

Author, Author

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Is Biography fiction? The British biographer Peter Ackroyd has written that it takes more imagination to write a biography than a novel. This might appear paradoxical but it makes perfect sense. A biographer is constrained by the facts, and it is a well-known fact that the more constraints are put the more demands are made on your imagination because it limits the obvious responses forcing you to dig deeper, something any mathematician can testify to. In fact with no constraints at all, the imagination has nothing to feed on and shrivels¹. The problem of writing a biography is the spotty documentation, what survives to tell its tales is more or less random, thus the problem confronting a biographer is not unlike the problem confronting a paleontologist with a fragmentary fossil record forcing him to hypothesize missing links. So likewise a biographer needs to have the imagination to make up plausible missing links, otherwise a narrative will not work logically. This is indeed a risky business, but also one that all historians have to contend with. There is always the risk that the future will unearth new documents that will seriously challenge previous guesses, but this is also the fate of science, which will always be doomed to be preliminary and provisional.

Lodge is a deft writer, clever but not very deep; this makes him a favorite of the academic community when it comes to light reading. Clearly in spite of his clowning exterior², he has serious interests, and has done his stint as a teacher of literature, and yearns to spin some serious yarns. As a late 20th century teacher of English, a favorite author is bound to be Henry James. This is a writer who fulfills a great variety of conditions to succeed as an icon in an undergraduate context. First he is something of a period piece, the period of late 19th early 20th century that to most of us has a lasting romantic appeal, as testified by the continuing attractions wielded by the Sherlock Holmes stories. It is a time on the verge of the modern era, still close enough to provide us with personal ties via grand-parents and at least great grandparents. It is also an era in which the taste for modernity, in technology and arts, had been stimulated, without having yet been vulgarized. A time when one could live well, provided one had independent means. In short a period to generate nostalgia. Furthermore James provide the unsophisticated mind with a promise of sophistication. His stories are painted with a very small brush, there is little action, events are subtle, and often most things are left unsaid for the reader to fill in the details. In fact all the action that seems to be going on is the purely cerebral. And cerebral in the subtle ways most people can instinctively appreciate, namely the one of the subtlety of social intercourse. True, his fiction is an acquired taste, but the very fact that you have to train yourself to appreciate it, makes it so much more valuable to anyone

¹ It is much harder to come up with say a random name of a person or a country, than to be restrained to having it start with a certain letter or to have a certain number of letters

² Most apparent in his two hits 'Changing Places' and 'A Small World'.

involved in a sincere quest for sophistication.

Now, literature in a liberal educational setting is not meant primarily for enjoyment but for instruction and reflection, the kind of instruction and reflection which can be turned into term-papers. The novels of James are excellent subjects for literary analysis. Not obvious, nor intractable. In fact they require closer readings to be fully savored. Now there were a lot of novels written at the time with the same high-minded purpose, involving the same charming period piece furniture, but somehow do not seem to have made the grade³. Maybe the work of James contains that extra element that makes it persevere. Is it because he is a better craftsman? The joints are better welded to each other, the material of better quality, the traces of work better hidden. Maybe his sentences are indeed better crafted, in fact so exquisite that they transcend the actual contents they are designed to convey. One does not read his novels for their plots, in fact one could not care less, only for the vehicle such plots and characters provide for the invariably well-turned phrases that will ensue. In fact is this not, for the unsophisticated at least, the epitome of fictional sophistication? A text turning its attention to itself, not to its subject matters. A level of abstraction beyond the naive approach. A student who has realized this has gone some way in intellectual awakening.

The novels of Henry James also have obvious drawbacks. They may work as literary miniatures, small jewels to be traded on the market of precious stones; but do they work as full-bloodied literature, the books that grip you by your tail and will not let you go until you gasp for breath. James is indeed something of a cutter of diamonds, sitting in intense concentration wielding small tools, to eventually produce gems of sparkling brilliancy, but he is not a butcher providing meat for your body. He is unable to produce visual vividness. You may listen to his voice and the voices of his characters, but your eyes are not employed. His failure to evoke a sense of place is almost ghostly. And to many of us that kind of evocation that is almost palpable is what draws us into a fictional world. But as Lodge has argued elsewhere, those very limitations of James is also what makes him so amendable to visual dramatization, and as modern film, especially in televised serializations⁴ has to some extent replaced the classical reading, it is often through films such as those that most modern readers first encounter him. This is a bit ironic, as the subject of this semi-fictional biography is to present his most humiliating failure, that of becoming a successful writer for the stage.

