The many lives of Henry James – biographers, critics and novelists on the Master

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ABSTRACT

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

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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,

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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?”

> “What shall we call our self?”
> “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.”

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!”

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-

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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. 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. 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

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