

# Correlation of Fact and Fiction in Biographies of Henry James: Moral and Aesthetic Vision

Olga Antsyferova

Siedlce University of Natural Sciences and Humanities, Poland

## Abstract

*The paper focuses upon the history of both academic and fictional biographies of Henry James – a writer well known for his complex vision of the balance of private/public in life-writing. The proliferation of biofictions in the 2000s (D. Lodge, C. Tóibín and others) is viewed as a result of James's conscious self-mythologizing, which is related to fictional elements in academic biographies (L. Edel, F. Kaplan et al.) The complicated and multidirectional process of myth-making and myth-destruction is symptomatic of the current situation with regard to biographies of Henry James, which obviously sets the current situation apart from earlier stages of development (1990s–2000s), when fictionalizing determined the main vector.*

*Keywords: Henry James, life writing, (auto)biographies, biofictions, public/private, fictionalization, mythmaking, demythologizing*

Henry James (1843–1916) is a case of an artist whose life was completely dedicated to creative work – so writing Henry James's biography is, first and foremost, writing the history of his literary experiments. Life and art formed an organic whole for James, both being consciously constructed by him. Neither can be interpreted without the other.

Writers' biographies have always attracted the attention of a broad readership. This literary genre touches upon ever-topical problems of the correlation of art and life, of the subjective and the objective. It evokes reflections about the nature of genius and the role of biographical circumstances in its consummation or failure. Another issue that is important

for every writer's life-writing is the degree to which it is permissible for a biographer to penetrate into the private life of an artist. The latter issue is specifically relevant in our times, characterized by the predominance of publicity.

During recent decades, writers' biographies – specifically fictionalized ones, or *biofictions* – have been proliferating, remaining on bestseller lists for a long time. The English-speaking cultural space, with its long-sustained tradition of life-writing, is no exception. Let it be recalled here that it was the British biographer Lytton Strachey who paradoxically remarked: “We do not reflect that it is perhaps as difficult to write a good life as it is to live one” (qtd. in “Leon Edel”).

In 2006 David Lodge gave an astute explanation for the popularity of writers' biofictions:

The biographical novel – the novel which takes a real person and their real history as the subject matter for imaginative exploration, using the novel's techniques for representing subjectivity rather than the objective, evidence-based discourse of biography – has become a very fashionable form of literary fiction in the last decade or so, especially as applied to the lives of writers [...] It could be taken as a symptom of a declining faith or loss of confidence in the power of purely fictional narrative, in a culture where we are bombarded from every direction with factual narrative in the form of ‘news’. It could be regarded as a characteristic move of postmodernism – incorporating the art of the past in its own processes through reinterpretation and stylistic pastiche. It could be seen as a sign of decadence and exhaustion in contemporary writing, or as a positive and ingenious way of coping with the ‘anxiety of influence’. (Lodge)

Henry James has been a favourite subject for biographers. In the early 2000s, several biofictions inspired by his life and work were published: David Lodge's *Author, Author* (2004), Colm Tóibín's *The Master* (2004), and Alan Hollinghurst's *The Line of Beauty* (2004). Henry James is the central character of the first two works. *The Line of Beauty* is set in the 1980s and narrates the story of a gay man who is writing a postgraduate thesis on Henry James, more or less consciously searching for parallels between his life and James's art (see: Antsyferova 119–129). There was also Emma Tennant's *Felony: The Private History of 'The Aspern Papers'*, which gave an account of James's relationship with the American novelist Constance Fenimore Woolson. Closely intertwined with the historical background of James's well-known tale *The Aspern Papers*, the book features among its characters not only Henry and Constance, but also Claire Clairmont, a former lover of Lord Byron and the possessor of his letters, and the notorious Shelleyite Edward Silsbee – the prototype of the unscrupulous narrator of *The Aspern Papers* who would stop at nothing to take hold of the precious papers. The main narrator is Georgina, a thirteen-year-old great-niece of Claire Clairmont, which adds a specific poignancy to the story of various misdemeanours connected with literature. Close parallels between the theft of Byron's letters and James's growing unease with his own messages left at the disposal of the American lady-novelist create a curious interplay of real-life and fictitious motives, of fatal continuity between James's life and his writing. *Felony* was published in 2002 and reissued as a paperback in the spring of 2004. In 2005 the South African writer Michiel Heyns published *The Typewriter's Tale*, narrated from the point of view of James's

fictional secretary and focusing upon the writer's involvement, between 1907 and 1910, in a love affair between two of his friends, the novelist Edith Wharton and Morton Fullerton.

