



Beyond the Historical Record? Henry James in “The Master at St. Bartholomew’s Hospital 1914–1916”

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THE JAMESIAN BIOFICTION. A HYBRID SUBGENRE¹

In 2008, *Cambridge Quarterly* published an article by Max Saunders titled simply “Master Narratives”, in which the author delineates the reasons underlying a curious phenomenon of the contemporary literary market: the efflorescence – in the first decade of the new millennium – of tales and novels with the historical Henry James as their protagonist. The 2000s saw the appearance of multiple fictional accounts of the American novelist’s life, which are based on James’s private documents and autobiographies as well as on critical scholarship on his oeuvre and personality. In addition, these texts feature an appropriation of James’s distinctive literary style and narrative techniques. From 2002 to 2014, twelve publications of this kind may be counted: such a considerable amount that it spurred Jessica Kent to hail the emergence of a new subgenre in today’s Anglophone literature – the Jamesian biofiction (2015: v).

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In 2002, centring her novel *Felony* on the friendship between James and Constance Fenimore Woolson, Emma Tennant paved the way for a steady flow of Jamesian biofictional narratives that culminated in the year 2004 – dubbed “The Year of Henry James” by David Lodge (2007) – when, over the span of seven months, a tern of lengthy novels inspired by James appeared: Colm Tóibín’s *The Master* came out in March, Alan Hollinghurst’s *The Line of Beauty* in April, and David Lodge’s *Author, Author* in September.² And the flow of biofictional narratives continued way beyond the *annus mirabilis* 2004: suffice it to say that while Saunders was editing his article, Joyce Carol Oates reprinted her “The Master at St. Bartholomew’s Hospital 1914–1916” in the collection *Wild Nights! Stories about the Last Days of Poe, Dickinson, Twain, James and Hemingway* – the short-story had appeared on the pages of *Conjunctions* the previous year – followed at a brief interval by Cynthia Ozick novella “Dictation”. Unlike the 2004 novels, Oates’s short-story has been almost neglected by scholars studying these biofictional narratives, who in fact mention it only to demonstrate the extent of the appeal James’s life and work exert on contemporary writers.³ “The Master at St. Bartholomew’s Hospital 1914–1916” nonetheless deserves critical attention because it best exemplifies certain aspects peculiar to this subgenre, analysed both here and in previous scholarly works.

The boom of Jamesian biofiction could hardly pass unnoticed, and indeed scholars immediately started speculating on this phenomenon by placing it in the broader framework of Neo-Victorianism – the aesthetic movement that may include the creation of novelistic refashionings of the XIX century, nowadays a significant trend in English literature (Kaplan 2007; Kirchknopf 2013: 2) – and of the revival of biographical writing in current literary practices (Kusek 2014: 53). This success has been related to the readership’s increasing desire to know the subject and, when it comes to fictional biographies about authors, to have glimpses of their private emotional life: readers wish to know more about the writers behind the literary works they read (Hannah 2007: 72). Thus, the last years witnessed the flourishing of fictional biographies of many writers, including Charles Dickens and Oscar Wilde.

Compared to Wilde’s, the bachelor James lived a quieter life, unmarred by scandals. Yet, the novels and tales inspired by his biography largely outnumber those about the playwright, who – at first glance – may appear as a more interesting subject for literary treatment (Kent 2015: 262). Due to the impossibility of fictionally reviving any scandal in James’s life, the authors of Jamesian biofiction focus on the known

² Admittedly, Hollinghurst’s novel cannot be defined a fictional biography of James *tout court*, because it is set in Thatcherite Britain. In this Booker Prize novel, James’s personal experience and prose are rather employed as a touchstone of aesthetic sensibility. The other works inspired by James not mentioned here are: *The Typewriter’s Tale* by Michiel Heyns (2005); *A Jealous Ghost* by A.N. Wilson (2005); *Lions at Lamb House* by Edwin M. Yoder Jr. (2007); *The James Boys* by Richard Liebmann-Smith (2008); *The Open Door* by Elizabeth Maguire (2008) and *Palmerino* by Melissa Pritchard (2014).

