

A Powerful Writer: Henry James – Himself a Character in Author, Author - David Lodge and Felony - Emma Tennant

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Abstract

The present paper is an attempt to analyze Henry James as a character in the works of David Lodge – Author, author(2004) and Emma Tennant – Felony (2002). The two postmodernist writers wanted to revive the memory of the modernist H. James by focusing on two important events in his life: Author, author – the failure of the drama Guy Domville in January 1885, which represented for James the starting point of "the most awful four weeks of my life" (the period when Guy Domville was played on the stage) and Felony – a novel about the creation of The Aspern Papers, a framed story (or a story within a story).

Key words

character, Henry James, modernism, postmodernism, reality, fiction, biography, techniques

It is a mystery the fact that Henry James, an author who practically was prolific all his existence and who had very little time left for personal life, became a character in the novels of Emma Tennant, Alan Hollinghurst, Gore Vidal, Colm Tóibín, David Lodge, Michiel Heyns, John Aiken. Why have so many writers created a character that has the name "Henry James"? As Peter Kemp stated in the review of *Author, author*, "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" (Kemp *The Sunday Times* of August 29, 2004:np). Let us keep in mind the fact that Henry James was not only a modernist writer, but also a critic of his own work and he revolutionized literature by the introduction of terms like *reflector*, *ficelle* (*informer*).

We believe that James's followers felt the need to integrate in their own literary products not only obvious details taken from his biography, but also they tried to imitate his narrative style, they created a story within the story (see *Felony*, based on the story of writing James's *The Aspern Papers*), they noticed "Henry James – the character" in connection to America's early history (see *Empire*, a drama which

is extremely vivid and documented, dealing with issues that would make other novelists reluctant to confront with). Moreover, it is required a great deal of empathy to enter the mind of “the master of consciousness. Our intention is to create the portrait of Henry James seen in two literary works, David Lodge’s *Author, author* and Emma Tennant’s *Felony*, comparing and contrasting the two images.

As far as *Author, author* is concerned, despite Lodge’s efforts to create a biographical novel, we have perceived it as considerably lacking in consistency compared to his previous writings. We could not agree more with Sophie Harrison who stated in *New York Times* on October 10, 2004 that “It takes a lot of audacity to reanimate a dead author – or so the evidence of David Lodge’s new novel about Henry James would suggest.” In fact, the narrative thread starts with the moment of James’s waiting for his death that was to come in 1916, all the events in the book are nothing but analepsis.

To begin with, the period that is depicted in Lodge’s novel, 1880-1890 is the time when James’s muse seemed to hide, the writer was trying to refind his inspiration by having an active social life, especially in the winter of 1878, when he dined out 107 times. In search for his lost tranquility through writing, James had a period of shadow, underlined by Lodge’s words “By the end of the 1880s, Henry had become increasingly anxious about the progress of his career as a novelist – or rather, about its lack of progress.” (Lodge *Author...* 2005:94) In order to bring authenticity to the novel, Lodge integrates even the words of James from a letter to his American friend William Dean Howells, dated 1888: “I have entered upon evil days – but this is for your most private ears”. (Lodge 2005:95) Lodge considered failure with *Guy Domville* the perfect starting point for bringing back to life the image of Henry James.

Lodge tried to cast light on the human side of James, by exploiting his jealousy: in the mentioned period, James launched the play *Guy Domville* in January 1895, exactly in the same night with Oscar Wilde’s new play, *An Ideal Husband*. Unfortunately for James, Guy du Maurier with *Trilby* and Constance Fenimore Woolson with *Anne* were successful. The comment of Lodge comes promptly: “But it was even more mortifying when one’s literary friends had an undeserved success.” (Lodge 2005:97)

From our point of view, it is not enough to “exploit” a difficult time in the life of a gifted and prolific writer as James was in order to have a successful book. For a number of reasons, we consider *Author, author* a disappointing novel:

- Although James is monitored while having long walks with his friend Du Maurier or travelling from one place to another, the major fault of Lodge is that he does not succeed in entering the consciousness of “the grand master of consciousness”(Harrison 2004:np). Consequently, what this book lacks is a representation of inner life.

- Furthermore, we cannot say that Lodge’s work is a trust-worthy biography, for it is a mixture of biography and fiction, which, in our humble opinion, is not very well coagulated, giving the impression of gratuity. In the *Author’s Note*, Lodge underlined:

“...Nearly everything that happens in this story is based on factual sources. With one significant exception, all the named characters were real people. Quotations from their books, plays, articles, letters, journals etc. are their own words. But I have used a novelist’s license in representing what characters thoughts, felt and said to each other”(Lodge *Author...*2005:np)

- Lodge himself doubted the quality of his work and even stated it. He did not trust his own writing in this specific case and he was right to do so, his attitude may be considered one of humble asking for apologies from the readers.

- *Author, author* is not challenging enough for the readers, David Lodge unfortunately put all his cards upwards on the table.