At this juncture, biographers' specific attention to Henry James might be accounted for by the anniversaries of his birth and death, in 2003 and 2016 respectively. However, this is not the only reason. There is something more to this American classic which makes his life such a "juicy story". Certainly it is not connected with any specific adventure in his life, in the form of unexpected turns or collisions. His experience was filled with observation and writing. If his life was adventurous, the only adventure was an intellectual one.

Here I would like to propose at least four main reasons for Henry James's popularity with biographers. All of them are connected with both ethics and aesthetics.

The primary challenge for James's biographers is to write about an author who had such an ambivalent attitude to the craft and ethics of the literary biography genre. James made his own attempts at writing biographical narratives. In 1879 he published an essay about the American Romantic writer Nathaniel Hawthorne in the series "English Writers". Later, in 1903, James authored a biography of a famous American sculptor, *William Wetmore Story and His Friends*, where much attention was paid to Story's literary colleagues and friends – Robert and Elizabeth Browning and James Russell Lowell.

However, as early as in 1872, in his review of Hawthorne's *French and Italian Notebooks*, James wrote with bitter irony about the necessary limits for biographical studies, as if anticipating his own contradictory postmortem popularity:

These liberal excisions from the privacy of so reserved and shade-seeking a genius suggest forcibly the general question of the proper limits of curiosity as to that passive personality of an artist of which the elements are scattered in portfolios and table-drawers. It is becoming very plain, however, that whatever the proper limits may be, the actual limits will be fixed only by a total exhaustion of matter. There is much that is very worthy and signally serviceable to art itself in this curiosity, as well as much that is idle and grossly defiant of the artist's presumptive desire to limit and define the ground of his appeal to fame. The question is really brought to an open dispute between this instinct of self-conservatism and the general fondness for squeezing an orange dry. Artists, of course, as time goes on, will be likely to take the alarm, empty their table-drawers, and level the approaches to their privacy. The critics, psychologists, and gossip-mongers may then glean amid the stubble. (James, "Passages").

It is quite obvious that these 1870s observations about the borderlines between private and public, about the insatiable curiosity of biographers and their hunger for sensation, anticipate the most pressing problems of today's cultural life, characterized by intrusive publicity and the overwhelming ubiquity of the mass media. It is equally evident that James's own attempts at writing a biography of his literary confrere made him very much alert to the moral issue of possible invasions into privacy. Not without reason did James consider William Shakespeare the luckiest and the most accomplished literary genius, with so little known about his life that "we shall never touch the Man directly in the Artist" (James, "Introduction" 1220).

James's animosity towards biographers found its most dramatic and vivid expression in *The Aspern Papers* (1888). James's letter to his nephew in 1914 is also often cited in this connection: "My sole wish is to frustrate as utterly as possible the postmortem exploiter – which, I know, is so but imperfectly possible [...] I have long thought of launching, by a provision in my will, a curse not less explicit than Shakespeare's own on any such as try to move my bones" (*Henry James: Letters* 806).

The second aspect of James's magnetism for biographers is connected with the intriguing scenario of his postmortem popularity. This, to a certain extent, was foreshadowed by a specific method of self-representation acquired by James, which might be termed automyth-making, or self-fictionalizing, which eventually produced the Cult of the Master (Анцыферова: 378–416). One of the first explicit symptoms of this myth was the book published by Simon Nowell-Smith *The Legend of the Master* – a collection of reminiscences about Henry James. In his preface, Nowell-Smith celebrates H. G. Wells as the creator of the first written source of this legend, referring to the notorious pamphlet *Boon* (1916).

