Seeing a Life Through Biography, Letters, and Fiction

FILM DIRECTORS, opera composers, playwrights, and choreographers have long been drawn to adapting Henry James's fiction. In recent decades, fiction writers from Carlos Fuentes to Joyce Carol Oates to Hilary Bailey to Alan Hollinghurst have reset such stories of James's as The Aspern Papers, The Turn of the Screw, and "The Pupil." But this year, Colm Tóibín, in The Master, and David Lodge, in Author, Author, have both taken the unusual step of making Henry James the central character in full-length psychological novels. Partly because of the coincidence of these two authors' working simultaneously on similar projects, but also because of the renown of Lodge, Tóibín, and James, The Master and Author, Author have received considerable attention.

These two novels add themselves to the many biographies (by Leon Edel, Howard M. Feinstein, Lyndall Gordon, Alfred Habegger, Fred Kaplan, R.W.B. Lewis, Jane Maher, Sheldon M. Novick, Linda Simon, and Jean Strouse) that suggest by their very number how compelling James and his immediate family are as narrative subjects.

One could speculate about why the Jameses are a rewarding subject both for biographies and for fictional adaptation. At first, that did not seem to be the case; Edel, author of a five-volume biography of Henry James, once wondered if there would be enough to say about James, since not much happened during his life: James never married, had no lovers that anyone knew of, and did not do much but write and take a few holidays.

Or so it seemed. It turns out that both James's personality and the psychological dynamics of his family are rewarding subjects of investigation. Edel decided to explore the psychology of the James family and its impact on James; subsequent biographers have represented the Jameses similarly.

Henry James had to live with being the younger brother of William James, one of the greatest American philosophers, a founding figure in the history of psychology in the United States, and by all accounts a powerful personality; central to Edel's portrayal of Henry James was a lifelong Oedipal struggle with his older brother.

Henry James Sr. was a powerful personality, too. A loving father, charismatic and eccentric, he had a strong impact on his five children. That impact is central to biographical work on the Jameses, especially Habegger's. William, Henry, and Alice James all suffered psychological breakdowns at various stages of their adult lives. Bob became an alcoholic, and Wilkie died at the relatively young age of 38; both were abject business failures. These were among the costs of being members of the James family. It is perhaps because the Jameses' story is so interesting as a psychological drama that Lodge and Tóibín have turned to James as a subject for precisely the kind of psychological novel he pioneered.

Edel began to work on his biography in the 1940s and 1950s. He presented James as he did in part because he could not treat James's emotional and sexual life as openly as a biographer would today. For Edel and others in the middle of the 20th century, James's bachelorhood had to appear the result of a life devoted to the writer's art. As a result, James appeared a celibate, ascetic, and stereotypical modernist artist who had transcended the mundane material and commercial world and was above the fray of politics and ordinary life.

Kaplan's and Novick's recent biographies treated James's relationships with men more openly than Edel's early volumes could, and what grows out of their accounts is a poignant picture of a lonely yet passionate man living at a time when the aging bachelor was much more socially acceptable than being openly--or secretly --homosexual.

Other scholarship of the last two decades has shown in a number of ways that James was not the cliché celibate, art-for-art's-sake ascetic. Studies have shown that as a writer he was as diligent about the business of the publishing marketplace as he was about his writing. He has been shown to have engaged, both in his published writing and in his personal life, the political and cultural issues of his day. And while he zealously guarded his privacy, he was also an ardent socializer. In addition to his possible sexual life, a very different sort of James has emerged in the last 20 years: a complicated man with many contradictory impulses to his personality.

AS ONE LOOKS at the great quantity of biographies, published selections of letters, and other scholarship on James that has appeared since his death in 1916, it is clear that there is much to debate, much that is open to interpretation. That is partly because of the nature of James's personality. It is also the result of the state of the documentary evidence. The James family papers at Harvard consist of as many as 25,000 separate items. In all, 10,439 extant letters by Henry James have been identified. Four thousand of these are at Harvard; 1,000 are at Yale. The remainder are scattered among 130 different repositories in six different countries in Europe and North America. About 3,000 of James's letters have to date been published in 200 different books or articles (many out of print). As a result, the conditions under which scholars could conduct archival research on James--necessitating considerable travel and a sizable photo-duplication budget--are less than ideal, and the published record is far from complete and far from representative.

