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Fully canonical authors are best approached on tiptoe, if not in a genuflect position. It takes at least a T. S. Eliot to assert that *Hamlet* is an artistic failure and yet get away with it relatively unscathed. The natural consequence of this proposition is that the history of literature is ridden with myths and half-truths, and little or no debunking seems forthcoming. One century has elapsed since the bodily death of Henry James, and the occasion seems just ideal to discuss some of his artistic and personal infirmities, and, by trying to sketch a whole picture of him and his craft, redress the balance and do a minor service to those amateur Jacobites who—quite wisely—concur with the common reader rather than with the cold, dissecting eye of knowledgeable academic critics.

That James has been popularly presented as the perfect tenant of an ivory tower is neither a controversial nor a baseless opinion. Evidence for it can be found in his biography and readily derived from what we know of his professional attitudes and artistic convictions. James, for instance, was a life-long bachelor. No facts, moreover, have ever been brough to light about any real intimacy with his many female acquaintances. Leon Edel, his most authoritative biographer, toys with the idea that the closest he came to maintaining this kind of intercourse was during his stay with Constance Fenimore Woolson in the Florentine villa Brichieri early in 1887, though James, characteristically, tried to hush up the fact with friends and visitors lest gossip should arise (*Life* 1: 80204). For some, his bachelorhood and uncertain relations with women bespeak an ambiguous sexual identity; for others, however, it underlines his will to avoid any family tie that could hinder his artistic pursuit. "I shall never marry," he confesses in a letter addressed to Grace Norton. For him, "[s]ingleness consorts much better with my whole view of existence . . . my habits, my occupations, prospects, tastes, means, situation in ‘Europe,’ and absence of the desire
to have children . . . " (cit. Edel, *Life* 1: 69394). Furthermore, the idea of marriage as an obstacle to artistic achievement recurs persistently in many of his tales of literary life, especially in “The Author of *Beltraffio*” (1884), “The Lesson of the Master” (1887), and “The Next Time” (1894). With varying degrees of irony and ambiguity, all three present versions of the dilemma faced by the conscientious author who must choose between feeding his family in a petty bourgeois context or writing with absolute freedom for an intellectual, appreciative coterie. On the whole, James always sympathized with the latter option.

Another biographical feature that reinforces his image as an “artist enamoured of perfection, ridden by his idea, or paying for his sincerity” (James, *Art of the Novel* 221) is his gradual withdrawal from London society into the relative seclusion of Lamb House in the Sussex village of Rye. After what Edel called his “conquest of London” (*Life* 1: 491634), during which he led an incredibly active social life and became an attraction of sorts in the most fashionable salons of the late 1870s, he obscurely felt that his popularity was a check on his literary powers, and, dejected at the failure of his novels of the 1880s and his theatrical attempts of the early 1890s, he decided to write his transitional works of the late 1890s in a rural environment which could bring him, he hoped, the necessary quiet to set his ideas in order and embark on the ideation of a new novelistic form. Narrative milestones such as *The Spoils of Poynton* (1896), *What Maisie Knew* (1897), and *The Awkward Age* (1898-99) were all composed in Sussex, either at Point Hill in Playden, in the Old Vicarage of Rye, or in Lamb House itself, which he first took on a lease and finally purchased in 1898. It eventually became his permanent residence for many years, until old age advised him to move again to London. Different modulations of the idea that solitude and peace of mind are essential to produce literary masterpieces lie, for instance, behind short fictions like “The Private Life” (1892), a semi-fantastic *amusette* about the public and private selves of socialites and high-minded authors, and “The Death of the Lion” (1894), a tale of unwanted protection where work and writer are identified to such an extent that the loss of one necessarily entails the extinction of the other.

But Jamesian aloofness extends beyond biographical facts and gestures, for his professional and aesthetic outlook seems best apprehended in the light of indifference to material gain, Olympian insensitivity to readers’ tastes, and a kind of subjection of life to art that could be expressed as *ut pictura vita*, should one wish to rephrase the Horatian dictum. James was a fully professional author with drastically limited private means—perhaps the first fully professional author of true canonical stature that lived entirely by his pen. In spite of this, he never bowed to his readership nor made the least concession—so runs the myth—in order to enlarge the
circulation of his works. This prevailing view is much more than a mere aspect of the posthumous New Critical construction of his image as a formalist, aestheticizing writer; it was customarily voiced by contemporary critics and reviewers in unequivocal terms, as when W. C. Brownell, for instance, claims in 1905 that James “scrupulously followed his ideal” and “never, at any rate, yielded to the temptation to give the public what it wanted” (396). Reviews of transitional novels such as *What Maisie Knew* and *The Awkward Age* show invincible amazement at the mounting difficulties of his works, conviction that they call for a very specific readership, and an amusing blind faith in the fact that if James had authored them they would surely be all right, even if what he meant by them was just incomprehensible for most of his readers. Additionally, as James entered upon full maturity, his belief that life is moulded on art and not the contrary and his rejection of the mimetic ideals that informed his seminal essay “The Art of Fiction” (1884) crystallized in famous statements such as “It is art that makes life, makes interest, makes importance, for our consideration and application of these things, and I know of no substitute whatever for the force and beauty of its process” (*Letters of Henry James* 1: 508). In the same vein, the young, impressionable narrator of “The Author of Beltraffio” views the creepers on the garden walls of Mark Ambient’s home as “copied from a masterpiece of one of the pre-Raphaelites” and reflects that “[i]t was not the picture, the poem, the fictive page, that seemed to me a copy; these things were the originals, and the life of happy and distinguished people was fashioned in their image” (61). In conclusion, a tall, glittering ivory tower indeed.