The very title of Nowell-Smith's book testifies to the indissoluble connection between James's life and his art: the writer continued to live not only on the pages of his works, but also as a legend, as a mythological figure. This edition presents Henry James not so much as an author, but as a partaker of Anglo-American "literary mores", to use a term coined by Boris Eikhenbaum (Эйхенбаум 429). Reading about Henry James makes us surmise that the writer, whose whole existence was filled by and confined to his creative work, shaped his life in accord with literary conventions, creating a myth about himself. As Norman Page aptly put it, "the master of the art of fiction was to the very end himself the object of a largely unconscious fictionalizing process" (Page xvi).

The ways of Henry James, as registered by his contemporaries, are so idiosyncratic that they often suggest self-parody. In his everyday life Henry James seemed to play off his habitual reputation as an artist deeply immersed in the search for *le mot juste* (G. Flaubert), painfully trying to capture all the nuances of human psychology. For instance, along with his contemporaries, Henry James was introduced to a new form information technology – the telegraph. It is well-known that Marcel Proust's cables were as long as his letters. Henry James appropriated this genre of writing in a different way. Here is the text of James's telegram addressed to the American artist Edwin Austin Abbey: "Will alight precipitately at 5.38 from the deliberate 1.50" (qtd. in Lucas 268). A telegram to Amy James can also be cited. Sent from Southport, it refers to the stage adaptation of James's novel *The American*: "Unqualified triumphant magnificent success universal congratulations great ovation for author great future for play Comptons radiant & his acting admirable writing Henry" (qtd in: Seymour 75). Numerous epithets and parallel constructions run counter to commonly accepted norms of cable-writing.

In his introduction to *Henry James: Interviews and Recollections*, Norman Page writes: "James had no Boswell, but the collective testimony of those who knew him is very extensive; attempts to record his conversation are particularly numerous, and probably no other major novelist is known to us so fully in his habit as he talked. As with Dr. Johnson, however, the bulk of this material relates to his later years" (xi). Over the years Henry James became a memorable and characteristic figure, evoking very distinct associations. The

famous artist and illustrator W. Graham Robertson (1866–1948) found a curious visual parallel:

In the 1890s [Henry James] was in appearance almost remarkably unremarkable; his face might be anybody's face; it was as though, when looking round for a face, he had been able to find nothing to his taste and had been obliged to put up with a ready-made 'stock' article until something more suitable could be made to order expressly for him. This special and only genuine Henry James's face was not 'delivered' until he was a comparatively old man, so that for the greater part of his life he went about in disguise" (Page 14).

However, Robertson's irony seems to be an oversimplification. It would be more accurate to speak not about an expressive self-image finally found by the writer during his "major phase", but about his *attainment of biography*. Yuri Lotman's observations seem very appropriate here: in the second part of the nineteenth century, biography "becomes a more complicated notion than just a chosen mask. A biography implies some inherent history. In so far as history at that time is perceived as a movement from the unconscious to the conscious, a biography is taken as an act of gradual self-education directed at intellectual and spiritual insight" (Лотман 372).

James's subordination of his life to his literary vocation became one of the major factors in transforming his biography into a hagiography. The myth about James's selfless and profitless worship of Art made him a cult figure for a group of devoted admirers and apprentices from the 1880s onwards. They included Paul Bourget and some literary novices who were destined to carve themselves a place in the history of English literature – Joseph Conrad, H. G. Wells, Ford Madox Ford, and Stephen Crane. According to Ann Margolis, this heterogeneous group served as an alternative reading audience for James, giving him support and, probably, inspiration (62).

