"How Should One Live?" The "Lives" of Henry James and Martha C. Nussbaum's Conception of Moral Philosophy

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Abstract
The 21st century has witnessed an unprecedented novelistic attention on Henry James and, consequently, multiple resurrections of the Master in the form of James-based or James-influenced works of fiction. Some of the questions bothering novelists, critics and readers alike have been: How to portray James, his life and genius, when there are as many variants of James as there are critics and biographers writing about him? How to write about a life when the life itself, a hypotext, is veiled in ambiguity and uncertainty? In what way should the gaps be filled or what explanations ought to be provided? Should one follow the Master or rebel against him? The present paper wishes to discuss how Martha C. Nussbaum's theoretical underpinnings of moral philosophy might prove helpful in performing a critical and comparative reading of the "lives" of Henry James. The Master *by Colm Tóibín and* Author, Author *by David Lodge will be subjected to qualitative analysis within the interpretative framework provided by Nussbaum's theory postulated in* Love's Knowledge, *which applies moral philosophy to the discussion of literary works.*

Keywords
Henry James, Martha C. Nussbaum, moral philosophy, biographical novel

1.

The year 2004 – the hundredth anniversary of the publishing of *The Golden Bowl* – could not have been named anything but the year of Henry James. In March, the Irish writer Colm Tóibín published to great critical acclaim his biographical novel *The Master*, which introduces episodes from James's life between January 1895 and October 1899, with many flashbacks covering James's childhood, adolescence and youth. A month later, Alan Hollinghurst saw the publication of his fourth novel *The Line of Beauty*, which, in spite of not having James as a character, was understood by most critics as a homage to James[1] and was ultimately awarded the Booker Prize for Fiction. Not only is the novel's major character, Nicholas Guest, writing his postgraduate thesis on Henry James and writing a script for the film adaptation of *The Spoils of Poynton*, but both stylistically[2] and thematically[3] the novel is perhaps the closest to what James himself might write if he were our contemporary. Finally, in September of the same year, the Secker & Warburg Publishing House released the novel by David Lodge entitled *Author, Author* which,

1 Cf. Robert McCrum, "Could Henry James scoop up the big prizes this year?," *The Guardian*, April 25 2004. Accessed August 12, 2013. http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2004/apr/25/henryjames; Geoff Dyer, "The last summer," *The Telegraph*, March 28, 2004. Accessed August 12, 2013. http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/3614486/The-last-summer.html; Anthony Quinn, "The Last Good Summer," *The New York Times*, October 31, 2004. Accessed August 12, 2013. http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9E07E4DA113AF932A05753C1A9629C8B63.

2 E.g. the use of periphrasis and the orotund style of James's late novels.

3 The panorama of British society with the focus on a young hero, both insider and outsider, entering the world of money and privilege.

apart from the opening and closing pages presenting the dying James in December 1915, concentrates on Henry James's middle years, namely the last two decades of the 19th century.

But the students of *zeitgeist* were offered more to satiate their appetite for the fictional resurrection of Henry James. In the spring of 2004, almost simultaneously with Tóibín's and Hollinghurst's, Emma Tennant's novel *Felony* was reissued in paperback. Published in 2002, the book was a first attempt at a biographical novel on James with special attention paid to the relationship with the American novelist Constance Fenimore Woolson and to the origin of James's novella *The Aspern Papers*. The book is by no means a successful novel and, in fact, another one in a series of Tennant's minor biographical works; yet it deserves mention since, to the best of my knowledge, it was the first time that James appeared under his own name as a principal character in a novel[4].

Today, thanks to research conducted by Lodge in his study *The Year of Henry James*, it has come to light that two more novelists showed interest in Henry James around 2004. Firstly, in the same year the South African writer Michiel Heyns submitted to London publishers his new novel *The Typewriter's Tale*, set in the first decade of the 20th century and dealing with James's involvement in a love affair between Edith Wharton and Morton Fullerton. The title refers to a narrative mode in which the story is told from the point of view of James's secretary. British publishing houses declined to release Heyns's work on the basis of the market being already flooded with "a spate of fiction based on the life of Henry James"[5] and the book was ultimately published a year later by South African Jonathan Ball, earning a limited response from both critics and readers[6]. Secondly, according to Lodge, in the spring of 2004 the American novelist David Leavitt was expected to offer to his publishers his new novel that was to address the life of Henry James.[7]