These conditions are what prompted Greg W. Zacharias and me to begin editing The Complete Letters of Henry James, the first volume of which is scheduled for publication by the University of Nebraska Press in the fall of 2005. Through our
work—we are transcribing from scratch, proofreading, and annotating every single letter—we have gotten to know well James's personality as it presents itself in his letters.

During James's adult life almost all of his next of kin and many of his closest friends lived on the other side of the Atlantic Ocean, and as a result, he wrote at length, in detail, and regularly to a great number of his intimates, and many of those letters survive. The surviving letters are not, in a true sense, complete: Most of the other half of the correspondence—the letters to James—as well as many, perhaps thousands, of James's own letters have been lost. But the extant letters provide by far the most complete—and without a doubt, the most fascinating—account of James's personality. As James himself said in 1913 about the letters of his brother William: "He was so admirable a letter-writer that they will constitute his real and best biography."

The old portrayal of a James devoted to his art to the exclusion of other concerns is partly understandable when one considers that the early editors of published selections of James's letters, faced with so massive an epistolary corpus, focused on editing those letters that had a direct bearing upon his novels and stories. But the letters in which James writes in detail about his compositions are relatively few, and especially in his early letters, when he does mention his fiction it is with considerable modesty.

James's personal letters are the most interesting of all, for it is there that James most reveals various aspects of his multifaceted personality. In 1872 James chaperoned his sister, Alice, on a trip to Europe, and the letters from this period express a mixture of anxiety about Alice's precarious psychological health and assurance that his parents need not worry, for he can handle things. Letters home from the winter of 1873-74 reveal the same delicate treading on the subject of a sibling's—this time, William's—precarious psychological health.

And yet, for all his apparent but not entirely confident assurance in these letters that William and Alice have never been better, James's account of his own physical and emotional health both at this time and during his 1869-70 trip to Europe is a sorry, detailed record of anguished appeals for pity and, at the same time, an attempt to cheer up both himself and his family at home (the latter motivated, no doubt, at least in part by his fear of being summoned back).

In the fall of 1869, while in Florence and Rome, he suffered a debilitating case of constipation, and his letters from this time give a detailed account of his symptoms and treatment, his activities, and his speculations about his prognosis. Of his diet he reported that since "meat is more nourishing & less crowding than other things," he breakfasts "on a beefsteak" and "chocolate made with water." (On the subject of food and drink, in a later letter he exuberantly tells his family: "If Alice [or any of you] wants a good tonic beverage for warm weather I recommend: vermouth, quinine and seltzer! It's delightful & I drink it regularly. Much vermouth & little quinine, of course.") When a few weeks later his symptoms cleared up thanks to a mixture of aloe and sulfuric acid a doctor had prescribed, James triumphantly dashed off a note to William (then just completing medical school) giving him the exact prescription.

Because James lived so long abroad, his letters frequently give and demand news of friends both near and far. As a result, his correspondence is full of gossip and conflicting statements about mutual acquaintances. For instance, when he first reports meeting Sarah Butler Wister, who along with her mother, actress Fanny Kemble, and son, novelist Owen Wister, would become lifelong friends and correspondents, he turns downright nasty: "Mrs. Wister," he tells his mother, "is a 'superior' woman, but a beautiful Bore. Tell it not in Philadelphia—where I don't believe they know it." A few weeks later he writes to an old friend: "I have seen almost more of [Mrs. Wister] than of any one; & yet her beautiful hair is the thing most to be praised about her. It's on the whole the handsomest I've ever seen." But a few months after he would write to his father that: "I used some brutal phrase about her in one of my early letters, which I hope you never repeated. I immediately retracted it & have regretted it ever since. She is a fine person—not 'easy', but perfectly natural." James and Mrs. Wister kept up a correspondence until her death in 1907, and he visited her Philadelphia home in 1875, 1882, and 1905.

