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# The Secrets of the Master

By Kathryn Kramer, *Middlebury College*

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In 1909, Henry James went out into the garden of his house in Sussex and made a massive bonfire of forty years' worth of letters and private papers. In 1915, he did it again. Not for him, evidently, Kafka's risk, that of requesting a Max Brod to destroy manuscripts after his death, an entrusting one may suspect of not having been wholehearted. James seems to have been in no doubt that doing away with this evidence was the right thing to do. Yet—evidence of what? Would whatever was in those letters fill in the gaps in our knowledge of James's private life? This is a writer who left a style as recognizable as a logo and, it appears, left his readers with an unabated curiosity about what really went on inside the polished dome of his head. What *could* that reticent, passionate, and yet ultimately solitary person have so dreaded our discovering? Would the letters define his "obscure hurt" or tell us whether he went to his grave a virgin? Or reveal just how much of himself he promised to Constance Woolson and then rescinded? And what would we have if we did discover these things?

It's known that James was in the grip of a depression the first time he did away with his evidence; the second, he knew he didn't have long to live. Had he been in his usual health, it's tempting to conjecture he might have acted otherwise. On the other hand, perhaps a somber mood simply made more palpable the risk of leaving behind such relics. He couldn't control what would become of the letters he'd *sent* (though in at least one instance he succeeded), but perhaps destroying his half of the correspondence would leave the rest more ambiguous. So keen himself about human psychology, so avid to delve into it, he felt a profound distaste at the prospect of posterity's grubby pawing about in his, neglecting his carefully edited published work to look for first drafts in his life. A deep believer in privacy, he felt horror at the thought of having his experience distorted by others' misunderstandings, an experience routinely suffered by his characters. And yet, ironically, his self-protective measures seem practically designed to invite imaginations to insinuate themselves into the interstices. In a turn of the screw that one would like to think would amuse James—if he could overcome his revulsion—within the past decade, *he* has appeared as a character in no fewer than six published novels, with who knows how many more

in progress. Something is missing, these writers—including the present one—seem to have felt, that imagination may be able to supply.

Obviously, historical figures have inspired novels whose goals have been to reanimate the past, to make it accessible to latter-day readers (what did a boy in ancient Rome feel?) or to reveal the inner life of public figures (Mary Stuart was a vulnerable human being, and her dog loved her). Records not available during the subject's lifetime are consulted, and so on. In this genre in recent years not only is greater liberty taken in imagining the subject's interior life, but writers seem to be attracted less by the historical record than by gaps in it. Things known to have happened—meetings taken place, letters written, friendships clandestinely maintained, love affairs rumored—but for which there remains no determinate evidence. Janice Galloway's *Clara* (2003) (starring Clara Schumann), Lew McCreary's *Mount's Mistake* (1987) (Thomas Edison), Robert Coover's *The Public Burning* (1977) (Richard Nixon), and Eric Zencey's *Panama* (1995) (Henry Adams) are a few examples. The hope seems to be that the novelist will imaginatively penetrate where plodding, evidence-shackled biographers could not gain access. For a novelist, too, there is the not inconsiderable comfort of a book's plot coming ready made, a reprieve from the vertigo of being author. One is already authorized, flashes a press card.

With writers as subjects, what's going on is even trickier. Writers are people who presumably have said what they wanted to say—in some cases exhaustively (James, arguably, having left the most extensive record of all)—and yet those of us who've written about writers seem to be saying that, despite this, these writers concealed something, the ambiguities in their texts were driven by guilt or self-serving explanations, or else they were constrained by compunctions now rendered obsolete from speaking honestly. Apparently, we believe we can liberate the repressed.

Other writers besides James have had novels written about them. Virginia Woolf makes a notable appearance in Michael Cunningham's *The Hours* (1998); Dostoevsky in Leonid Tsytkin's *Summer in Baden Baden* (2001) and J. M. Coetzee's *The Master of Petersburg* (1994); Tolstoy in Jay Parini's *The Last Station* (1990); Arthur Conan Doyle in Julian Barnes's recent *Arthur and George* (2006), to name several, but, with the exception of Dostoevsky, these are not repeat performances. So—*six* novels, with more perhaps to come? One can't but wonder why James, of all people, has come in for such scrutiny—and why now.