- The references to James’s vision on sexuality are too explicit.

In the article *Ce este un autor?*, Codrin Liviu Cuțitaru referred to *Author, author* as “o radiografie a gestului de creație și a faptului de a fi autor. O radiografie “în clar” a angoasei, incertitudinii și labilității din umbra fiecărui destin estetic”.¹ We consider that his opinion is totally justified and a fragment from Lodge which best illustrates this idea is represented by James’s words: ”(Depression) it’s the occupational disease of artists. We’re always striving to imagine and think what has not been thought before, and so always risking defeat and disappointment.” (Lodge 2005:69)

Reading *Author, author*, we realized that there is a bitter irony which prevails in this work, intensified by the tensions, the trials and... the unavoidable failures of one’s life.If we are to establish the meaning of the title, Lodge wanted to refer to

¹ “a radiography of the gesture of creation and of being an author. A “clear” radiography of anxiety, uncertainty and lability which are in the backstage of every aesthetic destiny” (Cuțitaru, Codrin Liviu, 2006: np, translation mine)

that moment in Henry James's life when he was booed at the première of his controversial play *Guy Domville* on January 5, 1895. Cornelia Bucur found an inspired translation for *Author, author*, the Romanian equivalent is *Autorul, la rampă!*, referring to the habit of the spectators from London theatres to ask for the author's presence on this stage. This habit has been perpetuated since Elizabethan times to nowadays.

Being himself a writer, Lodge is familiarised with the intimate practicalities of being an author, the sensitivities, aspirations and despairs; we believe that the James created by Lodge is, to a certain extent, the representation of Lodge's inner movements as far as artistic turmoil is concerned. For him, James is a stoical, honourable hero of the literary imagination, even of consciousness. *Author, author* could be seen as an inspiring record of an existence devoted to an ideal – that of the novel as art.

The core of this novel is the admirable friendship and human edge of rivalry between James and George Du Maurier, Punch cartoonist and late in life also a novelist – whereby hangs the tale. Du Maurier offered James, whose career was in desperate need of success, an anecdote about an ordinary girl who, under the power of a Jewish mesmerist, can sing divinely. James hesitated, and generously encouraged his friend to try it himself. Du Maurier did – writing *Trilby* (1894) – which, just as James's five years of theatrical attempts were turning to ashes, became the subject of a craze, the biggest "best seller" to that date. The very Jamesian twist of Lodge's treatment is that the wild success of *Trilby* bears no rational relation to its quality. Hitting the literary jackpot more or less kills Du Maurier, who derives less joy from it than anguish, while it gives James a "pang" of inevitable human jealousy.

Author, Author is a good, but not extraordinary expression of affection for a great writer who was also a great human being. In its low-key way it is also, following James's example, an experimental novel.

On the other hand, Emma Tennant's *Felony* is a remarkable literary achievement. Emma Tennant is known as a Scottish writer, "her work is feminist, magical and wicked, and she uses the fantastic and the Gothic to interpret and explore everyday women's roles" (Wisker *Emma Tennant. The Literary Encyclopedia* 2001:np). According to *Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory*, magic realism is defined as: "a genre of contemporary fiction in which a limited number of fantastic elements appear within a preponderantly realistic narrative." (Herman 2005:282)

Being first published in Great Britain in 2002 by Jonathan Cape, *Felony* refers to the idea that generated *The Aspern Papers*, James's novella. This book contains *Dramatis Personae* explaining relationships among characters, for every chapter of her novel is written from the perspective of a specific person. In fact, there are two narrative plans involved: the story of the papers of Shelley belonging to Claire Clairmont, being told by Georgina in Florence in 1876 and the narrative thread of Henry James and Constance Fenimore Woolson, in Venice, in 1887. We may call this novel "a zigzag" one, for the structure is an alternation of the two stories mentioned above.

In the *Author's Note*, Emma Tennant underlines the proportion of reality vs. fiction in her novel, stating that: "Dates and details in this story of what really went on in Claire Clairmont's household in Florence in the 1870s are as accurate as possible." (Tennant 2003:IX) Tennant admits that "the sole invention is the visit of Edward Trelawny to Claire in Florence: he had written to her frequently there, stating that he would have persuaded her to banish the phantasy that her child Allegra still lived."

Offering a personal exploration of social and family matters, Emma Tennant proves to be a fine observer and analyst of human kind, her novels reflect the preoccupation for "inner movements", this feature can be considered a strong point held in common by Henry James and Emma Tennant. Other common elements for the two writers are the usage of references to arts: "Zeus, Hera and Leda, all represented on the great ceiling frescoes above the net, look down more dimly in the fading brightness of the God of Modern Literature." (Tennant 2003:6) and the introduction of expressions in French: "But the price was marriage to the niece. '*Il court encore*,' Lee Hamilton had laughed." (Tennant 2003:8) This aspect is also noticed by David Lodge and it explains the presence of French words in James's work, as "a verbal condiment": "One undeniable benefit of his father's eccentric plan of education for his two eldest sons (...) was that Henry had learned to speak French fluently and correctly, and was frequently complimented by the natives on this accomplishment." (Lodge *Author...*2005:53)

We particularly enjoyed the intriguing analysis of Toby Litt regarding the architectonic layers of *Felony*, for it was well-structured, it had both fond and form and the beginning was particularly catching:

"I don't know what Henry James ever did to Emma Tennant, but it must have been something pretty awful. Awful enough to have her take revenge upon him by making him the villain of her latest novel, *Felony: The Private History of The Aspern Papers*.

