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DAVID LODGE

The Year of Henry James

or, Timing Is All:
the Story of a Novel

WITH OTHER ESSAYS ON THE
GENESIS, COMPOSITION
AND RECEPTION OF LITERARY FICTION

VINTAGE BOOKS
London

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PART ONE

THE YEAR OF HENRY JAMES

or, Timing Is All:
the Story of a Novel

I

If anyone deserves to win this year's Man Booker Prize, it's Henry James. During 2004, he has been the originator of no fewer than three outstanding novels.

Thus began Peter Kemp's review of my novel, *Author, Author*, in the *Sunday Times* of 29 August 2004, a few days before its official publication date. The other two novels to which he referred were Colm Tóibín's *The Master*, published in March of that year, and Alan Hollinghurst's *The Line of Beauty*, published in April. Henry James is the central character of both *The Master* and *Author, Author*. The central character of *The Line of Beauty*, which is set in the 1980s, is a young man who is writing a postgraduate thesis on Henry James, and Hollinghurst's novel was seen by several critics as a stylistic homage to him. In due course *The Line of Beauty* won the Booker Prize, and *The Master* was shortlisted for it.

Peter Kemp did not mention another novel about Henry James which had been published in November 2002 and was reissued as a paperback in the spring of 2004, Emma Tennant's *Felony*, which spliced together an account of James's relationship with the American novelist Constance Fenimore Woolson and a speculative retelling of the source story of his novella, *The Aspern Papers*. Nor did Kemp mention – probably he was not aware of its existence – yet another novel about James, by the South African writer Michiel Heyns, which was being offered to London publishers in 2004. Entitled *The Typewriter's Tale*, and narrated from the point of view of James's secretary, it concerned James's involvement, in the years 1907–10, in a love affair between two of his closest friends, the novelist Edith Wharton and Morton Fullerton, bisexual journalist and man of letters. We know all this about a book which is still unpublished because Michiel Heyns wrote an eloquent and poignant article in the magazine *Prospect* in September 2004 about coming last in the procession of James-inspired novelists. These were its opening words:

My agent forwards to me another polite letter of rejection: 'I am so sorry but timing is all – and there has been a spate of fiction based on the life of Henry James published here. I don't know how such coincidences happen . . . something in the atmosphere? So regretfully I must say no.'

Henry James was unkindly portrayed, thinly disguised as 'Jervase Marion', by Vernon Lee in her story 'Lady Tal' in 1893, and there may have been other fictionalised portraits in his lifetime, or after his death in 1916, but as far as I am aware he never appeared as a character in a novel under his own name prior to Emma Tennant's novel in 2002. Yet

within two years of the appearance of *Felony* two more novels about him were published and a third was looking for a publisher.* It can be inferred from the available evidence that the preparation and composition of all these books overlapped chronologically and that none of the authors was aware of the projects of the others until their own was under way or actually completed. On the face of it, this convergence of novelistic attention is a remarkable phenomenon, and the anonymous publisher who regretfully declined Michiel Heyns's novel is not the only person to have wondered what could explain it. Something in the atmosphere – or, to use a more philosophical term, the *Zeitgeist*? Needless to say I have given the question some thought myself, and have come to the conclusion that it was a coincidence waiting to happen.

Although Henry James's reputation suffered a certain eclipse in the decades immediately following his death, he has been firmly established as a major modern writer for at least the last sixty years, required reading for any serious student of the English and American novel, and the subject of a steady stream of scholarly books and articles. He has always been a writer's writer because of his technical skill and dedication to his art, a critic's writer because of the challenge his work presents to interpretation, and a biographer's writer because of the intriguing enigmas of his character and personal relationships. The facts of his private and professional life have been available in rich detail since the completion of Leon Edel's

* There might have been a fourth. I was reliably informed in the spring of 2004 that the publishers of the American novelist David Leavitt were expecting his new novel to be about Henry James, but when it was delivered it turned out not to be. Perhaps he discovered that Colm Tóibín was working on the same subject and dropped it. I presume Leavitt's novel was *The Body of Jonah Boyd*, published in the USA in May 2004.

massive five-volume biography, published between 1953 and 1972. So what's new that would explain the appearance of a clutch of novels about him in quick succession between 2002 and 2004?