But raising the foregoing points suggests a fundamental question—do they draft a unilateral, partial view of Henry James, or rather a balanced, complete, and trustworthy image of him and his creative disposition? In other words, does his image consistently live up to fact? Since the 1980s a growing mass of evidence has undermined the idea of an unworldly James. In her 1983 book *Henry James and the Mass Market*, Marcia Jacobson, for one, conclusively proves that during the 1880s and 1890s James made countless efforts and concessions to become popular and write for the mass market in order to earn money and gain some visibility. He did this by trying to absorb the conventions of contemporary topical literature and replicate them in his works. Thus, *The Bostonians* (1886) owes its characterological outline, plot structure, and social atmosphere to the subgenre of US Civil War romance, *The Princess Casamassima* (1886) to the working-class novel, *The Tragic Muse* (1890) to the novel of actors and theatre life, and so on. James failed, however, because his worldview was too pessimistic and his incapacity to concoct happy endings too notorious for the readership he intended to captivate.
Three years later, in 1986, Michael Anesko published a true landmark of Jamesian historiography and criticism. His “Friction with the Market”: Henry James and the Profession of Authorship dealt the coup de grâce to the ethereal vision of an introspective James daydreaming about his characters, picking up the gems of experience and stringing them up on the chain of artistic execution, perpetually communing with himself and wary of any intrusion from the outside world. Backed by a vast amount of documentation, the Anesko book brings a different, more credible Henry James to life. Now we see a savvy businessman, who, having learned the lesson of how badly Hawthorne had been treated by publishers, inaugurates new ways to conduct business with publishing houses for his own benefit, especially the practice of playing one against the other to obtain higher royalties instead of tying himself to one for life, as was the standard, 19th-century policy. The final chapter of this book is particularly telling. In 1951, Leon Edel published a paper on the organization of the New York edition of James's selected works that became the last word on the subject. Edel argues that James chose, ordered, and distributed his novels and tales into volumes with outmost care, following essentially aesthetic criteria, and with a view to creating his own comédie humaine—precisely in twenty-three volumes—after Honoré de Balzac's own collected works. Anesko, on the contrary, shows how the volumes were put together in almost haphazard fashion and according to mercantile criteria, if any criteria at all. Once again, this just confirms the general rule that what a truly great artist does is faultless by definition, and the only thing left to critics, at best, is to sanctify his or her actions by providing a set of suitable motives.

That Henry James was professionally-minded in his dealings with literature is also clear from his correspondence. Take, for instance, the letters he wrote to Frederick Macmillan of the firm Macmillan and Company between 1877 and 1914, which were collected in 1993 by Rayburn S. Moore. Though exceptions certainly abound, a typical letter begins with James's comments on some social occasion or outstanding piece of gossip and ends by bargaining terms for a new narrative project, by asking for advances in cash, or by complaining of low sales and the practical absence of royalties he receives for his works. Of course, this embarrassing attitude squares badly with the image of disinterest and detachment that has been thrust upon him. And yet the episode of his life that best contributes to unsettling the Jamesian myth is, to my mind, his active involvement in the theatrical enterprise in the early 1890s.

James was a persistent theatre-goer all his life and an enthusiast of the dramatic form. He wrote a total of seventeen plays from 1869 to 1909, but he only attempted to have one staged—an adaptation of his novel The American (1877)—as late as 1891 and following the commercial
failure of his novels of the preceding decade. But apart from his spirited praise of drama, the reasons he gives for his change of tack are mildly disturbing. In a notebook entry dated May 12th, 1889, he confesses the motives behind his renewed infatuation with theatre, “I simply must try, and try seriously to produce half a dozen—a dozen, five dozen—plays for the sake of my pocket, my material future. Of how little money the novel makes for me I needn’t discourse here” (Complete Notebooks 52). This is not, however, an isolated admission. In an 1890 letter to his sister Alice, he feels as if “there had been a triumphant première and . . . [he] had received overtures from any managerial quarter and had only to count . . . [his] gold” (Letters 3: 285); in the same letter he vents his anger at the “poverty-stricken condition of the English repertory,” but nonetheless feels happy because this means that his plays will stand out more clearly and bring him “profit indeed” (Letters 3: 286). On January 9th, 1895, a few days after the disastrous première of Guy Domville, he writes to his brother William in a mood of ironic confession that “[t]he thing fills me with horror for the abysmal vulgarity and brutality of the theatre and its regular public—which God knows I have had intensely even when working (from motives as ‘pure’ as pecuniary motives can be) against it” (Letters 3: 508-509).