To date, the novels are Carol de Chellis Hill's *Henry James's Midnight Song* (1993), this writer's *Sweet Water* (1998), Emma Tennant's *Felony* (2002), Colm Tóibín's *The Master* (2004), David Lodge's *Author, Author* (2004), and Michiel Heyns's *The Typewriter's Tale* (2005). I know of a second as yet unpublished novel starring Henry James's amanuensis, Theodora Bosanquet, and there have been fictional reimaginations of some of James's novellas: A. N. Wilson's *A Jealous Ghost* (2005), a kind of updating with social commentary of "The Turn of the Screw" (a disturbed American nanny, unable to tell the difference between the literal and the literary, ends up destroying the children in her charge), and John Drury's long poem, "Burning the Aspern Papers" (2003), not to mention the quantity of recent film adaptations of James's novels.

Although in some cases there may be triggering circumstances—the opening up of papers at Harvard originally made accessible only to Leon Edel, James's first and still chief biographer; the publication of revisionist biographies such as Lyndall

Gordon's *A Private Life of Henry James* (1998) and Sheldon Novick's *The Young Master* (1996); the interest in James by Queer Studies—the five novels were inspired independently of one another, the way parents hit upon “Brandon” or “Chelsea” as an original name, only to learn afterwards that half the maternity ward has had the same idea. You have to wonder what in the zeitgeist is going on.

For my part, it was the happenstance of needing a subject for a character, a biographer, to write about and then, when I thought of James, the serendipity of discovering that he'd actually spent time just across the river from where my novel is set. If serendipity is what you want to call it. In *Sweet Water* James's is not a starring role, though a pivotal one, and he works under a pseudonym. Code-named “O.” by his biographer in the novel, he visits a Vermont resort hotel in the 1870s and thereafter carries out an epistolary never-consummated love affair with the proprietor's daughter, mistress of the hotel's water cures. The dates of O.'s trips to the hotel coincide with those of James's rare visits to the U.S. and in particular with, in one instance, a stay in Chocorua, directly across the Connecticut River in New Hampshire. His unrealized relationship with my nineteenth-century water witch to some degree replicates James's quasi, unrealized romances with Constance Woolson and Mary Temple, though I wrote the novel before reading any secondary material except Edel's (condensed) biography. Not Novick's or Gordon's books; not Sedgwick's “The Beast in the Closet.” No doubt in part because of this, I am alone among these six writers in having had the effrontery to give James a love scene—even if it's a solitary, masturbatory one, his partner imagined, and, even more improbably, a woman.

For many years, I took James at face value. When I don't have my teaching hat on, I'm a naïve reader, as often as not using books as a springboard to dreaminess, I'm afraid, as I've done since a childhood lived largely within and through them. I've read James most of my life, from “The Turn of the Screw” in seventh or eighth grade through the major novels in college (although not in a class, where my innocent readings might have been disputed). If ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny, then over the years I evolved from the early straightforward readings of James (the ghosts are real), to the psychological (the governess is sexually repressed), to the cultural historical (the ruling class distorts underlings' experiences; Christianity might also be to blame), to the deconstructionist (nothing is ever one thing).

I thought that the way James's characters saw things was the way things were. People hid things from you for their own advantage. I still think that, but what I missed when I was younger was the naïveté on the part of the duped that expedites the process. I didn't pick up on the warnings about missing the obvious with which James's work is shot through: Lambert Strether in *The Ambassadors* fantastically unable to see that Chad and Mme de Vionnet are lovers; Maggie and Adam Verver in *The Golden Bowl* incredibly not noticing the same about their respective spouses. There was so much I just didn't get about how and why people got along with each other, or didn't, especially when it came to men and women, and I found James's refusal to take any of this for granted congenial and comforting. What most other writers seemed either unaware of or to gloss over—how intimately people used each other—was in the forefront with James. More than any novelist, he dramatizes the morality of private relationships. What reader can ever forget the moment when Strether, spying Chad and Mme de Vionnet approaching him in a boat out of a set-

ting exactly like that in a painting he admires, realizes all at once that he has colluded in letting them hide from him? It is one of the most brilliant scenes in all literature, and the subsequent scene in which the three perpetuate their now glaring mutual self-deception one of the most excruciating.