There have been two fairly recent developments in the academic study of literature which have some bearing on this question: feminism and so-called Queer Theory. Probably no male novelist of the period created so many memorable women characters as Henry James, from Daisy Miller and Isabel Archer at the beginning of his career to Milly Theale and Maggie Verver in his late, 'major phase'. Feminist critics, or critics influenced by feminism, have taken a keen interest in this aspect of his work, and they have also been intrigued by his intimate personal relationships with women, notably his cousin Minny Temple, who died young of consumption in 1870, his sister Alice, who died of cancer in 1892 after years of neurasthenic illness, and Constance Fenimore Woolson, who took her own life in 1894. Although James was attracted to Minny, and enjoyed close companionship with Fenimore (as he called her), he never committed himself emotionally to either of them, and there is evidence that he felt some guilt on this account after their deaths (he had less with which to reproach himself in his treatment of Alice). The most thorough and persuasive investigation of this aspect of James's life and character is Lyndall Gordon's *A Private Life of Henry James*, published in 1998, which may have inspired Emma Tennant to write *Felony*. She states that she is 'deeply indebted' to it in a prefatory note to her novel. I too am deeply indebted to this remarkable book, but I read it fairly late in my preparatory research for *Author, Author*. It convinced me that I would have to find room in my novel for extensive treatment of James's

relationship with Fenimore, but it was not one of the original stimuli of my project.

James's ambivalence towards women is inevitably associated with the belief of most of his biographers, including Edel, that he was a repressed homosexual who probably never admitted this orientation explicitly to himself or acted it out in a physical relationship. Not surprisingly James has been the object of intense interest from exponents of Queer Theory, which asserts the centrality to literature and the human condition of forms of sexuality traditionally regarded as deviant or transgressive. They have combed his work for rhetorical clues to suppressed homoeroticism (Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's claim to have discovered imagery of anal fisting in the Prefaces to the New York Edition of James's *Novels and Tales* being a notable example),¹ and are sympathetic to the view that he may not have suppressed it after all. In his biography, *Henry James: the Young Master* (2000), Sheldon M. Novick argued that James was initiated into sexual love in the spring of 1865 by the jurist Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr.² Both Colm Tóibín and Alan Hollinghurst are identified as gay writers and are interested in this aspect of James's life and work. Tóibín has a scene in which the young James is affected by sharing a bed with Holmes, both being naked (though nothing happens between them), and deals with James's much later and better documented attraction to the sculptor Hendrick Andersen (an episode in his life which falls just outside the chronological scope of my own novel). But comments and asides of both novelists in articles and reviews suggest a certain scepticism about the efforts of Queer theorists to co-opt James into their cultural mission, and Tóibín has stated that for him the initial stimulus to write a novel about James came from reading Edel's biography, which he

picked up at a writers' colony where he was working on a quite different subject.³

In short, although these currents in the stream of critical and biographical commentary on Henry James may have contributed something to the almost simultaneous composition of several novels about him, they do not wholly explain the phenomenon. Each of the novelists had their own 'take' on the subject, and their own starting point. A more important factor, in my view, is that 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 is not of course a totally new phenomenon. Anthony Burgess wrote a novel about Shakespeare, *Nothing Like The Sun*, in 1964, and later published *Abba, Abba* (1977) and *A Dead Man in Deptford* (1995) about Keats and Marlowe, respectively; Peter Ackroyd's second novel was *The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde* (1986) and he subsequently produced *Chatterton* (1987), *Milton in America* (1996) and *The Lambs of London* (2004), a novel about Charles and Mary Lamb. But both these novelists are, among their contemporaries, distinguished by a consistent interest in historical and biographical subjects of all kinds as sources for fiction. What is notable about the last decade or so is the number of novelists who have taken up the biographical novel at a relatively late stage of their careers, and their focus on writers as subjects. Emma Tennant published such a novel about Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes, *The Ballad of Sylvia and Ted* (2001), before she turned her attention to James and Constance Fenimore Woolson. Other examples which come