³ When this paper had already been submitted to the editors, Lucy Biederman published “After the Year of Henry James: The Undermining of Authority in Short Fictions by Cynthia Ozick and Joyce Carol Oates” in the 2017 winter issue of *The Henry James Review*. Here, the scholar comes to the conclusion that Oates’s tale is partially a rewrite of James’s “The Middle Years”, a literary homage I discuss later in the article.



moments of intense pathos the American novelist experienced, many of which correspond to downfalls in his artistic career. In a self-referential way, the Master's life offers great opportunities to tackle issues such as the dilemmas afflicting writers and the complexities of the writing process. James's literary career enables the authors to explore the anguishes coursing through an artist's mind because it is punctuated by mocked ambitions, frustrations, and commercial failures of his most cherished projects. James's was not a dull success story, but a parable marked by moments of emotional upheavals that entice narration such as the disastrous premiere of the play *Guy Domville*,⁴ which figures prominently in both Tóibín's and Lodge's novels. Oates likewise centres her short-story on a moment of dejection for the writer – when, in 1914, he felt helpless and unable to write fiction. And, as I would argue through the analysis of "The Master at St. Bartholomew's Hospital 1914–1916", fictionalising the life of Henry James has such a great appeal because it provides authors with an arena where to critically discuss his writing methods and works or – as particularly evident in Oates's story – even to meditate on the potentiality of fiction. These texts have permeable boundaries so that they grow to include their author's past criticism on James or feature new critical insights into unexplored aspects of his oeuvre.⁵

There is yet another major cause in James's attractiveness as a literary subject. James proves to be an ideal subject especially because of the mystery surrounding his private emotional life: while there are accounts of almost every social event he attended, little is known about his feelings or about his sexuality, which has always been an object of speculation (Kusek 2014: 53). The unsaid in James's life either afflicts or intrigues the authors of biographies and biofictional narratives about him. In the prefatory note to her own *A Private Life of Henry James*, Lyndall Gordon reveals to be attracted and simultaneously plagued by the awareness that James's emotional side, it being omitted in the historical record, is unattainable through the means of conventional biography. She observes that "James is the most elusive and unwilling of subjects", pointing out that his letters "were a façade for the private action of [his] most private of lives" (1998: 5). Seemingly, this façade may be breached by fictional biographers, bestowed with the opportunity to resort to their personal experience or imagination – what Lodge calls "novelist's licence" in *Author, Author* (2005: iii) – when confronting the textual gaps in James's life. The set of novels and tales which go under the label of "Jamesian biofiction" thus plays with the readers' desire to know the author beyond the public domain of textuality and their longing for a deeper knowledge of his private life. And it is Oates, in her short-story, who devotes the greatest attention to discussing the potentiality of fictional narration to go (or not) beyond the boundaries biographers usually impose on themselves in order to be faithful to the historical record.

⁴ The premiere of this 1895 play by James ended with him being booed from the gallery as he bowed onstage.

⁵ For example, in *The Master*, Tóibín tracks down these experiences in James's life that provided the germinal idea for future works, while calling for a reconsideration of James's fiction in the light of his Irish ancestry, this aspect having been almost neglected so far.



Perusing Leon Edel's biographies of James and the latter's private documents, Oates pinpointed a moment of great crisis in the novelist's life at the outbreak of the Great War: the documents show James unable to write on trivial subjects in those dark days, but the numerous gaps in the historical record call for speculation. Oates's "The Master at St. Bartholomew's Hospital 1914–1916", which is reminiscent of James's tales at the narratological level, consists in the investigation of her protagonist's troubled consciousness in wartime. It is the reflector of almost any event described in the short-story, told through James's eyes or from over his shoulders. And although Oates does not opt for a first-person narrator, the recurrent employment of the free indirect discourse gives insights into the character's mental process.

