particularly drawn to. Hollinghurst, unanimously lauded by critics as the most accomplished stylist working in English language today,⁵³ is in my belief James's most apt pupil since he not only enters into an explicit dialogue with the Master's style and rhythm of his prose, but he also shares his moral intelligence and social criticism. Tóibín, on the other hand, is equally interested in both James as a writer and as a man of flesh – hence, in his fictional account of James's life he focuses on the issues that he himself explored in his previous novels, i.e. self, identity (also national identity, Irish-American context being the most overt), sexuality, loss and solitude. Finally, David Lodge, who, after years of teaching and writing criticism about James, saw the Master's life as an opportunity for combining his

⁵¹ I am indebted to Professor Mirosława Buchholtz from the Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń for directing my attention to Ozick's and Cohen's works.

⁵² Ozick's, Oates's and Cohen's works are not considered in this respect as they were published four years after the so-called James's hype in 2004.

⁵³ H. Hitchings, "The Double Curve," *Times Literary Supplement*, October 31, 2004, available at http://www.powells.com/review/2004_10_31.html [accessed on June 7, 2010].

expertise in literary scholarship and writing fiction.⁵⁴ His is the least Jamesian novel as far as stylistic and thematic criteria are concerned, but it pays homage to the man of his times introducing his readers into a literary and theatrical life of Victorian England, populating *Author, Author* with famous names and vividly drawn characters.

But what needs to be stated is that in spite of many parallels that a critic can encounter in the works of James, the precursor, and those of Hollinghurst, Tóibín, Lodge, and others, his ephebes, James himself is a good enough reason for embarking on a fictional pursuit of the Master's life. Unquestionably, James, despite being one of the most researched and written about authors in English letters, is also the most mysterious one, especially when it comes to so many aspects of his personal life and its impact on his literary oeuvre. The mystery invites speculation – hence, it breeds fiction. Thus, I have no doubt that the proliferation of life-writing genres ultimately *had to* result in the novels about Henry James. I am sure that their appearance was just a matter of time. And that the new takes on Henry James – be it biographical or fictional – are bound to follow.

⁵⁴ For exhaustive explanation of the origin of *Author, Author* see D. Lodge, *The Year of Henry James*, op. cit., pp. 3–102.