If money-making played a crucial role in James’s decision to become a staging dramatist, it also clarifies how he dealt with the ideas and materials for new plays which he collected during his theatrical period from 1890 to 1895. When his dramatic project fell through early in 1895, he had many notes which could be equally developed, he argues, as plays or as novels. This hesitation gives rise to a curious phenomenon in James’s literary production which I have elsewhere called “fluid texts” or “textual fluidity.” For years and even decades, some Jamesian works thought out in the early 1890s had oscillated between two genres—either they were first conceived of as plays, then became fictions, and were later reconverted into plays, or began as narratives and ended up in script form or even staged as full-fledged plays. The cases of The High Bid (1907) and The Other House (1909) are paradigmatic and quite illustrative of this remarkable fluidity. They were first written as dramas (a one-acter by the title of Summersoft [c. 1895] and a lost scenario, respectively), then recomposed as narratives when staging proved impossible (“Covering End” [1898] and The Other House [1896]), and, eventually, recast as plays when impresarios showed renewed interest in them considerably later.

But these episodes of conversion and reconversion are only meaningful here if one considers how they were carried out. Technically, they were not true adaptations, in which a basic kernel of meaning is developed according to the conventions of another semiotic medium, but rather hasty, slipshod rewrites where stage directions simply became narratorial discourse and characters’
speeches were often preserved and merely placed between quotation marks. Motivationally, James undertook genre-switching in an awful state of mind. He was disappointed and angry that his plays and scenarios did not move theatre managers, and tried to make most of them by recasting them in narrative form at the lowest possible cost in time and effort. For these reasons, the results of genre-switching do feature among James’s poorest, most embarrassing works. He was fully conscious, moreover, of what he was doing and how he was doing it. In a 1908 letter to Solger, for instance, James confesses that he produced the novel version of *The Other House* “rapidly and at short notice . . . by the simple expedient of calling the Acts Books and ‘writing in’ such an amount of scenic indications and comment as would make a sort of equivalent or substitute for very good acting” (qtd. in Tucker 215n19). Likewise, in his letter to Auguste Monod of August 2, 1907, he calls *The Other House* a play “converted into a narrative in three ‘Books,’” whose “material was economically used tel quel, as it stood, for the narrative purpose: the only small scrap of rearrangement . . . being the 3 or 4 opening pages. The rest is all ‘scenic’ and the thing thus perhaps a considerable curiosity: which may be its only merit!” (*Letters to Benson and Monod* 107). Similarly, he discloses how he wrote “Covering End” in a letter to Gosse dated October 12, 1898, acknowledging that it had “like *The Other House*, its base origin smeared all over it” and that he thus reclaimed *Summersoft*, the source play, “a little for literature—and for [his] pocket” by rewriting it “on the absolutely same scenic lines, into narrative” (*Letters* 4: 82-83). But his true stance on the whole genre-switching enterprise brutally transpires when, amazed at the popular success of the novel version of *The Other House*, he exclaims “If that’s what the idiots want, I can give them their bellyfull” in a letter to his brother William dated October 30, 1896 (Skrupskelis and Berkeley 2: 416).

As stated right at the beginning, a centenary may be a splendid occasion to present a canonical author whole and without concessions. *The Times Literary Supplement* once characterized James Joyce as an almost unique author because he had managed to publish only masterpieces. This is obviously not the case with James. The Irish writer published fifteen tales under the title of *Dubliners* (1914), two novels, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916) and *Ulysses* (1922), and an unwieldy, mind-stunning text by the title of *Finnegans Wake* (1939), on which he invested seventeen years of his life. James, by contrast, authored over twenty novels, seventeen plays, and more than one hundred tales, some of them lengthy novellas, apart from writing thousand of letters, autobiographical volumes, and an incredible mass of critical opinion. It is only natural that he was unable to match at all times high artistic standards with the extent of his literary production. James’s New Critical myth is hard to maintain on the evidence that has
accrued since the 1980s, but the contrary is also true. To think of James as a mercenary of letters, perpetually bent on nothing but reckoning his gains, would lead us into a kind of Manichaean thinking that little consorts with the vast complexity of the personage.

**Works Cited**


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