to mind include J. M. Coetzee's *Master of Petersburg* (1994), Penelope Fitzgerald's *The Blue Flower* (1996), Michael Cunningham's *The Hours* (1999), Malcolm Bradbury's *To the Hermitage* (2000), Beryl Bainbridge's *According to Queeney* (2001), Edmund White's *Fanny: a fiction* (2003), Kate Moses's, *Wintering* (2003), Alberto Manguel's *Stevenson under the Palm Trees* (2004), C. K. Stead's *Mansfield* (2004), Andrew Motion's *The Invention of Doctor Cake* (2004) and Julian Barnes's *Arthur and George* (2005), novels about Dostoevsky, Novalis, Virginia Woolf, Diderot, Dr Johnson, Mrs Frances Trollope, Sylvia Plath, Robert Louis Stevenson, Katherine Mansfield, Keats, and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, respectively. It is important to distinguish the biographical novel from the romantic biography, a once popular but now somewhat discredited genre which purports to be history but insinuates a good deal of authorial invention and speculation into the narrative. The biographical novel makes no attempt to disguise its hybrid nature, though each writer sets himself or herself different rules about the relationship of fact to fiction. Some keep very closely to the historical record, as I did in *Author, Author*, and others invent freely, sometimes to the point of travesty – for example, Lynn Truss's amusing *Tennyson's Gift* (1996), which brings together on the Isle of Wight in July 1884 the poet laureate and his wife, Charles Dodgson (Lewis Carroll), the painter G. F. Watts and his sixteen-year-old wife, Ellen (née Terry), and the pioneering photographer, Julia Margaret Cameron, with farcical consequences that are entirely fictitious.

Why the biographical novel should have recently attracted so many writers as a literary form is an interesting question, to which there are several possible answers. 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'. The same trend is observable in contemporary drama – for example: Tom Stoppard's *Travesties* (1975), about James Joyce, Lenin and Tristan Tzara, and *The Invention of Love* (1997), about A. E. Housman and contemporaries; Michael Hastings's *Tom and Viv* (1985), about T. S. Eliot and his first wife, Vivien, and *Calico* (2004), about James and Nora Joyce, Samuel Beckett and Joyce's daughter, Lucia; Alan Bennett's *Kafka's Dick* (1987), and April de Angelis's *A Laughing Matter* (2002), about David Garrick, Dr Johnson and Oliver Goldsmith.

In short, the biographical-novel-about-a-writer has recently acquired a new status and prominence as a subgenre of literary fiction, and it was only a matter of time before this kind of attention was turned on Henry James. That is what I meant by saying that the decision of several novelists, independently but at approximately the same time, to write novels about James was a coincidence waiting to happen.* Speaking for myself, I would certainly not have thought of writing a book like *Author, Author* twenty years ago; not because I was uninterested in James – I have been reading, teaching and writing criticism about him since I was an under-

* I might have realised this earlier, in January 2003, when I was deep into my own novel, and my friend, fellow novelist and Birmingham resident, Jim Crace, guessed its subject with astonishing ease and the minimum of clues ('Historical? Late 19th century, early 20th? A writer? Henry James.'). But I did not.

graduate – but simply because my concept of what constituted a novel, especially my own kind of novel, did not then include the possibility of writing one about a real historical person. The fact that for much of my life I pursued a dual career, split between writing fiction and literary scholarship, publishing books of each kind in alternation, may have delayed my perception of the possibility of combining both kinds of interest and expertise in a biographical novel. For the same reason I perhaps overlooked the professional pitfalls of such a project.

There is a sense in which all literary novels published in the same year or season compete with each other – for readers, for sales (not quite the same thing, though the two are of course connected), for critical approval, and (a fairly new phenomenon, this) for prizes. The proliferation in the last few decades of literary prizes like the Booker, with their published shortlists and (more recently) longlists, has intensified and institutionalised the element of competition in the writing and publishing of fiction – a development which may have been good for the Novel, inasmuch as it has increased public interest in literary fiction, but not for the equanimity of novelists, publishers and agents. Normally, however, novels compete in all these ways as independent works of art, not as different treatments of the same subject matter. If it happens that two new novels have a theme in common, or the same historical background, they are likely to be compared and contrasted more directly. Writers are always uncomfortable when they find themselves in this situation, because it threatens to detract from the originality of their work – originality being a highly valued quality in modern