In Oates's hands, the narration of an episode in the life of James becomes a literary project dedicated to exploring the consciousness of the American novelist, to unveiling those feelings that are not represented in the private writings. This exploration is conducted also taking into account her experience as a writer – a prolific writer: since her first short-story collection *By the North Gate* came out in 1963, she has published more than ninety volumes of fiction and criticism. The works of fiction disclose her ambition to represent the US and their culture through the experience of the individual: indeed, the analysis of character, with a focus on moments of breakdown and crises, constitutes the core of all her literary production.

Yet, her portrait of James is not outlined exclusively by drawing biographical material from her own life and James's. The account of his final years is open to infiltrations:⁶ on the one hand, "The Master at St. Bartholomew's Hospital 1914–1916" is laden with the anguishes of Oates to the point that it turns out to be a locus of anxieties, with the fictional James becoming a surface on to which she projects her own fears. On the other hand, the text poses no barriers to infiltrations of a different kind, related to Oates's activity as a scholar of English Literature: both in her depiction of James and in the development of the plot, the readers may catch glimpses of her critical essays on the Master's prose, of her comments on his public persona, and of her interpretations of works such as "The Middle Years". "The Master at St. Bartholomew's Hospital 1914–1916" thus epitomizes the qualities of Jamesian biofiction, whose essential characteristic is hybridity: this subgenre was indeed described by Saunders as a four-element hybrid comprising biography, autobiography, fiction and criticism (2008: 126). These components are all geared to offer a mediated Henry James, i.e. Oates's "vision" of him. As Harvey argues in "Lessons of the Master: The Henry James Novel", however obvious his statement may sound, in the biofictional narratives the authors present their "vision" of James so that the character "'Henry James' will never be Henry James, whichever novel he inhabits" (2007: 88).

Oates has no pretence of truth about her representation of James. On the contrary, through recurring tropes of concealment and unveiling, she demonstrates awareness that fictional biography can only give the illusion of saturating the lacunae in James's life: his emotional side remains inaccessible to both the conventional and the fictional biographer. By exposing this illusion of truth, Oates points out that the

⁶ I draw the notion of "infiltration" from Dimock (2013)



potential of fiction lies elsewhere: the portrayal of James undergoing a crisis provides the authoress with an excellent opportunity to engage her readers in a meditation on the enduring power of art and the potential of fiction to create counter-realities.

SILENCE IN HENRY JAMES

Tracing the story of Oates's interest in James implies unveiling a fascination with what remains unsaid and implicit in the Master's prose and life. A fascination that initially emerged in the authoress's two attempts to rewrite *The Turn of the Screw* with "The Turn of the Screw" in 1971 and "The Accursed Inhabitants of the House of Bly" in 1993.⁷ Since its publication in 1898, James's novella has puzzled readers and scholars with its unresolved enigmas: above all, the one impeding a positive statement as to whether the unnamed governess has hallucinations or the country estate is really haunted by ghostly presences. In her two rewrites, Oates either tries to fill in the gaps of James's narrative or brings to the surface what is confined to the background: while in the "The Accursed Inhabitants of the House of Bly" she proposes a solution to the enigma by telling the story of Flora and Miles from the point of view of the former governess – now a ghost – in "The Turn of the Screw" she introduces James as the protagonist, re-characterising him as a repressed homosexual who develops an infatuation with a young American. By delving into her protagonist's homoerotic desires, she not only foregrounds the suffused sexuality permeating James's novella, but also tackles one of the most speculated on mysteries in the novelist's life – his sexual orientation. And it is the first occasion Oates incorporates material from Henry James's life into a work of fiction.