So when I “discovered” that James had visited my fictional universe and fallen in love with my nineteenth-century heroine, it was both a return to a familiar world and a thank you to him for what he’d comforted me by articulating. If I was impertinent in feeling sorry for him for his never-companied life—well, I didn’t mean to condescend. I, or at least my fictional biographer, interpreted O.’s solitariness as a self-sacrificial self-denial, a martyrdom for the purpose (conscious or not) of showing the error of his country’s ways. The wrong path it had gone down that resulted in people’s alienation from each other. Did he “abstain from a fulfillment society at large could not know?” asks the biographer, or was his “private paralysis cast like a giant shadow across everything he looked at?” (Kramer 43). I was aided and abetted by remarks of James’s own in *The American Scene* and wanted to bring his prescience to bear upon concerns of my novel, in particular his finding a “queer deep split or chasm between the two stages of personal polish, the two levels of the conversable state, at which the sexes have arrived”:

[F]rom the moment the painter begins to look at American life . . . he is in danger of seeing, in comparison, almost nothing else in it—nothing, that is, so characteristic as this apparent privation, for the man, of his right kind of woman, and this apparent privation, for the woman, of her right kind of man. (AS 65)

In *Sweet Water*, O. is irrevocably drawn to Lucinda Dearborn, a dowser and administratrix of water cures, but frightened by her intimate knowledge of him. One day he follows her into the woods where she bathes in a stream. He thinks himself unseen, but she knows he’s there. She slips and falls, and he inadvertently reveals himself, but instead of initiating a more direct relationship, he insists that they “must tell no one. . . . No one would understand our innocence” (Kramer 169). He writes to her for years, but nothing ever “happens” between them. Lucinda, meanwhile, carries out an actual love affair with a neighbor, a Civil War veteran, a miner, a married man; its clandestine nature does not interfere with her “real” love for O.

One winter she gives birth to the miner’s stillborn daughter, whose body he unearths in the cellar after Lucinda’s suicide. This was occasioned by her reading of a story by O. in a magazine, which seemed to her to make clear that his recalcitrance was *her* fault. Her lover, after disinterring and reburying the stillborn baby, replaces the body with O.’s letters to Lucinda, which are discovered a century later by the contemporary biographer, and the secret begins to unravel. There are parallels between the biographer’s own troubled marriage and the relationships in the past. His wife, unknown to him (“unknown” in the way that Chad and Mme de Vionnet’s relationship is unknown to Strether) has engaged in a long-time relationship with a man who is also married to someone else.

As I’ve read James more intensively since writing this novel, in part for a seminar I’ve taught, I’ve come to think that there’s room in James’s work for interpreting his

characters' (Strether, Isabel Archer, Densher) ultimate refusal of connection as heroic, not pathetic. As willed rather than tragic. Or willed as well as tragic. Strether's turning his back on Maria Gostrey's explicit invitation at the end of *The Ambassadors*, for instance (the novel that was James's personal favorite). If he couldn't have the real, right thing (and he couldn't; she'd already been used up by Chad), then he wouldn't have anyone. This is *an* interpretation; it's possible, of course, to read the refusal as self-serving on James's part, a repudiation of sexual needs, an inability to write openly of the real object of desire, which has occasioned so much obscure cathexis in the relationships in novels of the era. (Think Fielding and Aziz in *A Passage to India*; Sally and Clarissa in *Mrs. Dalloway*; Rupert and Gerald in *Women in Love*, to name only the first three that come to mind.) It's this inability that informs Colm Tóibín's *The Master*, the textually thickest of all these James novels as concerns James's sensibility and the one that gives the most haunting portrait of James's essential loneliness, the longing for he could never risk even articulating fully even to himself.