Edith Wharton was another friend about whom James expressed a range of sentiments. They became good friends during the last decade of James's life, often visiting each other's homes; once he stayed in her Paris apartment for 10 weeks (he had originally planned, he wrote in one letter, on two or three). Wharton struck James as a vigorous, decisive, but restless person (in one letter he called her "remuante"; in another she is a "whirling Princess"). When the summer heat was too much for James during his late June 1905 visit to her Lenox, Mass., home, she suggested that he move his planned return date for England ahead and sail from Boston in two days.

According to Wharton's autobiography, James was so astonished at the notion of being packed off across the Atlantic at such short notice that he could only murmur in disbelief: "Good God, what a woman—what a woman! Her imagination boggles at nothing! She does not even scruple to project me in a naked flight across the Atlantic." Small wonder that in letters he called her "the Angel of Devastation" and "the wondrous firebird," "an amiable & imperative friend," "a great & graceful lioness"; "She's prodigious." And yet James also called her "the most gracious of ladies & kindest of friends & most accomplished ... of women."
IN SPITE of his disdain for the kind of publicity associated with the rise of mass-market journalism (a disdain he expressed in a number of fictional and nonfictional publications), James was an inveterate gossip, as these epistolary comments about Sarah Wister and Edith Wharton suggest. When Wharton's marriage fell apart, James explained in a letter to a mutual friend that her husband was not simply suffering from "melancholia" but from "quasi-demented excess"; then, in a gesture that reveals a fear of being caught indulging in gossip, James scrawled and double-underlined for emphasis the following plea: "don't know this from me, please."

His letters also show that James was kind and generous. In 1897 he wrote to his 4-year-old cousin, George Grenville Hunter, to thank him for sending a picture he had drawn of a boat race. Referring to a forthcoming visit to the Hunters, James concluded the letter by saying: "Look out of the window at me when I come, for I am very shy when I pay a visit, & it makes me happy to think there may be a very brave little boy to take me by the hand. Wait till I come." Having heard that his 17-year-old nephew, Aleck (William's youngest son), felt homesick after his parents left him in Oxford, James dashed off a consoling letter urging Aleck to "think of your affectionate old uncle not at all far off & who is ready to fly to you at any real trouble; write to him, on receipt of this, telling him just how you feel & how things roundabout you look." If James's gossiping letters could be sharp, the tart tongue was but one side of the personality James expressed in his letters; the "affectionate old uncle" was another.

No short list of examples from James's letters can thoroughly portray the many sides of James's personality, nor can a single volume (or even five volumes, in the case of Edel's biography)—be it a biography, a selection of letters, or a historical novel. The James portrayed in Tóibín's The Master and Lodge's Author, Author, their afterwords acknowledge, was researched in a number of biographies and selections of published letters. As a result, their fictional portrayals of James are accurate in many respects and are engaging introductions to some of the key elements of James's life, especially of James's failed effort to become a successful playwright.

But as fully fleshed out portraits of James's personality, they fall short. Taking a cue from Edel, both novelists portray a tense relationship between William and Henry, not the deeper and more affectionate—though nevertheless strained at times (as what brothers' relationships aren't?)—relationship revealed in their surviving correspondence of 737 letters (all published in the first three volumes of The Correspondence of William James).

Throughout Tóibín's The Master, James is mute during encounters, allowing his interlocutors to do all the talking; he is utterly incapable of a bon mot—quite unlike the historical James. At social gatherings James becomes bored and sneaks out early; when he receives house guests he yearns for their departure so he can enjoy peace and quiet again. No doubt there was something of that in the James who carefully guarded his privacy. But James also loved to socialize, and on the subject of loneliness he once revealed that: "The port from which I set out was, I think, that of the essential loneliness of my life—and it seems to be the port also, in sooth to which my course again finally directs itself! This loneliness, (since I mention it!)—what is it still but the deepest thing about one? Deeper about me, at any rate, than anything else: deeper than my 'genius,' deeper than my 'discipline,' deeper than my pride, deeper, above all, than the deep countermanning of art."