In spite of many pages devoted to the exploration of James's sexuality, "The Master at St. Bartholomew. 1914–1916" mainly revolves around another 'silence' in the author's life: Oates's narrative is hinged on the silence into which James sank at the outbreak of the Great War, evidence of which is contained in his pocket diaries. In the preliminary research stage, Oates consulted *The Complete Notebooks of Henry James* edited by Leon Edel and Lyall Powers. In their edition, the diaries come in the form of a long succession of notes of multifarious nature – James noted both his appointments and ideas for future works – which suddenly reaches an end in August 1914: the entry of the 4th when he expressed concern about an imminent war is followed by a three-month silence, when nothing is recorded. An absence so exceptional that prompted its editors to highlight it with the note "[There are no entries for the next three months.]" in the middle of the page (1987: 408). He did not write down any anecdote or note about how to develop plots he had in mind. He had set to work on *The Ivory Tower* at the request of Scribner's, but this novel was eventually published incomplete

⁷ Whilst "The Turn of the Screw" first appeared in 1971 in *The Iowa Review* and was collected in *Marriages and Infidelities* the following year, "The Accursed Inhabitants of the House of Bly" was first published in *The Antioch Review* in 1992 and later collected in *Haunted: Tales of the Grotesque* (1995). The two short-stories are explored at full length in Loeb (2002).



after his death together with a fragment of *The Sense of the Past*: in the last year and a half of his life, he failed to conclude a work of fiction, but summoned up his energies to write essays to collect money for the Norton-Harjes Ambulance Corps and visit the maimed soldiers in London's hospitals. A perusal of his correspondence reveals that James was distressed by the advent of the war: in the face of such carnage, he wrote some eloquent letters about the descent of the world he had known into barbarism. Unfortunately, there is only one passage in his letters between August and November 1914 that gives an idea about his view on writing novels or tales when (his) civilisation was collapsing. In an October letter to Edith Wharton, he reported a conversation he had with his friend the Duchess Millicent Erskine, who wrote light novels and plays: "'Are you able to work?' I am asked. 'Oh dear no, alas – are you?' 'Ah yes – I have already finished half a novel.' 'That seems to me very wonderful: how do you manage?'" (James 1984: 723).⁸

Intrigued by James's difficulties in writing, Oates charts the three-month hole in the notebooks in order to give insights into the mind of the American author. In "The Master at St. Bartholomew's Hospital 1914–1916" she stages a vulnerable James, at a loss in a world he does not recognise and where any of his certainties seems to have vanished. Through a multifaceted intertextuality, consisting in the insertion of snippets from the works of Anton Chekov and Walt Whitman, she presents a writer doubtful about the capability of his style and works to reflect contemporaneity: with the European nations at war, social mores and aesthetic experiences – "the elegant flowering of a civilization" (2007: 49) – seem trivial subjects. Her portrayal of James partially recalls the characterisation of the novelist Dencombe in "The Middle Years", the tale the Master wrote in his fiftieth year:⁹ haunted by a sense of impending death, they are both prone to question their own artistic legacy. In a 1996 essay, Oates observes that "The Middle Years" is a "confession of the artist's anxiety over the worth of his art" and "the terrifying aloneness" demanded by his devotion (1996: 259). "The Master at St. Bartholomew's Hospital 1914–1916" deals with writers' anxieties about posthumous reputation: a theme which is explored throughout all the short-stories composing *Wild Nights! Stories about the Last Days of Poe, Dickinson, Twain, James and Hemingway*. In their respective biographical treatments, the canonised American authors seem to become Oates's locus of anxiety about posterity: in particular, through the fictional James, she brings to the surface fears about the uncertainty of posthumous appreciation, which Kaplan identifies as "the *sine qua non* value – the guarantor of [...] an author's work" (2007: 71).¹⁰

⁸ Oates must have chanced upon this letter when researching for her short-story because she employs the name Erskine for James's housemaid. This misattribution suggests that her work is a freewheeling reflection she constructed starting from James's life.

⁹ "The Middle Years" (1893) is the story of the dying Dencombe who, having spent his life learning how to write, yearns for a second life to put it into practice.