In fact, Tennant is acting –or so it may seem – on behalf of a woman scorned: Constance Fenimore Woolson, popular novelist, great-niece of the author of *Last of the Mohicans* and Henry James's most intimate female friend." (Litt *Aspern Capers*:np)

In fact, there are two centres of interest in *Felony*: firstly, the story of Claire Clairemont, the stepsister of Mary Shelley whose love affair with Byron resulted into a daughter, Allegra, who had the misfortune of dying when she was five in a convent in Tuscany; secondly, the possibility that was probably only in Fenimore's head, that of marrying Henry James; when he was asked about their relationship, James simply replied "Miss Woolson is a good friend" and that is all she is to stay, despite her dreams of "sporting a diamond solitaire on the fourth finger of her left hand and the gentleman announcing this had been his mother's engagement ring". The special relationship that the two share is one of the pillars of Tennant's narrative structure: they are simple friends who share a passion for literature, they discuss upon different literary topics, they are both writers, they occasionally visit the same place, at a certain time, they were simply neighbours, sharing the same house-Fenimore lived upstairs. Their relationship is underlined by Tennant as a cast one: "Fenimore did not and never will cohabit with the Master." (Tennant 2003:14) On the same topic, Lodge focused his creation, writing that "Nothing amorous or improper happened on this and similar occasions. Their relationship was one of platonic companionship and informed conversation about subjects of common interest." (Lodge 2005:73)

At the beginning of the novel, James is in Venice, preparing his nouvelle *The Aspern Papers*. Appealing to a deconstructivist approach, Tennant reveals how the idea of writing this novel firstly appeared: picking his topics from everyday world and getting the idea of the novel based on a piece of gossip, from Lyndall Gordon's *A Private Life of Henry James*. Silsbee, a sea-captain from Boston, obsessed with Shelley, had discovered that Claire Clairmont, Shelley's sister in law and one-time mistress of Byron, was still living in... Florence. Silsbee offered himself as a lodger, to gain access to a house where, he was sure, Shelley's papers were secreted. When, at length, Miss Clairmont died in 1879, the papers came into the possession of a great-niece who lived with her and whose confidence Silsbee had contrived to gain. The climax came when the niece (an 'old maid of 50') proposed to the lodger as a condition for handing over the papers. The man fled." (Gordon *A Private...*1998:21)

The James created by Tennant is a character dominated by worries, his major concern is that, when he publishes his version of *The Aspern Papers*, Fenimore will

read it autobiographically, recognizing the character of the desperate old maid as being based upon herself (which it will be). In a very Jamesian move, Tennant treats the doomed non-romance of James and Fenimore as an elaborate framing device. The story within the story is that of Claire Clairmont, her niece Paula Hanghegyi and, most of all, of Paula's daughter Georgina. With another witty nod, Tennant makes the 13-year-old girl the narrator of this strand of the novel. When writing about James, Tennant uses a pastiche, or perhaps a parody, of James's own elaborate middle style; when writing through Georgina, she seems unable to forget the very adult sub-clauses and elegant variations of that same style – and so the voice is not always convincing. In a novel of so many deceits and parallels, this may be deliberate: of all the felons in *Felony*, Georgina is far from being the most innocent.

Tennant has been rewriting literary histories for a long time. The most powerfully subversive female figure who might play a part in the novel, Mary Shelley, is kept firmly to the margins. Constance Fenimore Woolson, despite Tennant's best efforts (having her run suicidally around Lake Geneva during a thunderstorm, distraught at having read *The Aspern Papers*), never becomes more than a figure of slightly ridiculous middle-aged pathos. All in all, *Felony* could be read as an entertaining and supersubtle post-feminist rewriting of feminist rewritings. Compared to *Author, author*, *Felony* is undoubtedly better, for the writer integrates in the chapters seen from Henry James's eyes elements which are specific to James's writing, the structure of the novel is more elaborate, being like a spiral which has two threads which intertwine, it has mystery and it is challenging for the reader, it does not contain the too-explicit fragments referring to sexuality that Lodge's work offers generously.

In a nutshell, we believe that the use of Henry James as a character is due to the fact that his work had a major impact. The followers felt the need to "revive" his memory by bringing him back to life through their literary products. Moreover, they focused on his difficult moments and, based on facts, intuition and context, they underlined certain features of James's personality that they had considered relevant for the depicted situation.

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