If there's a single difference between the female and male writers on James, it's that the former focus on the results for others of James's sexual confusion, the latter on the consequences for James. Highly social (James once went out to dinner in London more than a hundred nights in a row), a loyal friend, an ardent conversationalist, he aroused devoted friendship and the tenderness of those who recognized but couldn't assuage his essential solitariness. This is the script Tóibín has his James follow. *The Master*, though its present time covers only the last years of the nineteenth century, touches on the salient points of James's entire biography. From the invented Corporal Hammond (at least I think he's invented) who lovingly tends to James during his visit to Lord Wolsley in Ireland to the sculptor Hendrik Andersen who embraces the Master to comfort him on a visit to Constance Woolson's grave, younger men are drawn to James. But he retreats fearfully behind his circumspection from even the most tacit offers to bridge the distance he maintains between himself and others. The scenes in which the mere suggestion of contact frightens James are handled with deep compassion and consummate delicacy—narrative, not "moral" delicacy. James's thoughts are made visible and tactile, just as his own prose makes his characters', though Tóibín is not trying to write James's prose.

Locating James's sensibility at the crossroads of other people's observations, Tóibín makes the physical metaphysical and vice versa, and his James possesses great psychological richness. For instance, at Lord Wolsley's house in Ireland, James stands in a doorway watching a little girl watching their hostess flirting with a guest. Later that day he construes the scene in which he participates with his manservant as it would appear to an observer in the doorway, and we see how James (or "James") learns to absent himself emotionally at the same time that he learns that the nature of reality varies according to who's looking at it. From an upstairs window, he observes the same little girl alone in the courtyard, staring fixedly up at an upstairs window, as later will Miles in "The Turn of the Screw." And as will Miles's governess, so does James rush outside to look where the other has been looking. And sees nothing: the window is empty, the curtain undisturbed. It's a brilliant set piece: we see James attempting to inhabit another's point of view, failing, then having to wonder if even his view of the other's view is to be trusted. We recognize that an awareness of the occluded nature of one's knowledge—let alone the making of this a moral imperative, as James would do—is painfully alienating.

In the first published of these novels, Carol de Chellis Hill's *Henry James's Midnight Song* (1993), James, despite the book's title, shares billing with a panoramic array of characters, Sigmund Freud and Edith Wharton among them. The novel's an intellectual thriller, in which most of the characters are suspected of murder, usually of murdering women (as a sex) or perhaps nineteenth-century innocence. On Freud's couch James is forced to confront his sense of responsibility for his friend Constance Woolson's suicide. There are some light moments. One gets the pleasure of hearing Hill's James complain to Wharton that Proust "goes on endlessly with the *finest* nuances. I mean simply on and on" (Hill 75).

In Emma Tennant's *Felony* (2002), subtitled "The Private History of the Aspern Papers," James divides the limelight with Georgina Hanghegyi, Claire Clairmont's adopted great-niece. The "felony" of the title is James's having aroused without satisfying Constance Fenimore Woolson's love. That the female writers seize upon Woolson's unrequited feelings more insistently and exclusively than the male writers doesn't require exegesis. *Felony* alternates between James and Woolson's story and the story behind James's novella "The Aspern Papers." (An obsessive Shelley hagiographer, Edward Silsbee, contrived to lodge in the Florence home of the aged Claire Clairmont, Mary Shelley's stepsister and lover of Byron, possessor of a cache of Shelley's letters. After Clairmont died, her fifty-year-old adopted niece reportedly offered Silsbee the papers in return for her hand in marriage. He fled in horror.)

At the time he heard this story, James was sharing a house outside Florence with Woolson (whom he called by the masculinizing "Fenimore"); they occupied separate apartments, yet it was an arrangement he nevertheless kept under wraps, concealing his presence from Florence's American colony, downplaying the degree of their intimacy when he wrote about her to others, though it's possible that this may have been for no reason more sinister than his awareness of the era's narrow ways of assessing male-female friendship.

Tennant exploits the irony of James, the writer, finding himself in a situation similar to that of his character in "The Aspern Papers." Woolson was generous to James, gave him not only indefatigable moral support but sometimes (sometimes unwittingly) material for stories—and may have hinted that she was available for more. After Woolson committed suicide by jumping out of the window of her Venice pension, James traveled down from London, went through her desk and destroyed papers, and, in a ghoulish move, took Woolson's dresses out to sea in a gondola and drowned them. They filled with air and floated, accusing black balloons, refusing to be submerged. It's a scene one presumes that the author of "The Turn of the Screw" and "The Jolly Corner" would have been pleased to have invented.