An outrageous literary scandal was connected with one of this group. In the 1910s H. G. Wells rapidly morphed from a devoted Jamesian into his harshest critic. Insulted by James's criticism in the article "The Younger Generation" published in *The Times Literary Supplement* (March and April, 1914), Wells lampooned the Master in his pamphlet *Boon* (1916), notoriously comparing him to a "leviathan retrieving pebbles", to a "magnificent but painful hippopotamus resolved at any cost, even at the cost of its dignity, upon picking up a pea which has got into the corner of its den" (Wells 51). Twenty years later, when this violent controversy had become a fact of history, Wells wrote in his *Experiment in Autobiography* (1934) about Henry James: "He was the most consciously and elaborately artistic and refined human being I ever encountered [...] All this talk I had with Conrad and Hueffer and James about the just word, the perfect expression, about this or that being 'written' or not written, bothered me, set me interrogating myself, threw me into a heart-searching defensive attitude [...] in the end I revolted altogether and refused to play their game" (qtd. in Seymour 73). (This well-known aesthetic and ideological conflict is recalled here to reconstruct the latent dramatism of James's life – not necessarily in relation to his sexuality, as has often been supposed recently.)

The third reason for biographers' unrelenting interest in Henry James is the paradoxical combination of his extreme privacy with his huge epistolarium. James pedantically destroyed all letters addressed to him, but he could do nothing to his own letters. His letters, together with his own fictional works, formed a basis for several academic biographies, which in turn inspired later fictionalizers. Even the way in which James's archives became available to scholars and the general public was dominated by conflicting forces, generated dramatic tensions and had what James would call "the story in it".

The first major biography of Henry James was a five-volume work by Leon Edel, who took twenty years to write it (1953–1972); the last volumes were awarded the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Award. Due to his authorship of this "canonical" biography, along with two hundred other papers on James, Leon Edel remained the most influential James scholar, dominating this field of research up to his death in 1997, or at least up to the mid-1970s. Michael Anesco, in his book *Monopolizing the Master: Henry James and the Politics of Modern Literary Scholarship*, explains "how [Edel] gained – and assiduously worked to maintain – his peculiar advantage: controlling others' access to the James archive" (Anesco xii). I would add that the canonical and authoritative status of Edel's biography somehow correlated with the domination of "New Criticism" in the U.S. humanities: it was a time of ideological conformity and unanimity.

Michael Anesco presents the history of Henry James's legacy in a panoptic fashion. The first lines of his book present a clear-cut comparison of critics with parasites; he then convincingly demonstrates that "James's contemporary acolytes [...] and the next generation of modernists [...] attempted to appropriate the Master's aura, wanting to transfer or borrow his cultural capital to shore up their own artistic agendas" (xii). Along with this, "running in tandem – and very much at odds – with these early moves to canonize James were other critics who wanted to discredit the criteria advanced by the Master's disciples for the validation of his cultural capital" (120). Here Anesco aptly highlights the contradictory nature of the appropriation, both aesthetic and academic, of James's legacy. Intrigues, suppression and concealment are shown to be an integral part of this process. Stating that "restrictive energy of rare force resulted from barely concealed self-interest on Edel's part and protective family scruples on James's" (170), Anesco makes "Edel the Ubiquitous" the central character (mainly satirical) of the last chapter, which is entitled "The Legend of the Bastard". Hence we learn, for example, about the egregious degree of Edel's authoritative possessiveness. Among other things, this manifested itself in the way he evaluated papers sent to him by the journal *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* for reviewing: "[He was] very selective in what he was willing to entertain, and was especially hostile to anything that might be seen going against the grain of his own writing on James" (qtd. in Anesco 174). Thus, the hidden controversies over the Master's archives added to the latent dramatics of his postmortem fate.

The fourth reason for biographers' unquenchable interest in Henry James has much to do with the more or less overt fictionalizing that was a distinct feature of James's life-writing from his postmortem years well into the late 20th century. If H. G. Wells intentionally depicted a grotesque figure of Henry James in his *Boon*, Leon Edel was not a stranger to fictionalizing either. In his 1985 interview, he compared his main impetus for writing a biography to falling in love, and confessed that his interest in James arose rather from

working with family archives than from reading his novels: “Everything seemed filled with mystery and promise; there were all kinds of answers in those papers to the puzzles and secrets the novelist had left behind, residues of his complex being” (“Leon Edel”).