Henry James also featured prominently in "The Master at St. Bartholomew's Hospital, 1914-1916" from Joyce Carol Oates's 2008 collection entitled *Wild Nights!* – a series of fictional representation of the last days of famous writers, i.e. Edgar Allan Poe, Emily Dickinson, Mark Twain, Henry James and Ernest Hemingway. Moreover, Cynthia Ozick's life-long fascination with Henry James resulted in two Jamesian works: the 2008 novella *Dictation* which depicted the friendship between Henry James and Joseph Conrad, and the 2010 novel *Foreign Bodies* which is an act of retelling James's 1903 novel *The Ambassadors*. Finally, in 2010, Henry James appeared as a character in two works of fiction: the short story "Silence" from Colm Tóibín's collection *The Empty Family* and a novel by Paula Marantz Cohen entitled *What Alice Knew.* In an introduction to a collection of Colm Tóibín's essays on James, Susan M. Griffin suggested that in the light of the plethora of works which address the life of Henry James a "new genre" can be delineated "in which James appears as a central character."[8] Griffin adds several other titles to the genus: *Henry James's Midnight Song* by Carol de Chellis, *Sweet Water* by Kathryn Kramer and *The James Boys* by Richard Liebmann-Smith.[9]

4 As far as I am aware Henry James's first appearance in fiction is in Gore Vidal's 1987 historical novel *Empire*.

5 In Michiel Heyns, "The curse of Henry James," *Prospect*, September 26, 2004. Accessed August 12, 2013. http://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/2004/09/thecurseofhenryjames/.

6 Though it bears mentioning that it was shortlisted for the Commonwealth Writers' Prize, Africa region.

7 David Lodge, The Year of Henry James. The Story of a Novel (London: Penguin Books, 2007), 5.

8 Susan M. Griffin, *All a Novelist Needs. Colm Tóibín on Henry James* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010), xv.

9 Griffin, *All a Novelist Needs*, xv.

Any researcher who refuses to be satisfied only by arriving at a list of James--inspired novels, but who actually wishes to discuss the "lives" of Henry James both critically and comparatively – in other words, to qualitatively evaluate and position them in a hierarchy of literary value – might well find the task thoroughly challenging and, often, highly frustrating. In what ways might one contrast the diverse strategies that this single life has inspired: historically and biographically accurate narratives with the ones that prioritise fiction and fantasy; third-person accounts and first-person narratives; vehemently critical pieces with those that are largely sympathetic to the main character? Multiple resurrections of the Master in the form of James-based or James-influenced works of fiction are, in fact, the battlefield of various literary (as well as cultural) paradigms and ideologies.

The aim of the present paper is to suggest one (by no means definitive or conclusive) way of this conundrum, to show how a set of critical tools might be found helpful to conduct a comparative analysis of the James-based novels. For the purpose of this inquiry, two biographical novels about Henry James that profoundly differ both thematically and structurally have been selected, namely *The Master* by Colm Tóibín and *Author, Author* by David Lodge. These works will be subjected to a qualitative analysis within the interpretative framework provided by Martha C. Nussbaum's theory postulated in *Love's Knowledge*.

2.

The American philosopher Martha C. Nussbaum singlehandedly revolutionised not only the studies of Henry James (and Marcel Proust) but the study of the novel as such with her seminal 1990 work *Love's Knowledge*, which postulated the application of moral philosophy to the analysis of literary works. Nussbaum was not the first one to combine life-writing genres (a category to which the biographical novel undoubtedly belongs) with the questions of morality and ethics. Nine years before the publication of *Love's Knowledge*, James Olney released his study of autobiography *Metaphors of the Self* in which he claimed that (auto)biographical writing does not only advance our knowledge of a person but above all it should work towards the reader asking and trying to find an answer to the principal ethical question, namely how one shall live.[10] Life-writing genres are, then, understood as instruments in moral education and in performing such a noble function should be regarded as *belles-lettres* proper.

Nussbaum is known today for being one of the very few philosophers consciously working against New Criticism and Deconstruction and emphasising the role of ethics in contemporary discourse. "It was assumed," she says, criticising the two schools of thought,

> *that any work that attempts to ask of a literary text questions about how we might live, treating the work as addressed to the reader's practical interests and needs, and as being in some sense about our lives, must be hopelessly nad've, reactionary, and insensitive to the complexities of the literary form and intertextual referentiality.*[11]

10 James Olney, *Metaphors of the Self. The meaning of autobiography* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), 3-51.