¹⁰ The comparison with past authors may even turn into an abuse of them: in "EDickinsonReplilux" Oates concocts a story of undesired posterity by transforming the poetess into a robot, repeatedly vexed by its purchaser who has fanciful artistic ambitions. Since his verses are only a



The phrase “last days” in the collection title highlights that death is a major motif, omnipresent in the Jamesian story: while soldiers are dying in Flanders or at the hospital, James himself has only one year and a half to live. In the face of death, he falls into a crisis. The short-story projects an image of James that does not match the one conveyed by the portrait Singer Sargent made of him in 1913. In Sargent’s painting the American novelist looks self-confident – an imposing figure with the ample forehead suggesting the intellectual fecundity which ensured him the honourable title of Master; the readers of Oates’s short-story have a glimpse of this ‘Master’ only at the very beginning, when the protagonist is about to enter the hospital for his first day as a volunteer. Like in the title of the short-story, the name is not explicitly mentioned in the first paragraphs – yet, it would be superfluous: the passage in which he is said to be called Master for his literary accomplishments and the “finely nuanced artistry of his mature prose style, which rebuked all simplicity” (47) makes it easy to identify this character with Henry James. As if to facilitate the process of identification, the third-person narrator also imitates the tortuous style of the late James in the opening sequence while proposing a typical Jamesian situation: a character feels so awkward in its environment that its movements through space and through trivial tasks acquire a certain degree of gravity. While going into the St. Barth’s to do volunteer work, the fictional James does not picture it as a straightforward job but as a feat of epic proportions: “This would be the greatest test of his life”, the narrator exclaims (Ferguson 2009).

The fictional James senses his uneasiness worsen rapidly once inside the hospital hall. He is there plunged into the midst of the body’s waste products: upon his entrance, his nostrils are assailed by a melange of disgusting odours – “rank animal smells, bodily wastes, a powerful stink as of rancid, rotting flesh: gangrene” (51). Since he devoted his talent to depicting “the elegant flowering of a civilization”, the products of human metabolism have never found room in his prose: the sentences “*In all of the Master’s prose, not one bedpan. Not excrement of any kind, nor the smells of excrement*” point out to what extent, in the authoress’s view, James’s prose is detached from reality (72). The protagonist is forced to reconsider the main tenets of his production: “such a spectacle of suffering seemed to the Master a rebuke of him, as of his ornate, finely spun art”; thoughts echoed by the more disturbing awareness that for the first time he feels to authentically inhabit the world: “*This has been the actual world*” he acknowledges bitterly (58).¹¹

Before a wounded soldier, whose limbs are rotting, James manages to utter just some words “which might have issued from a politician’s smiling mouth” (57). He is likewise unable to pin down his emotions in his diaries as he used to: the experience in close contact with the wounded soldiers of WWI hinders textualisation, rejects his celebrated eloquence. When unleashing his emotions on paper, he erupts in an

pale replica of Dickinson’s, he tries to steal poems from the robot: thus, an inferiority complex leads to abusive attitudes towards dead authors.

¹¹ The italics are in the original: Oates often italicises the sentences that reflect her character’s mental processes.



“animalesque rant” made of mumbled phrases: confronted with the horrors of the war, James borders on the inarticulate in his writings. His reflection lacks coherence, because the attempted descriptions of his experiences at the hospital are interwoven with fragments of sentences revealing his frustrated ambitions to become a commercially successful writer:

rot/ gangrene/ *gloire* of history
Ward Six, St. Bartholomew’s Hospital: an anteroom of hell damned
dentures ill fitting / overly shiny/ costly
failure of the New York Edition
piteous royalties, after a career of four decades
[...] deep inanition & depression
“not to wake—not to wake”: my prayer
“avert my face from the monstrous scene” (52)

In the above quotation, Oates reports fragments from James’s letters and diaries,¹² which she mingles with imagined phrases, thus doing the complete opposite of Lodge in *Author, Author*. In the preface to *Author, Author*, Lodge reverses the usual warning about the fictitious nature of characters and places described in the novel, stating that it is based on James’s fictional and non-fictional prose and he allowed himself to imagine only the events or dialogue for which there is no documentation (2005: iii; cf. also Kusek 2014: 75). Moreover, since the reader should recognise at once the quotations from James’s texts, Lodge italicised and reported them word for word. In contrast, by manipulating James’s texts and collapsing fact with fiction, Oates flouts the conventions prescribing a scrupulous handling of original documents to offer a more powerful portrayal of an unstable identity. At the same time, she asserts her authorship over the text: her admiration for James does not lead to reverence, so she is neither overwhelmed by James’s prose nor inhibited from employing her own style. James’s distinctive style is abandoned as soon as doubts creep into the mind of the tale’s protagonist.