Thousands of letters shed light on new, previously unknown sides of Henry James, and soon Edel understood that he would have to depart from the customary pattern of life-writing: “As I kept finding surprises of one sort and another, I created a kind of fluid non-chronological episodic story. I’d startled too many hares in the published volume to be able to turn back to conventional chronological biography. I was creating a serial and it could be a cliffhanger if my material allowed for this” (“Leon Edel”).

Along with the experience of James’s play “Guy Domville” being booed by the audience in 1895, Edel was also the first to discover another biographical episode that was rich in fictional possibilities: it was James’s “strange friendship” with Constance Fenimore Woolson, which Edel interpreted as follows: “She an old maid who loved him, he a fastidious bachelor who was being kind to her but keeping himself distinctly at a distance” (“Leon Edel”).

Most probably inspired by Andre Maurois, Edel treats life-writing as an art rather than as journalism, as a process needing “the biographical imagination, the imagination of form. As biographers, we are not allowed to imagine our facts” (“Leon Edel”). In other words, the biographer must have a knack for a good plot. Still another fundamental idea of Edel is that the life-writing craft is conditioned by an ability to find a link between a talent and its accomplishments: without this link the whole material risks falling apart and becoming a chaotic aggregation of concurrent events and gossip.

Edel highlights that a biographer, unlike a novelist, is not omniscient: “The difference between a novelist and a biographer resides in the biographer’s having to master a narrative of inquiry. Biography has to explain and examine the evidence. The story is told brushstroke by brushstroke like a painter, and the biographer often has to say he simply doesn’t know – he cannot fill in the gaps.”

Edel was sure (and he was absolutely right) that new time demands new biographies:

Like humans, biographies grow old. New generations need new versions of past history in the generation’s new language. In the past thirty years our attitudes toward sex – toward the physical being of men and women – have changed drastically, and most biographies were written before these changes occurred. We have had the new feminism. And we have also the ‘new biography’. (“Leon Edel”)

Indeed, new biographies of James were on their way. In 1990, partly inspired by the 150th anniversary of James’s birth, two monographs were published not only presenting new facts and interpretations of James’s life, but also resonating with the time when these life-narratives were written – the cultural situation of postmodernism with its blurring of the dichotomies of mass/high culture, fiction/non-fiction, etc.

*Henry James: The Imagination of a Genius* (1992) by Fred Kaplan propounded pivotal postmodernist ideas: the poststructuralist thesis of “the death of the author”, the repudiation of the author as a generator of meanings. Kaplan based his life-narrative, just like Edel before him, mainly on James’s letters – though he focused on previously unpublished

letters. (From May 4, 1973, when according to the will of Alexander James, the great-nephew of the novelist, Edel's monopoly was broken and restrictions on access rescinded, more than twelve thousand letters were discovered and made available for researchers.) However, Kaplan made ample reference to the *trivia* of James's everyday life. In this biography the artist's personality was represented as a derivative from narratives, marginal narratives at that. It was intended to wipe away the customary binaries of essential/non-essential or art/hackwork, and to blur a seemingly evident sexual self-identification. The main source of the creative process was to be found in James's partly subconscious negotiations with the reading audience, his royalties either confirming or disconfirming his success. In the context of James's letters, his bachelorship was interpreted in explicitly homoerotic terms.

Hence the image of Henry James, as represented by Kaplan, was substantially trivialized, whereas the subtitle of the book "*The Imagination of the Genius*" foregrounded the generic feature of an artist, his "otherness". The gabble of the dying James was interpreted as a final escape into one of his imaginary worlds, the one that was the freest from conventions and limitations. Here imagination began to correlate with a liminal psychological condition, which invoked Michel Foucault's ideas.

The second biography, *Henry James: The Young Master* (1996), was written by Sheldon Novick. Again following Edel, Novick emphasized the proximity between biography and art: The author compares himself with James. The biographer overtly borrows his analytical instrument from his biographical object: Novick presents James in the light of different viewpoints (just as Emma Tennant would do later). His new type of biography claims to be very close to *autobiography*: the writer's life is presented as if perceived by the writer himself. In one way or the other, the biographer tried to fill in *lacunae* in the tentatively autobiographical portrait. For instance, Sheldon Novick insisted that James loved young men.