11 Martha C. Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge. Essays on Philosophy and Literature* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 21.

Nussbaum believes that the question about "how we might live" (which she recognises as a major ethical inquiry) still remains the most important one to be answered. Human beings, Nussbaum claims, are always in pursuit of some response to the question of life, with philosophy and literature playing a crucial role in accompanying us in this search. She finds traces of this approach in the philosophy of Ancient Greece, where ethical philosophers and tragic poets engaged themselves in an educational and communicative activity called *psuchagôgia* (the leading of the soul). Hence, Nussbaum initiates her discussion of literature and moral philosophy with a tenet similar to that of Olney's in mind, namely that literary forms are indeed philosophical. However, her reasoning is quite original as far as the role of literature and philosophy in shaping an individual's ethical stance. "There may be views of the world and how one should live in it," she states,

> – views, especially, that emphasize the world's surprising variety, its complexity and mysteriousness, its flawed and imperfect beauty – that cannot be fully and adequately stated in the language of conventional philosophical prose, a style remarkably flat and lacking in wonder – but only in a language and in forms themselves more complex, more allusive, more attentive to particulars.[12]

Two claims are central to Nussbaum's thinking. First, she believes that there is, with respect to any text carefully written and fully imagined, an organic connection between its form and its content. Second, certain truths about human life can only be competently and accurately stated in the language and forms characteristic of the art of fiction. Nussbaum perceives Henry James as her ally in this belief system. She points out that in the Preface to *The Golden Bowl* James compares a sense of life to soil and the literary text to a plant that grows out of that soil. Furthermore, understood as a work of art, a plant expresses the soil's character and composition by means of its form. In other words, a literary text should render life's "particularity and complexity"[13] since it originates in the concrete and deeply felt experience of life. A portrayal of a human then should require a highly complex, nuanced perception of as well as an emotional response to the concrete features of that individual's surroundings, including particular persons or relationships. I would further say that this also provokes the statement (so as to be in accordance with Nussbaum and James's theories of "fine attention" and "good deliberation"[14]) that a novel about Henry James should be illustrative of the particularity and complexity of his life, since it assumes that James's experience of life was concrete and deeply felt. Nussbaum believes that the telling itself should express a sense of life as being valuable. Consequently, all the formal structures, sentences, vocabulary, selection of a genre, the whole manner in which the readers are addressed should be indicative of what matters and what does not matter, of what life's relations and connections are. According to Nussbaum, a literary work cannot limit itself to a simple display of life, but every time needs to be "represented as something,"[15] meaning that a belief in objective and accurate presentation has to be abandoned and writers should instead opt for choices, varieties, selections, choosing certain activities and transactions instead of others so as to arrive at a certain vision of life.

12 Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge*, 3.

13 Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge*, 5.

14 Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge*, 5.

15 Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge*, 5.

Literary works are thus not neutral instruments for the investigation of all possible conceptions; on the contrary, they are powerfully charged with meaning. Nussbaum consequently proclaims that one should discover forms and terms that fittingly express as well as adequately state the ideas to be put forward. What she appears to say is that a certain truth needs to be stated in a specific language, a specific genre and style which guarantees that a particular statement on life is made. Nussbaum first proposes that not every text can fully and appropriately (and, one should add, without contradictions), state the truth about a human life. Only a specific family of statements is capable of this, namely a family comprising of what can be called literary narratives.

This proposition is important to the present paper and, in particular, to a general discussion of life-writing genres. If one agrees with Nussbaum's principles, then one is forced to say that strictly factual genres are entirely secondary, and the principal role should be given to fictional representation, because only fiction, and, what is more, only a specific kind of fiction, is capable not only of giving birth to nuanced perception and emotional response, but also, by means of its structure, of inviting readers to address the ethical question of how one should live. Only those fictional pieces that show interest in the concrete, in investigating emotional ties, in offering fine-tuned perceptions are works that address the readers' primary concerns. Only novels, Nussbaum declares, bring us into

> connection with our deepest practical searching for ourselves and others, the searching in connection with which the influential philosophical conceptions of the ethical view were originally developed, the searching we pursue as we compare these conceptions, both with one another and with our active sense of life.[16]

In other words, only novels are adequate in addressing crucial ethical conceptions since their forms and structures guarantee complete investigation capable of arriving at some sort of statement concerning one's life.