The atmosphere of instability is enhanced by making the uncertainty of the fictional James refract onto the short-story’s narrator. Whilst, at the very beginning, the narrator mimics the style of James, in the following paragraphs it frees itself from convoluted sentences: in a mirror-like play of refractions, the narrative voice seems to absorb the protagonist’s worries about whether his own works and style are efficacious in describing the actual world. Whenever prominence is given to the corporeal dimension through ubiquitous scatological tropes, not only do the sentences become increasingly briefer, but allusions to the work of another author recur. A line of demarcation between the narrator and the writer-James is drawn by means of references to Anton Chekov’s “Ward No 6” (1892): Oates’s hellish hospital

¹² “Not to wake—not to wake” is an extract from a letter Fullerton wrote to Wharton in 1914, quoting James’s statements. “Avert my face from the monstrous scene” is an extract from a letter to Rhoda Broughton sent on the 10th of August. “*Gloire*” is drawn presumably from the *Deathbed Notes* and the allusion to dental problems is inspired by a passage in *The Notebooks*.



recalls Dr Ragin's mental asylum, where no action is taken to improve the sordid conditions of the Ward No 6. Chekov describes a hospital in a Russian province, pervaded by the stink of death and infirmity and similar images can be found in the tale by Oates, who even clarifies her intertextual reference by attributing the name "Ward Six" to the wing where James ministers to severely wounded soldiers.

UNVEILING THE FICTITIOUSNESS OF "HENRY JAMES"

In "The Master at St. Bartholomew's Hospital 1914–1916" Oates establishes another intertextual link, this time to Walt Whitman's poetry. Whilst, in the first pages of the short-story, there is a glancing reference to James's disdain for "barbaric Whitman" and his "controversial verses", towards the end the protagonist is depicted while reading "the thrilling suggestive verse of his great countryman" in a heightened emotional state (55; 59). Oates condenses in few passages three decades in James's life, the time he took to appreciate an artist he had scorned at the age of twenty-two. In 1865 he wrote a hostile review of *Drum-Taps*, but in the 1890s expressed admiration for his compatriot's poetry, re-evaluated after reading *Calamus* (1897) and, above all, *The Wound Dresser* (1898). In wartime James also felt that they share a profound affinity and common experiences, Whitman having been a volunteer nurse to the wounded soldiers of the Civil War. James's sympathetic admiration for the poet is triggered by the resilience demonstrated during the war and the immediacy of his evidence in *The Wound Dresser*: however, in Oates's story the reader witnesses another manipulation of biographical facts, because the causes of James's admiration lie in Whitman's capability to write on homosexual passion. James is first depicted as a man upset by just touching a male body but, as time passes, he can't help falling in love with the young soldiers. Up to that moment, he has repressed his homosexual impulses both in his life and his work – "in all of the Master's lauded fiction, not one individual, male or female, inhabited an actual physical body" (57): so when he experiences an overwhelming passion for a man for the first time, he resorts to Whitman's poetry to describe his own feelings.

A couple of considerations may be drawn with regard to the function of the intertextual references to Whitman. First, the protagonist's remark that "who would be Master, if he could be – 'Camerado'?" (59) highlights to what extent the contrast between him and the author of *Drum-taps* – and it should be added: between their respective works – is sharp: compared with the celebrant of the body and the idea of community, the fictional James stands out as an aloof closeted gay who has repressed his (homo)sexual instincts for his entire life until, at the age of seventy, his blood is reawakened by the love for the young soldiers as Whitman's "hypnotic verses" awaken his blood (59). This portrayal of Henry James is in line with the statements Oates has made about the private James over the years: in the essay on "The Middle Years", she singles out a letter from the Master's correspondence where he complains about his increasing loneliness in order to illuminate the similarities between the tale's author