The proclaimed proximity between Novick's biography and the Jamesian method justified ample fictionalizing on the biographer's part. That gave the biographer a right to proffer his own interpretations for some well-known episodes. Novick was one of the first to write about James's assumed homosexuality – yet, as if fearing his own shocking assumptions, the biographer hid these passages among the notes. Firstly, he reconsidered James' friendship with Oliver Wendell Holmes. The future distinguished jurist was said to be the young James's first intense sexual experience (Novick, *Henry James: The Young Master* 109–110, 471). Reminiscences were used as the main source of information, validating retrospection as the main structural device: the biography was presented as recollections dictated by the ageing writer to his amanuensis. The reader can almost feel the hidden dramatic tension of the life-narrative, created by the undercurrent of clandestine and meticulously concealed passions which the biographer reads *into* the lines of James's letters and autobiographical writings. In the preface to his second volume, Novick declares that he has taken "a fresh look at the primary materials" and, contrariwise to the conventional view of James as "a passive, fearful man, detached observer of life around him" the biographer foregrounds "an active and engaged man, passionate and energetic, for whom relationships were the ground of life and the subject of his art" (Novick, *Henry James: The Mature Master* xi–x). Again, Henry James is treated more like a fictional character

to be construed by the author than a real person whose life was documented in numerous non-fictional texts.

Thus, when turning to Henry James's life, the biographers of the new millennium (a period in which biofiction has come to the fore) have to deal with the following specificities: (1) James's personal aversion towards invasions of his privacy, and his firm belief that the essence of art should be sought not in an artist's life, but in his work; (2) the paradoxical combination of James's extreme privacy with his huge epistolarium and dramatic tensions around his archives, worthy of the *The Aspern Papers*; (3) James's propensity to self-fictionalizing and self-mythologizing; (4) fictionalizing as an intrinsic feature of all preceding writing about James, both fictional and non-fictional.

Significantly, David Lodge, an author well-versed in literary matters, remarked: "Writing, and preparing to write *Author, Author* was an entirely new compositional experience for me: instead of creating a fictional world which wasn't there until I imagined it, I was trying to find in the multitudinous facts of Henry James's life a novel-shaped story. But its climax was always to be the failure of *Guy Domville* and the contemporaneous triumph of Du Maurier's *Trilby*" (Lodge, "Author's Curse").

Consequently, Lodge's novel is focused on the 1880s and 1890s – probably the most dramatic period of James's life. The novel is structured retrospectively and begins with the last days of the dying James. Characteristically, in Lodge's novel Henry James uses a manner of speech similar to his own idiolect, and appropriates his own characters' fates, which can be viewed as an instance of the postmodern blurring of fictional and biographical.

However, Max Saunders states that "there is nothing postmodern, or even modern, about biography or autobiography seeping into fiction." He notes that "James himself based characters on novelist friends, drawing on William Dean Howells for Lambert Strether and Henry Adams for his friend Waymarsh in *The Ambassadors*" (Saunders 125). Comparing two "master narratives" (biographical novels about the Master – David Lodge's *Author, Author* and Colm Tóibín's *The Master*), Saunders concludes that "all critical biography of writers is necessarily a hybrid form." Incorporating into his survey Ford Madox Ford's biography *Joseph Conrad* (1924), Saunders convincingly illustrates the fact that a typical form of a biography "is a four-part hybrid, fusing biography, autobiography, fiction and criticism [...] To some extent both Lodge and Tóibín are producing such four-way hybrids. But... where Tóibín allows fictional biography to do the work of literary criticism, Lodge increasingly fuses novel with lecture on literary technique in *Author, Author*" (Saunders 126). Thus, from the 1990s onwards, all biographies of James, whether overtly novelistic or more documentary in nature, flaunt their semi-fictional status and resort to Henry James's narrative technique.