Like much of what James wrote, that passage is open to interpretation, but the word James emphasizes the most in it is "loneliness," not solitude. Tóibín's James, who keeps wanting to be left alone, craves solitude, but the James who wrote on Monday, March 28, 1864, to his absent friend, Thomas Sergeant Perry, upon learning of the latter's imminent return—"Today I ... got your 3d letter!!! Oh beloved Friend! oh joyous tidings! oh magnanimous youth! Halleluia! oh laggard time! Come! Come! Come to your H J."

In Lodge's Author, Author, James is a more engaging and engaged personality. He is witty and devoted to his friends and relatives, and there is something of the mystery and complex self-contradictoriness that makes the historical James a compelling and challenging subject for research and narrative treatment.

For instance, Lodge includes the scene in which James, the victim of a stroke and on his deathbed, learns that he has been awarded the British Empire's Order of Merit: Apparently only half-conscious, James seems not to react to the news of the award; but as his well-wishers leave his sick room, James quietly asks the last person to "Turn out the light ... and spare my blushes." He has, in fact, heard everything. A simpler man, especially in a novel that focuses as much as Author, Author does on James's sense of failure, would have reacted with obvious joy, but a man like James would have reacted in so subtle a manner.

Tóibín's The Master is far better, however, at portraying James's sexual life—or lack of it—in a way consistent with the conflicted personality one encounters in his letters. The Master portrays a man who is unable to recognize, and therefore to act upon, what he wants sexually, the point being to show that that kind of frustration is one of the emotional costs of being gay in late-Victorian England. Tóibín (but not Lodge), therefore, depicts the scene in the summer of 1865 when James and Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr. shared a hotel room that we know from James's correspondence had only one bed, but he declines to make clear whether the encounter in fact became sexual. Sheldon Novick's biography of James argued strenuously—but not conclusively—that this was the occasion of James's sexual initiation, but Tóibín's open-ended treatment of the scene corresponds to the actual state of the scholarship today on the question of James's sex life: that
while James almost certainly had inclinations for other men, there is no hard evidence of the extent—if any—to which he ever acted upon them.

The very first paragraph of Author, Author tells us unequivocally, however, that James "never experienced sexual intercourse, that was by his own choice." That choice is consistent with the emphasis of Lodge's novel on what it calls James's "celibate dedication to the vocation of authorship." In other words, Author presents the tired old cliché of the celibate, ascetic James. That is why it omits another scene that The Master includes: According to Edmund Gosse, James's longtime friend, James once told of having stood forlornly on a "misty street, watching, watching for the lighting of a lamp in the window on the third storey" of the building opposite. "And the lamp blazed out, and through bursting tears he strained to see what was behind it, the unapproachable face. And for hours he stood there, wet with rain, ... and never from behind the lamp for one moment was visible the face."

Like much associated with James, that passage is open to interpretation: We know nothing of the circumstances to which it refers (Tóibín places the scene in 1876, outside the Paris apartment of Paul Zhukovsky, one of the lovers Novick's biography posits for James). Like Gosse, Hugh Walpole recalled James "telling me how he had once in his youth in a foreign town watched a whole night in pouring rain for a figure at a window." One could question the reliability of Gosse's and Walpole's secondhand accounts (Gosse was notorious for his inaccuracies), but they have a ring of truth, for they imply that the real James, like any person, had experienced the pain of heartbreak. A heartbroken James is not consistent with Lodge's James, who even at the relatively young age of 50 is relieved to have "reached the calm waters of middle age, having survived all the perils and problems, the vague longings and physical disturbances, associated with early manhood." While Author, Author clearly portrays James as a warm, affectionate person, it also portrays him as lacking the kind of romantic susceptibility of which Gosse's and Walpole's stories give us a glimpse.

Neither novel can do full justice to the rich, complicated, and somewhat unfathomable figure that was Henry James, but it is precisely because he is a rich, complicated, and somewhat unfathomable figure that biographers—and now novelists—find him compelling. It is also why reading all of James's surviving letters is so rewarding.

PHOTO (BLACK & WHITE): Henry James (left) and his brother Williams James, the psychologist, around 1900

PHOTO (BLACK & WHITE): Henry James Sr. and Henry Jr. in an 1854 daguerreotype

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