But as already mentioned, Nussbaum does not believe that all novels are moral philosophy. In formulating the principle of a literary text that would belong to the paradigm of moral philosophy, she turns to Aristotle and the features of his ethical position. The first of these features is the "noncommensurability of the valuable things," which Nussbaum understands as a commitment to qualitative distinctions. This principle is manifested in literary works by the organising vision of certain novels which show that one thing is not just a different quantity of another. A novel of moral philosophy should, according to Nussbaum, reveal to its readers the richness and worth of plural qualitative thinking and result in arrival at a richly qualitative way of seeing.[17]

The second feature borrowed from Aristotle is "the priority of perceptions," also known as priority of the particular. What is understood by this term is an ability to discern in an acute and responsive way the important and conspicuous features of one's particular situation.[18] Both to Nussbaum and Aristotle this ability is at the core of so-called "practical wisdom." This is not only a tool towards achieving a correct action or statement, but an ethically valuable activity in its own right. Nussbaum finds another iteration of the Aristotelian term in Henry James's "The Art of the Novel" where James

16 Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge*, 24.

17 Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge*, 36-37.

18 Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge*, 37-40.

speaks about being "finely aware and richly responsible."[19] Nussbaum declares this term to be synonymous with Aristotelian priority of perceptions.

Thirdly, a novel in question should be characterised by paying attention to the "ethical value of emotions." Emotions, Nussbaum claims, are no longer understood as blind surges of affect having no cognitive dimension, but as more reliable and less deceptively seductive than intellectual calculations. Nussbaum assigns a cognitive dimension to emotions, stating that emotions such as grief, love, pity are very closely linked to beliefs in such a way that any change of beliefs results in fact in a modification of emotions, which are thus defined as "discriminating responses closely connected with beliefs about how things are and what is important."[20] As such, they form an intelligent part of human ethical agency.[21]

Finally, "ethical relevance of uncontrolled happenings" is considered to be the fourth element that contributes to a literary work being classified as specific of moral philosophy. Ethical relevance means that events that happen to the characters through no fault of their own have some serious significance for the quality of the lives they manage to live. In other words, this is synonymous with the principle of contingency.[22]

But Nussbaum offers an addition to the four features that I have just mentioned. She explores the fact that the Aristotelian view of practical learning (here including the process of reading a novel) attributed great value to friendship and love. Learning is not only the experience of the concrete, but it happens in a relationship, often intimate, and the process of learning is motivated by the desire to share a form of life with a friend. "Trusting the guidance of a friend and allowing one's feelings to be engaged with that other person's life and choices, one learns to see aspects of the world that one had previously missed,"[23] is Nussbaum's variant of what otherwise is known as empathic reading. Thus, relationships represented within a given novel as well as the entire process of reading a novel, i.e. the relationship between a reader and a book, should be characterised by the principle of love and friendship, understood as "engagement with the life and choices" in order to see "the aspects of the world missed."[24]

Nussbaum states that not every novel can be classified as moral philosophy. "Why these novels and not others?" she asks. "Why novels and not plays? Biographies? Histories? Lyric poetry? Why not philosopher's examples?"[25] She excludes, for example, and perhaps erroneously, the works of George Eliot, explaining that her omniscient posture, narratorial "falsification of our human position,"[26] conventional springs of dramatic interest may, in fact, corrupt one's relation to our daily lives. Nussbaum regards James and Proust as the best practitioners of moral philosophy (the structure of their works, attention to the small movements of the inner world of their characters, fulfilment of Aristotelian principles). But other types of writing are not ontologically excluded. She admits that some biographies and histories can as well be classified as "moral philosophy" as long as they "give sufficient attention to particularity and emotion:" "so long as they involve their readers in relevant activities of searching and feeling,

19 Henry James, *The Art of the Novel* (New York: Scribner's, 1907), 149.

20 Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge*, 41.

21 Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge*, 40-43.

22 Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge*, 43-44.

23 Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge*, 44.

24 Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge*, 44.

25 Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge*, 45.

26 Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge*, 45.

especially feeling concerning their own possibilities as well as those of the characters."[27] A description of this type of work of art should then embrace the following categories: peculiarity, emotive appeal, absorbing plottedness, variety of indeterminacy, open--endedness, the reader being not only a participant but a friend to the literary text.[28] According to Nussbaum, such expressions would not only describe a work of art, but above all they would characterise an individual's life since with the same words one could refer to their actual daily adventures.