Predictably, the best-selling version of Henry James produced by the openly gay Irish author Colm Tóibín cannot omit the issues of James's Irish roots and his presumed homosexuality. In an interview given to Michael Wood for *London Review of Books* Tóibín expanded upon the distinctive features of a gay artist's psychology and declared that, just like Shakespeare, Whitman and Kafka, James "dramatise the lives of isolated male protagonists who are forced to take nothing for granted, who are in danger of being discovered and revealed" admitting that "it is astonishing how James managed to withhold his homosexuality from his work" (Wood 2004).

At first sight, the main import of *The Master* is exactly that. The Henry of Colm Tóibín abstains from participation in politics (the Civil War), from sexuality and the expression of emotion (both for men and women). The main personage, i.e. Henry James, seems devoid of compassion and empathy; he shuns active participation in life and deep attachments. Presumed homoerotic motifs (James's long-ago feelings for the homosexual Paul Joukowsky and his mixed attraction and repulsion for the handsome American Norwegian sculptor Henrik Andersen, as well as an attraction to an Irish valet named Hammond) are described in the novel rather equivocally, via innuendo. While a whole chapter is devoted to James's reaction to Oscar Wilde's trial, James is absolutely reserved about it. However, the overall impression of Tóibín's version of James's life is that the main reason for Henry James's melancholy, coldness, and aloofness has a somewhat more complicated nature than his repressed homosexuality. As Hermione Lee puts it, "*The Master's* crafty structure is more interesting, and less obvious, than the outing of Henry James. It becomes apparent that James... has repeatedly resisted demands, controlled intimacy and avoided commitment in order to do his writing" (Lee "Great Pretender"). This appears to be one of the most unexpected and inspiring surprises for critics and readers. What actually happens is that the gay author does not confine himself to revealing the homoerotic propensities of his hero, but instead addresses himself to more universal problems of the genesis of art, devotion to art and personal responsibility to "live all you can" – which is very close to the core of James's own writing. This makes Tóibín's novel very congenial to its subject. Along with the aptly incorporated narrative technique of Henry James and the deft adaptation of his style to the tastes of modern readers, it can be considered the main factor in its best-selling status and favourable reviews.

Given the proliferation of biographical writings about James, it is not surprising that the latest biofiction about him, *The James Boys: A Novel Account of Four Desperate Brothers* (2008) by Richard Liebmann-Smith, is a clear-cut parody, or a pastiche, or a humorous "alternative history". In his debut novel, this famous American humorist posits what would have happened if two American intellectuals, the brothers Henry and William James, had been the brothers of the American outlaws Frank and Jesse James. The author daringly sends Henry James, then a correspondent for the *New York Tribune*, to the American West, instead of to Paris, and makes him get involved in the infamous heist at the First National Bank in Northfield, Minnesota. R. Liebmann-Smith admits that he owes the germ of the story to the famous American historian Otis Pease, who, while teaching a course in 19th century American history, used to say jokingly that "the story of America in the 19th century could be encapsulated in the story of the James brothers. William and Henry in the east and Frank and Jesse in the west" ("What if?"). In Liebmann's version two real-life younger brothers of Henry and William James, Rob and Wilkie, become, quite fantastically, the real-life bank robbers Frank and Jesse James. The powerful travesty dimension of the book offers rich possibilities for further study.

As for the more recent publications in the biographical vein, there have been quite a few – either reviewing James's own books relating to the autobiographical genre, or exploring his fiction as an indirect autobiography.

In 2013 Michael Gorra took "an original approach to this great American progenitor of the modern novel, combining elements of biography, criticism, and travelogue in

re-creating the dramatic backstory of James's masterpiece, *Portrait of a Lady* (1881)", as is written on the website amazon.com. Gorra's book is also defined as "a revelatory *biography* of the American master as told through the lens of his greatest novel" (italics mine), which makes it pertinent to the topic of the discussion in this paper.

The main body of all the numerous reviews of Gorra's book is given to the reviewers' thoughts, recollections and interpretations of *The Portrait of a Lady*, confirming that Gorra's *Portrait of a Novel* has performed a very important cultural task, bringing its readers back to the pages of James's middle-period masterpiece. As for the presumably innovative character of Gorra's research, James Wood states: "*Portrait of a Novel* is effectively a new biography of James, with *The Portrait of a Lady* at its centre. Gorra describes the entire arc of James's life, unobtrusively (this is made possible by the fact that James wrote it as a youngish man, and rewrote it, in 1906, as an oldish man); but he does so in order to tell the story of the novel – both as a critic and as a biographer" (Wood, 2012, 3–6).