David Lodge's *Author, Author* (2004) is, along with Colm Tóibín's, the first of the novels to give the by now seasoned actor Henry James the central role. Lodge focuses on the five years between 1890 and 1895 when James tried to write for the theater and on his friendship with the writer and illustrator George du Maurier, author of the then bestselling, now forgotten, *Trilby*. Contrasting James's lonely and largely unrewarded artistic struggles with du Maurier's almost unsought success, Lodge sympathetically recreates James's efforts to turn himself into a royalty-rich playwright when prose did not bring him a wide audience; the resounding and humiliating failure of that effort when he was booed onstage after the production of his play, *Guy*

*Domville*; and James's resurgence afterwards when in an astonishingly short span of time he wrote his three "late" great novels.

Lodge's James is a likable fellow, a loyal friend, devoted to his family, a person his servants revere and are fond of. His portrait is brought into focus through others' concern for him: his typist Theodora Bosanquet; his servants; William James's widow, Alice; and Woolson. Lodge's James consequently seems the most companioned of all, cared for and fretted about. By virtue of subordinating events such as Woolson's suicide to James's ruminations about his writerly endeavors, Lodge gives us a James whose primary involvement is with his tribulations as a writer, the rest of life a little muffled and distant.

Lodge is somehow both easy-going and meticulous in his attention to detail. *Author, Author* is a comforting and comfortable narrative that doesn't neglect the daily solaces—coffee and pastry, starched sheets, benches to rest on during walks—that the Master himself often enough neglects to bestow upon his own characters, if these things aren't required as reverie-triggering props. The novel is a benevolent tribute to a writer who proved of unimpeachable integrity even when he believed he would manage—with appropriate financial recompense—to impeach it. Lodge ends the book with the heartfelt wish that he could reassure James that, contrary to what he feared, he would not be forgotten but would become an "established classic, essential reading for anyone interested in modern English and American literature" (375), though it's frankly doubtful that this or any other of the novels about James is likely to send readers hurrying back to the Master's own oeuvre.

Michiel Heyns's *The Typewriter's Tale* provides an interesting counterpoint to Lodge's novel. Told from the point of view of a fictionalized version of Theodora Bosanquet, Frieda Wroth (she's the "typewriter" of the title), the novel revolves around James's friend (and Edith Wharton's lover) Morton Fullerton's request to Frieda to steal back his own letters from Lamb House and makes that event a trigger for the 1909 conflagration. Fullerton casually seduces Frieda, and her experience of being invisible to James while literally being dictated to by him points up the split in James's psyche (it may be) between the sympathy afforded plights imagined and plights endured beneath his nose. Frieda thinks that it was "characteristic of him . . . that he should lose himself in *analyzing the structure* of a story of a *young woman affronting her destiny* and disregard the daily presence of just such a young woman in his own house" (76).

It's a tribute to Heyns's rendering that, if one doesn't recognize them, one can't always be sure which are actual excerpts from James's pen and which imitations. As Frieda types, we see what it might have felt like to wait with bated breath for James to maneuver his way out of the labyrinth of one of his sentences:

*"The point is, however that . . . that this single small . . . corner-stone, hyphenated, comma, the conception of a certain young . . ."*

Person? Girl?

*". . . woman affronting her . . ."*

Past? Future? Fortune? Family?

*". . . destiny . . ."* (397–403)



This ingenious device submits both the character and the reader to James's prose. In a sustained bravura performance, the entire novel is written in Jamesian syntax and vocabulary. Although Bosanquet herself left only the most respectful and affectionate record of her many years' experience typing for James, the portrait of Frieda Wroth is a convincing one since her character stands in for all readers worshipfully entangled in the Master's prose who yet wish they could be sure that, beyond or beneath or behind the brilliant discernment, he's nonetheless thinking about *us*.