'Author, Author'. After a successful premiere performance, the ultimate creator, the author himself, is being invited to share in the celebration. A performer performs in a front of an audience, and the highest accolade he can receive is to get the unqualified praise in which to bask. What can indeed be sweeter? The work, the craft itself of course, but that is a lonely matter, it has to be complemented by external confirmation. With an actor or a musical performer this feedback is direct and immediate. Reviews do play a role, but they come later, but they cannot compensate the physical sensation of enthusiastic applause. One can well understand why people can become addicted to it. Without intermittent praise and encouragement most people, except the most driven and obsessed, shrivel. All

³ One thinks of somebody like Wharton and her minor colleagues

⁴ the modern soap is eerily reminiscent of the mid 19th century one, skillfully purveyed by a Dickens, it is only the medium that has changed

artists are performers, hence their need, their craving for unqualified praise as well. So what can be headier for a solitary author than to receive this direct physical applause, in addition to the more subtle support of friends and publishers, the intermittent letter from a reading fan or the steady income from an abstract reading public? Lodge does at least one thing well, depicting this almost infantile hunger for confirmation and admiration that any artist, especially an author, craves. Because an author may crave it even more, he or she, is not just a performer dependent upon somebody else, but literally a creator, fashioning out of nothing but their own very personal experience their work. When the work fails it is personal to the quick.

This whole novel is centered on James futile quest to establish himself as a successful writer for the stage, with all the financial rewards such would invariably involve in addition to popular fame. The hopes are gently generated by an initial promising success out in the provinces to fizzle out when brought to London. The suspense is heightened and the fall is great. Now this is literature not biography. In literature you can be more selective, in biography there is the implicit expectation, almost obligation, to tell everything the record allows.

So why is this biography more readable than most biographies? It is not because Lodge is necessarily a better writer, but simply because the fictional approach allows two things, subtraction and addition. The fictional writer can be more selective, he can make life into a plot; this is the first and most important advantage. The second is that he can smooth corners. He can invent dialog and he can invent interior monologues. This makes it easier for the reader to swallow. It simply sugars the pill. In addition Lodge writes a simple prose, (much to my initial surprise he has not attempted to show off by writing the whole novel as a pastiche of James prose), artless and kind to the reader. Thus one reads on with pleasure, not unlike the way one devours 'a good read' on the beach.

So the innocent reader learns a lot. Not only about the managerial life of theatre producers and the humiliations of cutting and rewriting a scriptwriter has to comply with (and James does it grudgingly yet with eager accomodation), but also about some of James friends, like the simple-minded artist Du Maurier (grandfather to the popular novelist Daphne Du Maurier) who scores great popular success when he turns to the writing of novels, far outshining that of James, although he in comparison is but an amateur. Or the novelist woman, with her hard of hearing and her ear trumpet, who is a descendant of Fenimore Cooper, and maybe is in love with the frigid James, and comes to grief through a gruesome suicidal jump from her abode in Venice. We also learn a little about James living quarters and domestic routines in a style to which had had grown accustomed but for which he found himself more and more financially pressed to keep up. He has a large apartment with walls lined with books in the Kensington area. He employs a couple as his servants, the man turning out to be an alcoholic helping himself liberally to James bottles. James also acquires a dog, so he can take walks in the park. While down in Torquay he learns to bicycle, but not too steadily on the wheel (and Lodge even invents an incident with the future Agatha Christie pushing a perambulator with a doll into his wobbly path, an incidence which could have happened in the sense of being hard to refute). Finally he falls in love with the village of Rye and signs a longterm lease on a house that he fancies, figuring that the arrangements might last him almost to the end of his life. (As it turns out, it

outlasts him.) James succumbs in the end, suffers a stroke, becomes demented, too far gone to savor the honors brought by receiving the Order of Merit (through the machinations of his powerful friends?). Still the discerning reader cannot be but a bit disconcerted. The book is not to be recommended to those that have an extensive familiarity with the secondary literature on which the book is based, because then the borrowings and the dependency of the sources will become too manifest, and any magic will be lost in the ensuing embarrassment⁵. But for those who are mainly unfamiliar with the life of Henry James, their curiosities will be tickled, and maybe they will be tempted to sample some of his work, have they never done so before.

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⁵ Myself I am only familiar with the peripheral matter relating to his brother William