Highlighting the important biographical dimension of Gorra's research, Hermione Lee notes that "James's biographers always compare Isabel and her novel to his own life," the early death of his lively, clever cousin Minny Temple seen as the main inspiration for the novel that provoked the invention of Isabel, whose "unlived future goes on in his head" (Gorra 30). The reviewer recapitulates various biographers' (before Gorra) approaches to *The Portrait of a Lady* and sees Gorra's main contribution in his refusal to view the novel's heroine exclusively as epitomizing James's private feelings and thoughts. According to H. Lee, Gorra finds a wider sociopolitical significance in Isabel's story:

In a crowded field of biographical interpretation, Gorra argues that *Portrait* is 'a critique of American exceptionalism'. The historical paradox for Americans is that they believe in a republican egalitarianism – all are created equal – and in the freedom to pursue, competitively, individual happiness. Isabel (leaving America, turning down a nice English lord and a determined Bostonian, choosing Osmond because she thinks he is a free agent) insists that she must be free to write her own plot. She will not be measured by what surrounds her – clothes, houses, money, traditions. She believes 'in her own autonomy, her own enabling isolation: a belief, and a dream, that all her later experience will challenge' [...] In Europe Isabel 'learns that her own life' has already 'been determined'. She finds that for her, as for America, there is no such thing as a 'fresh start' or a 'city on a hill' or a 'new world'. Other ways of reading Isabel – as a young woman afraid of sexual experience, as an innocent fallen into corrupt hands, as an enactment of James's passion for Europe, as a characterisation of solitude – take second place to this political interpretation. (Lee, "Portrait")

Thus, the reviewer emphasizes that Gorra's reading of the novel runs counter to habitual biographical explications of *The Portrait of a Lady*, and welcomes this more objective, sociopolitical interpretation eschewing biographical and critical clichés – which actually resonates with the main trend of James' recent life-writing, which I would see in the prevalence of myth destruction over myth-making.

In March 2016 Anne Boyd Rioux, a professor of English at the University of New Orleans and the biographer of Constance Fenimore Woolson, came up with "five flickering myths" about Woolson's relationship with Henry James. Rioux rebuts the stereotypical

conceptions (1) of Woolson being a second-rate author belittled by the Master, (2) of her unrequited love for James, (3) of her being just one of James's admirers whose attraction he indulgently accepted, (4) of James compelling her to destroy his letters, (5) of James wantonly destroying her papers and drowning her black dresses in the Venetian Lagoon. In her eristic short article, Rioux foregrounds at least two important issues: (1) versions of biographers composing life-narratives of counterparts unavoidably contradict each other: one is due to overshadow another; (2) the ethics of fictionalizing often run counter to the entertaining thrills of belles-lettres. It is no wonder, after being treated by so many biographers-fictionalizers, that Henry James's life-story has obtained a mythological status which needs to be demythologized by conscientious scholars. The reverse process has set in.

Michael Anesco guides his readers in the same demythologizing direction in his above-mentioned book *Monopolizing the Master: Henry James and the Politics of Modern Literary Scholarship*. To date, it is not only the life of Henry James that has become a source of material for myth-making; the very process of James's biography-writing has become mythologized, the central "cultural hero" of this myth being Leon Edel, whom M. Anesco seeks to disavow.

Hopefully, this is not the end. As we have seen, the complicated and multidirectional (often reversive) process of myth-making and myth-destruction seems to be symptomatic of the current situation in Henry James life-writing. And that obviously sets it apart from an earlier state of affairs (1990–2000s), when fictionalizing determined the main vector of the process.

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*Address:*

*Siedlce University of Natural Sciences and Humanities*

*08-110 SIEDLCE*

*Ul. Konarskiego 2.*

*POLAND*

*Olga\_antsyf@mail.ru*