and the main character, Dencombe;¹³ both dedicated their life to Art without being blessed by commercial success but with a strenuous devotion in the pursuit of great literary achievements that forced them into an inevitable solitude, the abovementioned “terrifying aloneness” (Oates 1996: 259). In a recent paper, Oates explains more clearly what kind of isolation she believes James had imposed on himself to pursue his artistic ambitions: in her view, the Master confined himself to an “emotional isolation” enabling him “to imagine the intense, intimate lives of others” (2016: 25). This emotional isolation entailed a constant effort to restrain his homosexual urges and, as a consequence, to hide his true sexual orientation. His “homosexual energies” nonetheless keep surfacing in his works, although the experience of homosexual passion is sublimated. For instance, Oates defined “The Middle Years” as a “gently homoerotic fantasy” (1996: 260) since the relationship between Dencombe and his young admirer Dr Hugh is altogether platonic.

In “The Master at St Bartholomew’s Hospital 1914–1916”, Oates parades before the reader all the suffused sexual desire permeating James’s corpus, jettisoning his verbal reticence: in keeping with the narrative strategy enacted in the two rewrites of *The Turn of the Screw*, the homoerotic fantasy is recast at the physical level with the fictional James described kissing the amputated leg of a hospital inmate or building an altar on which to keep memorabilia of the maimed soldiers. The authoress’s attempt to an act of *outing* James has a correspondence in her critical comments on him: Oates’s own criticism seeps into the text concurring to shape her representation of the Master. Harvey justly notes that fictional biographies always bear the “fingerprints” of their authors, but I hardly share his belief that the same authors fight to conceal themselves from the narration in order to present their “vision” of James as “truth” (2007: 88). This is not the kind of battle waged by Oates, who exposes the fictitiousness of her Henry James. And through a set of narrative strategies, which includes images related to the act of concealment, she eventually demonstrates that scholars and biographers – fictional biographers as well – pursue a futile quest in their attempt to decipher James’s private self. Recurrent tropes of concealment and exposure characterise also Lodge’s and Tóibín’s novels, who punctuate their narration with these figures for the same reason as Oates: as Hannah suggests, the two male authors so shed light on the biofiction’s “dependence upon the illusion of revelation”, i.e. the possibility of

¹³ As noted before, readers may identify traits of Dencombe also in Oates’ representation of James. Whether her short-story is a creative and critical response to “The Middle Years” is a hypothesis, albeit suggestive. Yet, there are some similarities – e.g. the love for young boys turning into a curative force. Like Dencombe, Oates’s James gets rid of certain dilemmas thanks to his relations with the youngsters. Assisting Hugh and the other soldiers, James frees himself of the inferiority complexes triggered by his shame for not having volunteered during the Civil War. In “The Middle Years” Dencombe waits in vain for a second chance as a writer; yet, in Oates’s view, he does not conclude his existence in despair: what he wanted was an admirer in the next generation and he has found it in Dr Hugh, who reassures him about posthumous appreciation. Oates notes that “Hugh” and “you” are almost homophones so that the doctor come to symbolise the yearned-for audience who will ensure him future recognition (1996: 260). And as if to drop a hint about a relation between the two tales, Oates draws attention to the assonance between “you” and “Hugh” making James murmur “Hugh, you” (58) in her short-story.



unveiling the private life of the subject; they demonstrate that the fictional biographer's intrusion into James's private life is not paid off with success, due to its essential inaccessibility (2007: 72).