Without the experiences offered by fiction our knowledge is too confined, restricted and parochial, Nussbaum declares. Literature extends our knowledge, making us reflect and feel about what otherwise is too distant and unavailable for feeling. Moreover, all living is considered interpreting because all our actions require the perception of the world as something. No life is "raw," Nussbaum concludes since "throughout our living, we are, in a sense, makers of fiction."[29] In the activity of literary imagining we are led to imagine and describe with greater precision, focusing our attention on each word, feeling each event more keenly. "Literature is an extension of life," Nussbaum says, "not only horizontally, bringing the reader into contact with events or locations or persons or problems he or she has not otherwise met, but also, so to speak, vertically, giving the reader experience that is deeper, sharper, and more precise than much of what takes place in life."[30]

Finally, a text is considered by Nussbaum, after Proust, an "optical instrument" through which a reader becomes an analyst of his/her own heart. By living the lives of others we form statements concerning our own lives and are finally capable of arriving at a set of answers to the principal question of human existence: How should one live?

3.

Having outlined the principles of Nussbaum's theory, I would now like to use them in an attempt at evaluating the two biographical novels which take Henry James as their main character, *The Master* by Colm Tóibín and *Author, Author* by David Lodge[31]. My belief is that a biographical novel is first and foremost a fictional narrative account. So not only is the analysis of the relation between "lived" and "imagined" lives possible and advisable, but the critic's task is evaluating the two novels' fictional qualities. In other words is one of them, both of them or neither truly Jamesian?

Reading *Author, Author* and *The Master* from the point of view of Nussbaum's theory, I am bound to conclude that only Tóibín's novel can be classified to moral philosophy. Firstly, Tóibín's account of Henry James far exceeds Lodge's as far as the particularity and complexity of a presented life is concerned. This can be seen primarily in his decision to resist all-encompassing energies and simplifying summations concerning James's sexuality which have been famously preferred by such critics as Richard Ellmann,

27 Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge*, 46.

28 Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge*, 46-47.

29 Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge*, 47.

30 Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge*, 48.

31 A detailed comparative reading of the two novels – however, without applying Nussbaum's theory– has been offered in my book *Authors on Authors in Selected Biographical-Novels-About-Writers*, which explains and, I hope, justifies the limited discussion of *The Master* and *Author, Author* provided in the present paper. Robert Kusek, *Authors on Authors in Selected Biographical-Novels-About-Writers* (Krakow: Jagiellonian University Press, 2012), 53-96.

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Hugh Stevens. Speaking against the homosexual panic theory, and simultaneously being careful in embracing the theory of James's active sexuality, Tóibín finds his own way out of the ideological conundrum by means of showing respect to the deliberate gaps in James's sexual life. Moreover, by means of employing an intimate style of narrative (the so-called third-person "intimate" style[32]) Tóibín brings his readers as close as possible to the soul and mind of Henry James, allowing us to participate in the intimate processes taking place in the character's consciousness. James, engrossed in the interiority of his life, remains, however, an ultimately indeterminate figure. In contrast to Tóibín's character, Henry James as portrayed by Lodge not only lacks a rich interior life; he also lacks a life that is complex, guided by various motives, allegiances, hopes and fears. Lodge leaves no space for a sense of doubt, implication or uncertainty and he avoids any internal debate by means of innumerable expressions of certainty such as "The reason he had…," "It was obvious…," "The truth was…"[33] Though Lodge also employs a third-person-singular mode of narrative which theoretically allows for instances of introspection, he altogether fails to narrate the life of the mind. Instead of being reflective, *Author, Author* is primarily descriptive and comprises detailed and incessant recountals of events and activities. Consequently, Lodge's James could be characterised as a flat character type (to borrow a term from E. M. Forster's *Aspects of the Novel*), thoroughly impervious to an extended in-depth analysis.