Have the foregoing synopses brought us any closer to figuring out why this fictional grappling with James has occurred at the turn of the twenty-first century? Do those of us who've written about James take advantage of the lacunae in his biography to project our personal and writerly concerns onto him? Or will a critic, examining the phenomenon a hundred years from now, be able to draw clear parallels between it and the circumstances of our time?

In one way or another, all of the novels focus on the single biographical circumstance in James's life that has given rise to the most speculation: his apparent lifelong celibacy. And certainly ours is, finally, an era in which a compassionate portrait of James's sexual uncertainty can be painted. The novels all come down on the side of "longed to, but couldn't." None goes as far as Sheldon Novick, who in *The Young Master* asserts that James did in fact have sex, with Oliver Wendell Holmes, for one; that he "underwent the ordinary experiences of life . . . [;] that he fell in love with the wrong people[; and] that his first sexual encounters were intense but not entirely happy" (xii). Novick argues that "[i]t has seemed most reasonable to assume that when he seemed to be having a love affair, he was; that when he seemed to be expressing an idea, he was consciously doing so." Novick makes a reasonable case, though his "it has seemed most reasonable to assume" has all the slipperiness of James's own refusals to be pinned down. The problem is, just when you are convinced that James could never, ever have done such a thing so blatant, so incontrovertible, so *uncontrolled*, as to have sex, you remember, say, all the puns in "The Figure in the Carpet": "What I contend that nobody has ever mentioned in my work is the organ of life . . ."; "I see—it's some idea about life, some sort of philosophy . . . Perhaps it's a preference for the letter P!"; "Remembering moreover how indispensable he was to Lady Jane . . ." (CT 284, 285). Once you get the joke—"organ," "P\_\_\_\_," "Lady Jane" (the figure in James's carpet is usually sexual)—you have to believe James knew exactly what he was up to and is making the reader into one of his obvious-missing dupes. Take the flagrant language of his correspondence with Hendrik Andersen ("I draw you close and hold you long & am ever so tenderly yours" [BB 70]): you think "Of course," but then, "Really?" and yet farther along, "It's simply metaphorical embellishment in the safety of correspondence."

The problem is that, as soon as you congratulate yourself on having got to the bottom—er, heart—of things, you realize that even if you're right, you know only *one* thing he was up to, and the risk is that afterwards that's all you'll see. James knew perfectly well that when sex is in the air some people will do everything they can not to notice, while others see it to the exclusion of everything else. Located in the gap between the two understandings are many of James's deftest narratives. It's easy to find ourselves caught in a trap of our own making, our own obsession with believing there's an answer. If we've read James, we ought to know better. (Shouldn't we?)

If he taught us nothing else (it seems), James has made clear the danger of thinking in a “literal vulgar way” (*TS* 3), as the fictional preface to “The Turn of the Screw” advises its auditors against doing. (But was this a red herring?) There’s warning as well as reluctance in James’s characteristic splitting the verb off from its object with “as it were.” (Is there not?) Aware of the slippage called *différance* decades before Derrida was a gleam in his parents’ eyes, James was a postmodernist before modernism even happened. (There’s a definitive statement.) Could it be that he suggests that sex, the event of the greatest slippage of all, is, despite all our talk and carpet-figuring, the subject we actually most avoid deconstructing?—thus a realm still needing protection from over-obvious definition, so that the seeming ninnies, like the Strethers and the Ververs, are the unwitting heroes in James’s universe, the resisters of the too facile, too hidebound point of view?

James’s evasions and circumspections were never simple, never attributable to a single cause, but one of them was certainly an inveterate horror of definition itself, in particular of how one’s family, culture, nation—other *people*—continually press one into versions useful to themselves. The ambiguous endings of so many of James’s novels and stories that disappoint so many readers enact this refusal to be defined, and when things *don’t* end this way (as in “The Jolly Corner”) it isn’t convincing.