The act of concealment is a significant leitmotif in Oates's short-story, which in turn may be interpreted as a meditation on two binary oppositions: concealment/disclosure and private/public. She plays with the well-known aversion to publicity of James, who made bonfires of his letters asking his correspondents to do the same and, in a Shakespearean fashion, even pronounced an anathema against future biographers. Several scholars drew attention to James's efforts to exert control over his biography and to shape the view the public had of him through a systematic destruction of evidence and the publication of three autobiographies (cf. Kirchknopf 2013: 66). Oates's character shares the historical James's aversion to publicity insofar he strives to conceal his love for the soldiers from the nurses: this is a recurrent image which invites a reconsideration of the reasons why Oates quotes Whitman. In public, the fictional James gives voice to his feelings only through the filter of Whitman's poetry: as demonstrated, the intertextuality highlights the contrast between the poet and James, whose oeuvre does not speak to homosexual love. Yet, at the level of the plot, it is an ingenious stratagem devised by the protagonist: since no one in the hospital staff understands the meaning of the poems he recites, he will not risk a scandal like Oscar Wilde's, whose name is mentioned in a passing reference. Whitman's poetry functions both as a vehicle and a mask for his emotions.

Oates's James persists in this protective concealment not only against the nurses but also against biographers and scholars. He is so aware that his private pocket diaries might be published in the future that he encrypts allusions to his own erotic life. He designs a code of black and red crosses with the intent to deceive biographers and scholars to come (61), the targets of his derision: he smiles to imagine their vain efforts to crack the code or to understand pronouncements that defeat interpretation such as "*Art is long and everything else is accidental and unimportant*" (63). Just as his obscure statements will baffle even diligent scholars, so James's slippery private self will always elude biographers. Biofiction can give only an illusion of truth like the illusion of stealing into "the privacy of [James's] bedchamber", where he keeps the wounded's memorabilia (60). With a plot twist in the final pages, Oates dismantles such illusion, reasserting the unattainability of the subject's private life. Her protagonist is dying in his apartments in Chelsea and is lost in reveries provoked by morphine: he pictures himself sailing across the Mediterranean Sea with the soldier he loves the most. The explicit hallucinatory dimension of the conclusion prompts readers to rethink about all the episodes that describe James as dreaming or in a swoon. These increase in number as the plot progresses: if, at the beginning, he faints because of his squeamishness, later he repeatedly falls in a swoon because he cannot bear the soldiers' suffering or death. He has a shock when his patient, to whom he was reading *Leaves of Grass*, dies of sudden haemorrhage. With this image Oates concludes a long section of her tale, graphically separated from the next one, which starts with a quotation from James's correspondence: "... *must for dear life make our own counterrealities*" (60). This is an extract from the letter James wrote to Lucy Clifford in 1914, after hearing of the



destruction of Rheims cathedral, the nadir in the descent into barbarism: with those words he asserted his belief in the healing potential of imagination and fiction to provide an escape from grim reality. The Henry James constructed by Oates, who believes that “the more we are hurt, the more we seek solace in the imagination” (2009: 140), is likely to find refuge in counter-realities conjured by his imagination. After quoting the extract from the letter to Clifford, the narrator describes James returning to the hospital and not remembering the facts Nurse Edwards tells him: there are discrepancies between his and the nurse’s version of the events taking place after the soldier’s accident. Since the episodes told in the short-story are filtered through his consciousness, readers wonder whether what they read is distorted by James’s perception which may mitigate the experiences too painful to endure.

Although an atmosphere of death pervades its conclusion, Oates does not conclude her short-story with a note of utter despair. Contemporary authors are likely to identify themselves with James, because by fictionalising his life they can shed light on a mutual story of success and failure in the literary market. Their sympathy for Henry James may result in an unwillingness to end their works with images of total defeat (Kaplan 2007: 71). Both *The Master* and *Author, Author* deal with the dramatic premiere of the *Guy Domville*, but in the final pages, the former shows James about to write the masterpieces of the Major Phase, while the latter focuses on James’s posthumous success. Like Tóibín and Lodge, Oates sympathises with her protagonist, but also engages in a process of identification with him because she works out her anxieties through the representation of James. And, whether it is a choice adopted out of sympathy for her character or a form of self-reassurance, in the closure of “The Master at St Bartholomew’s Hospital 1914–1916” Oates depicts James dying but again persuaded of the necessity of fiction and those works of art that create counter-realities.

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