The overall shape and organisation of the text is another element to be taken into consideration while discussing the two novels. While both novels boast consistency, precision and degree of explanation as required by Nussbaum, the primary difference between them is identified in their style. As already mentioned, Nussbaum believes that the style is an unalienable part of moral philosophy and it should correspond with the serious ethical questions that novels are bound to address. Clearly, *Author, Author* could not be classified as an ethical novel due to its recurrent application of social comedy. Being conventional in so many aspects (e.g. flashback, deathbed perspective), the novel escapes what should have been its most welcome and expected form, namely a realist novel with a significant psychological input in line with the claim that the account of an author's life should also focus "on the subject's psychological development, relying from evidence both on external sources and on the author's own writing."[34] Resorting to the register of social comedy, Lodge makes it impossible for us to relate to his character in a way that Tóibín manages to achieve in *The Master*, whose serious tone and style led one critic to claim that the novel verges on the genre of hagiography.[35] *The Master* surely allows the novel's readers to bond with the character, to develop sympathy and empathy towards him.

This brings me to love and friendship, another of Nussbaum's categories which she understands as a desire to share life with someone, to become engaged with the other person's life. In my opinion, readers of *The Master* are capable of developing this faculty in relation to the provided narrative. On the other hand, Lodge's primary aim is to inform and entertain his reader, and the style of his narrative as well as the presentation of the characters and the relations between them is devoid of intimate relations. Readers could be labelled participants in Lodge's narratives, but never friends. Needless to say,

32 Alex Witchel, "His Irish Diaspora," *The New York Times*, April 29, 2009. Accessed July 13, 2013. http://www.nytimes.com/2009/05/03/magazine/03toibin-t.html?n=Top%2fReference%2fTimes%20Topics%2fPeople%2fT%2fToibin%2c%20Colm&_r=0.

33 David Lodge, *Author, Author* (London: Secker & Warburg, 2004), 272, 59, 128, 41, 204.

34 W.H. Abrams, ed., *A Glossary of Literary Terms* (Fort Worth: Harcourt Brace, 1993), 266.

35 Michael Moon, "Burn Me at the Stake Always," *The New England Quarterly* 78 (2005): 642.

Nussbaum's Aristotelian principles, which can be summed up as multiplicity, particularity, emotions and contingency seem to me much more fully realised in *The Master* than in *Author, Author*: the former being much more open to indeterminacy and open-endedness, inviting more interpretations, having greater emotive appeal as well as containing a plot which is more absorbing and structurally developed in more elaborate way.

What should also be analysed in my comparative reading is the relationship between fact and fiction, which Nussbaum also finds of utmost importance. Both Lodge and Tóibín offer historically and factually faithful accounts of James's life, though Tóibín gives priority to fiction – imagining not only more episodes (e.g. James's visit to Ireland) and characters (Hammond, the Smiths), but the whole interiority of Henry James's life. *Author, Author* celebrates fact and is entirely constrained by its writer's deliberate refusal to imagine beyond the factual framework provided by research. In *The Year of Henry James* Lodge boasts about visiting all the places he described in his novel, from Venice to Whitby and Torquay. Lodge's primary focus is on facts, and he floods his readers with as many pieces of information as possible. Every scene of the novel serves to share as many period details as possible with the novel's readers; its pages are populated with well-known figures such as Virginia Woolf, Agatha Christie and Compton Mackenzie. "There are whole paragraphs that read as though they had been written for one of the more discursive handbooks to nineteenth century literary history,"[36] wrote one academic critic in a response to the book. *The Master* transcends the available historical accounts and offers a vision of a man's life which is in no way verifiable, since James's interior life is beyond record. Tóibín clearly has a vision of his character (one who avoids commitment, resists intimacy and finds comfort in solitude) and is not afraid to pursue it. Moreover, he is brave enough to speculate, to imagine, to look at the hypotext (historical life) with a fresh eye and ultimately transform it in such a way that a new and original hypertext (fictional life) is generated. Tóibín's attitude to his character, which is characterised by valorisation of fictional account, is emphasised at one point in the novel: "he lived, at times, he felt, as if his live belonged to someone else, a story that had not yet been written, a character who had not been fully imagined."[37] The act of a story being written and the character being fully imagined takes place in *The Master*. Towards the end of the novel, when James's life is finally, only momentarily, peopled by friends and relatives disclosing their plans for the nearest future, James confesses:

> "I have in mind a man who all his life believes that something dreadful will happen to him," Henry said. "He tells a woman of this unknown catastrophe and she becomes his greatest friend, but what he does not see is that his failure to believe in her, his own coldness, is the catastrophe, it has come already, it has lived within him all along."[38]

What James is talking about here and what he is anticipating is the narrative in which he himself is the character, the story of his own life as narrated by Colm Tóibín.