James himself was notoriously reluctant to say a simple thing. His friend E. F. Benson tells a wonderful story about James’s fumbling efforts to describe a black dog. “He could not bring himself to say ‘black dog,’ for that would have been a scarcely decent *déshabillé* for his information. ‘And from the dusky entry,’ he said, ‘there emerged something black, something canine’” (*IR* 90–91). James said to Virginia Woolf, “My dear Virginia, they tell me—they tell me—that you—as indeed being your father’s daughter nay your grandfather’s grandchild—the descendant I may say of a century—of a century—of quill pens and ink—ink—ink pots, yes, yes, yes, they tell me—ahm m m—that you, that you, that you *write* in short” (133). Another friend, Sydney Waterlow, remembered that James was “beset by . . . the enormous difficulty of getting inside the skin of life’s complexities, the responsibility for rejecting every external solution” (*IR* 52). It’s thus ironic that in all the James novels, the character Henry James is made to *say* things, to think and speak the sorts of statements that neither he nor his own characters would stoop to, made to achieve the narrative pinnacle of outburst that novel readers eagerly await. In *The Master*, standing before Woolson’s grave in the Protestant cemetery in Rome, James whispers, “I have come as close as I could, as near as I dared” (257). In *Author, Author*, James thinks, “Something fastidious in him recoiled from any thought of intimate sexual contact involving nakedness, the groping and interlocking of private parts, and the spending of seed” (172). In *Felony*, he concludes that both “a common burglar, a man so greedy for the papers once ruffled by the breath of genius that he will court an old maid and ransack a private chamber—and the author of his unfortunate character, are one and the same man, guilty in the eyes of all good and charitable beings in this world” (68–69). In *Sweet Water* he writes in a letter, “The longing to cast myself down in your verdant valley, to close my eyes in the dappled sunlight . . . comes upon me at many odd moments. Your lush and yet as it were upright Hollow is not the world” (40). In *Henry James’s Midnight Song*, after Woolson lays a hand on his and tells him she’d like him to stay with her, James thinks “how utterly it revolted him, imperiled

him to see that need, so naked upon her face. He heard his own sharp contemptuous voice, ‘Oh I couldn’t possibly, really. Let us go . . .’” (246).

Why are we doing this? Giving a voice to Henry James that he never gave to himself? It certainly brings us no nearer to knowing what we don’t know—if anything, leaves us more in doubt than we were in the first place. As we’ve seen, James’s manner of speech was so unusual, so ponderous and yet mischievous, so preoccupied and interior and yet performed, that no one could really capture it on the page, even James himself. And what *could* satisfy us? What information could ever lay to rest our wonderings? Suppose a letter *were* discovered in which James wrote, “My dearest Wendell, never shall I forget the moment in North Conway when your hand closed upon my penis. In flagrante delicto, Henry.” Would we delvers after his secret heart put down our spades with a sigh of contentment?

I doubt it. Trained by the Master, would we not ask, Is “penis” a metaphor? What does he really mean by “closed upon”? We *are* caught fast in the trap he didn’t in fact need to set for us—time took care of it—and we know we’re caught. It’s the trap of believing there’s no incontrovertible meaning and yet struggling nonetheless to lay hold of exactly this. It’s one thing cheerfully to assert that there’s no fixed correspondence between the word and the thing, another when, as it now appears, our politicians adopt this as a maxim.

In Anglo-America these days, we live in an era of unprecedented lying—lying that lies with impunity, presented bold-faced as truth, truth made by whoever has the power to make it. James knew all about this. He simply got it before the rest of us. Our recognition has seemed to translate into the longing for an acknowledgment from him that not only did he *know* this but knew where he himself stood in the midst of it. A fixed point after all. Pleading Jobs, we want him to say something, just *say* something. If only the master of shading and ambiguity could reassure us, in the words of a near-contemporary of his, that despite everything, despite the lies that strangle us, there’s nevertheless some *there* there. In our flailing to free ourselves from our imprisonment by the makers of non-meaning, we’ll try anything, including putting words into the mouth of the Master. Our hunger for the unvarnished truth intensifies at the same time and at the same rate that we doubt the possibility of finding it. Though it may seem paradoxical, this draws us at this time towards James’s masterful ambiguities. Trapped as we are in an era of planet-threatening over-simplification, it’s to James’s refusal to simplify that we ultimately turn for solace. Reading James makes clear the distinction between real, rich ambiguity and obfuscation. The curiosity about his private life, though the more apparent source of resurgent interest in him, is really symptomatic of an anxiety about the authenticity of our own.

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