

Preface

At least since Darwin's time, biologists have liked to remind us that the health of many ecosystems—indeed, the survival of many species—depends upon the otherwise unheralded work of parasites. The seemingly perverse symbiosis between such lowly creatures and the more conspicuous hosts who afford them life is a crucial element in nature's vast design. Much of the work of culture is done by similar organisms. The modern universe of literature would be unthinkable without the hungry tribe of critics, scholars, and biographers who feed on the lives and works of more celebrated others—the authors who inhabit and define the domain of public letters.

For reasons not hard to discern, the work of literary biographers, in particular, lends itself to this analogy. So many great writers have been shadowed by the men (of course they were men) who were in a privileged position to tell the life histories of their subjects: Doctor Johnson can hardly be imagined without his two-volume Boswell; Carlyle without his two-volume Froude; Dickens without his two-volume Forster. Lytton Strachey may have demolished the hagiographic archetype of such "life-and-letters" tomes when he published *Eminent Victorians* (1918); but modern literary biographers, if more critically disposed, have not escaped the veiled animus of parasitism that is concomitant with their work, which so often depends upon the discovery of materials—diaries, letters, drafts, and miscellaneous documents—rarely intended for others to see. The determined biographer, as James Joyce slyly anticipated, was ever more likely to become an author's "biografiend," an obsessive doppelgänger claiming exclusive priority to another's life history. *Monopolizing the Master* tells the story of not one but many such "biografiends"—all of whom have sought to shape our understanding of Henry James by cornering the market on that writer's cultural legacy.

Long before Pierre Bourdieu made the concept of "cultural capital" into a buzzword of contemporary literary criticism, another formidable thinker—the Canadian polymath, Northrop Frye—offered a salutary warning about the vagaries of defining it.¹ In the "Polemical Introduction" to *Anatomy of Criticism*

(1957), Frye took umbrage with the kind of “literary chit-chat which makes the reputations of poets boom and crash in an imaginary stock exchange.” Wittily extending the metaphor, Frye commented, “That wealthy investor Mr. Eliot, after dumping Milton on the market, is now buying him again; Donne has probably reached his peak and will begin to taper off; Tennyson may be in for a slight flutter but the Shelley stocks are still bearish.”² Since the time of his death, shares of Henry James have had their ups and downs, and his cultural valuation often has been linked to extraliterary factors and phenomena—particularly his citizenship and his supposed leisure-class allegiances. Although by now we have come to accept—even to presume—the Master’s blue-chip status, the high reputation enjoyed by James’s oeuvre (as Hilton Kramer has reminded us) “represents one of the most remarkable feats of literary exhumation in the history of twentieth-century literature.”³

Monopolizing the Master chronicles the history of that recuperation, focusing especially on the strategies by which different critical cohorts have attempted to shape—ideally to control—the contours of James’s posthumous reputation. Leon Edel’s domination of modern James studies has long been obvious (and frequently complained of), but no one really has explained how he gained—and assiduously worked to maintain—his peculiar advantage: controlling others’ access to the James archive. Still less appreciated is the extent to which Edel’s career epitomizes a logic of restriction that already had been put in motion before James died in 1916. Even then, family scruples (inflected more than a little by homophobic paranoia) seemed determined to perpetuate a discreet hagiography of the author, and his collateral descendants worked deliberately to frustrate what they considered unwanted speculation or investigation. The appearance of Van Wyck Brooks’s pseudo-psychological *The Pilgrimage of Henry James* (1925), which asserted that James’s whole career was a testament to de-racinated frustration and atrophy, galvanized his literary executors to thwart whomever they deemed “incompetent” from accessing sources that might disclose sensitive information about the James family.

James’s contemporary acolytes (especially Percy Lubbock and Theodora Bosanquet) and the next generation of modernists who largely salvaged James’s reputation (Eliot, Pound, and R. P. Blackmur) also, in their various ways, attempted to appropriate the Master’s aura, wanting to transfer or borrow his cultural capital to shore up their own artistic agendas. While their motives and

tactics differed widely, taken as a whole, they also worked to shape the contours of the “Henry James” with whom later readers and critics have had to reckon. Another key figure in this process was Harvard professor F. O. Matthiessen, whose “brief and busy excursion into James” (as Edel somewhat derisively described it) was largely responsible for the modern James revival. Edel was ready—at the time of Matthiessen’s tragic suicide in 1950—to crown himself as sole successor, or at least majority shareholder, in what would rapidly become almost a new industry. Postwar enrollments at American universities expanded in tandem with a revolution in paperback publishing, and an unceasing stream of James reprints soon began to appear (in the vast majority of which Edel had not merely a scholarly but also a considerable financial stake). It is hardly a coincidence that the 1971 *New Yorker* profile of Edel ran under a satirically pecuniary banner—“Chairman of the Board.” Edel’s virtual monopoly of the field has of course been noted for some time, but only now can a detailed account of his campaign to ward off “trespassers,” as he termed them, be given, since the vast archive of his own papers only recently has been open to public inspection and use. *Monopolizing the Master* fittingly concludes with that final chapter, for it was only when the last volume of Edel’s biography was published that restrictions concerning the use and publication of the James papers were lifted.

Even though other scholars have touched upon certain aspects of this narrative,⁴ a truly comprehensive account has had to wait. Michael Millgate concluded his important chronicle of James’s “testamentary acts” by saying that “it seems impossible now to recover or even guess at” the reasons to account for the author’s “final absolute dependence upon his own family” to lay the cornerstone of his posthumous reputation.⁵ But new family materials since deposited at Harvard shed much light on those reasons; at the same time they expose many of the tensions and cross-pressures that would affect access to the archive for decades to come. Likewise, the more recent tactical forays made by researchers into Leon Edel’s papers at McGill have glanced at topical issues—especially the details of his efforts to “police” the James archive at the expense of others—but have not sufficiently appreciated the extent to which such actions align themselves with the longer history of efforts to control the construction of “Henry James” as a subject for biographical or critical analysis.

Literary historians usually trace the beginning of the “James Revival” to the years immediately following the end of the Second World War, when

Matthiessen began to publish key source materials that previously had been locked away in the recesses of the Harvard library. In 1946, the same year that the James Revival formally was announced, already Lionel Trilling was forced to admit that “we are all a little tired of Henry James—or rather, we are tired of the Henry James we have been creating by all our talk about him.”⁶ That weariness has proved ephemeral, however. We have been talking about Henry James (more or less intelligently) ever since: creating—and re-creating—the forms of cultural capital he represents: possessing—or possessed by—the Master.