My belief is that Tóibín's version of life-writing is more successful, since, as Joseph Hillis Miller has said, truth about one's life cannot be "penetrated, reached, decoded, revealed, unveiled, and triumphantly brought out into the open where all

36 Moon, "Burn Me at the Stake Always," 642.

37 Colm Tóibín, *The Master* (London: Picador, 2004), 118.

38 Tóibín, *The Master*, 355.

may see it and where it may be told as a coherent narrative,"[39] no matter how precise and proper the procedures of research are. Miller's position is, then, similar to that of Martha C. Nussbaum (though resulting from different methodologies and tenets), namely that a narrative is successful when it is capable of abandoning fact/history. Actually, narrative's triumph lies in its deliberate "failure" to reach and possess history. Two novels are dissimilar then not only in terms of ontological status, but primarily epistemologically, i.e. in the degree of knowledge that can be sought and arrived at.

Finally, the most important question that needs to be posed is that of *Author, Author* and *The Master* as philosophical novels. This, following Nussbaum's framework, could be narrowed down to the question of whether novels pose and offer answers to the query: How should one live? In my opinion, only *The Master* addresses the issue sufficiently. In *Author, Author* the life of Henry James is plainly told, given to the readers to make them informed (and, through its style, entertained). However, the narrative does not ask the readers to judge and evaluate the character's behaviour and the consequences thereof morally. The situation is entirely different in *The Master*, which constantly invites us to pass judgment on the protagonist's acts, especially the ones of a life-determining nature. Nonetheless, judgment is never provided by the narrator, but it is up to us, the readers to formulate. Was James responsible for Fenimore's death? Was his life, devoid of love's nourishing influence, lost? Did his decision to avoid physical and emotional intimacy and companionship ruin his life? Is art worth sacrificing one's life for? The answers that the readers of *The Master* give to these questions consequently lead them to taking a position in a debate on how one should live. My belief is that Tóibín's novel is highly ethical since it directly addresses the issue, with the question being turned into a negative: how should one *not* live? Tóibín seems to suggest that one should not live without love, because love is essential not only for living a full life but also for understanding and pursuing the good – as shown for instance by Plato in *Phaedrus*[40]. When, around the margins of *The Master*, the silent world of love, "its exclusivity and its tumult, (…) a nourishing influence in the ethical life"[41] is perceived, one is bound to wonder if susceptibility to love would have made James a more complete human being, as Freud comments:

> "What would you have us to do when a woman complains about her thwarted life, when, with youth gone she notices that she has been deprived of joy of loving for merely conventional reasons? She is quite right, and we stand helpless before her, for we cannot make her young again. But the recognition of our therapeutic limitations reinforces our determination to change other social factors so that men and women shall no longer be forced into hopeless situations."[42]

My belief is that *The Master* originates in a similar ethical position – a realisation of a person's "thwarted life" and a desire to change the lives of others, the readers, who are to ask: Is this how I should live?

39 Joseph Hillis Miller, "History, narrative, and responsibility: speech acts in *The Aspern Papers*," in *Enacting History in Henry James. Narrative, power, and ethics*, ed. Gert Buelen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 200.

40 Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge*, 52.

41 Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge*, 53.

42 Sigmund Freud, *The Penguin Freud Library* (London: Penguin Books, 1993), 91.

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The aim of this paper was to perform a critical and comparative reading of the "lives" of Henry James. Consequently, *The Master* by Colm Tóibín and *Author, Author* by David Lodge – two of the James-based or James-influences works of fiction that have been published over the last decade or so – have been subjected to qualitative analysis within the interpretative framework provided by Nussbaum's theory postulated in *Love's Knowledge*, which applies moral philosophy to the discussion of literary works. I am aware that other approaches could also be applicable to a comparative reading of biographical novels about Henry James (and biographical novels in general, e.g. describing poetic influence using Harold Bloom's methodology of six revisionary ratios). Still, I hope that the selected method has proven to be both most adequate and fruitful, whereas its application has not only revealed some fundamental qualitative distinctions between the two novels, but has also helped to answer the question which James asks in all of his works, namely "How should one live?" This very question and Tóibín's determination to pose it in his novel result, I am absolutely convinced, in *The Master* – and not *Author, Author* – becoming not only a work of moral philosophy but a truly Jamesian work of art.

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