Henry James: the creation of a “self” image and its critical reception

Promotor: Prof. Dr. M. Demoor
Master dissertation in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of “Master in de Taal-en Letterkunde: Engels-Spaans” by Liese Vanbosch

2008-2009
Acknowledgements:

I had been given the opportunity to steep myself into one of the major intellectual and artistic minds that lived and wrote at the turn of the previous century. The journey that constituted the writing of this MA dissertation has been a long and difficult one. It seemed endless and this feeling is still with me somehow. It seems that in studying Henry James one will never reach the bottom of it. Although this has often been a source of frustration for me, it has enriched me and inspired me to keep digging into James’s legacy. I feel that I have just merely uncovered the tip of the iceberg and that beneath this lies a whole world of knowledge, wisdom and amusement waiting for me.

I would like to thank my promoter Prof. Dr. Marysa Demoor for her proofreading and wise advice. Furthermore, I have to pay my thanks to my friend Steven who was always there for me – during my moments of “utter despair” as well as my moments of “epiphany”.
# 0. Index

1. General introduction ................................................................. p. 4
2. James’s “philosophy” ................................................................. p. 7
   2.1 Introduction ................................................................. p. 7
   2.2 The principle of freedom ................................................ p. 11
   2.3 Life’s mirror ................................................................. p. 15
   2.4 The ideal of unity ........................................................ p. 20
   2.5 The character of the novelist ........................................... p. 21
   2.6 Conclusion ................................................................. p. 24
3. The pitfall of labels ................................................................. p. 25
   3.1 Introduction ................................................................. p. 25
   3.2 The label of realism ...................................................... p. 28
   3.3 Conclusion ................................................................. p. 33
4. Going beyond the labels .......................................................... p. 34
   4.1 Introduction ................................................................. p. 34
   4.2 The creation of a “self” image ........................................ p. 36
      4.2.1 The New York Edition ........................................... p. 42
      4.2.2 Autobiography ...................................................... p. 46
      4.2.3 Notes and Letters ................................................ p. 49
   4.3 A problematic “self” image ............................................. p. 51
   4.4 Conclusion ................................................................. p. 55
5. General conclusion ............................................................... p. 56
6. Bibliography ............................................................................ p. 58
1. General introduction

A man who lived to write and wrote to live. This phrase could have been Henry James’s epitaph. Henry James was born on 15 April 1843 at 21 Washington Place in New York City as the second out of five children of Henry James Sr. and Mary Walsh. Born into this famous and well-educated family, Henry James developed into the kind of artist that we still regard as the prototypical image of a “man of letters”. This image is reflected in the following fragment from James’s preface to Roderick Hudson in the first volume of the New York Edition:

I must that winter (which I again like to put on record that I spent in New York) have brought up my last instalments in due time, for I recall no haunting anxiety: what I do recall perfectly is the felt pleasure, during those months – and in East Twenty-fifth Street! – of trying, on the other side of the world, still to surround with the appropriate local glow the characters that had combined, to my vision, the previous year in Florence. A benediction, a great advantage, as seemed to me, had so from the first rested on them, and to nurse them along was really to sit again in the high, charming, shabby old room which had originally overarched them and which, in the hot May and June, had looked out, through the slits of cooling shutters, at the rather dusty but ever-romantic glare of Piazza Santa Maria Novella. The house formed the corner (I delight to specify) of Via della Scala, and I fear that what the early chapters of the book most ‘render’ to me to-day is not the umbrageous air of their New England town, but the view of the small cab-stand sleepily disposed – long before the days of strident electric cars – round the rococo obelisk of the Piazza, which is supported on its pedestal, if I remember rightly, by four delightful little elephants. (cited Adrian Dover 2009)

1 His father Henry James Sr. was a theologian and social thinker, his brother William was a famous philosopher and psychologist, and his sister Alice is still known for her diaries.
This excerpt actually synthesizes some of James’s essential traits. First, it starts with James’s lifelong occupation of writing. He has left us a considerable legacy of his diverse writings: novels, short stories, travel books, notes, letters, autobiographies and literary and cultural criticisms. Almost everything that happened in his life inspired him to write. Nonetheless, he was also aware that he had to produce to afford a living: he had to hand in his instalments ‘in due time’. Second, this fragment hints at the attraction that Europe had on James. James had come to know Europe through the many visits overseas with the family. He and his brother William had even attended European schools. Eventually, James left America behind him and settled in Great Britain where he became a naturalized subject in 1915, one year before his death. The third aspect present in this fragment is James’s habit of self-representation. He depicts himself as an author who finds himself in a ‘shabby old room’ in Florence sowing the seeds of his imagination. It is this feature of self-creation that has caught the attention of many James scholars. It will also be the focal point of this dissertation.

Writing at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century James had witnessed many socio-economic and cultural changes that also affected the position of the author. According to Marysa Demoor (2004, p.15), ‘the importance of authorship grew in the course of the nineteenth century until, at the end of that century and the beginning of the twentieth, its importance ever preceded the text’. This entailed that authors were in need of a public image which often led to the creation of a “self”. It is this dissertation’s contention to examine how James has created himself such an image and how it has been received and studied throughout the last century.

Chapter 2 has been the starting point of my investigation into this image. In order to explore the image that James created himself as an author, it is necessary to establish James’s view on authors and their occupation. Therefore, I have synthesized his reflections on the novel into what I have called James’s “philosophy”.
Chapter 3 will inquire into the academic method of categorizing James on the basis of his “philosophy”. Through the time many scholars have tried to label James’s literary position. To label an author means to define and pinpoint an aspect of this artistic sensibility. My intention is to expose the pitfalls that come with such a practice.

Chapter 4 will look into the labels that try to establish James’s identity. Whereas the previous labels revolve around his place in the literary scene, these are an attempt to determine the remaining authorial or private aspects of his personality. In search of these characteristics, scholars focus themselves on James’s self-representational writings that include the *New York Edition*, his autobiographical writings and his letters and notes. The “self” image that might be deduced, however, is problematic in nature. Therefore, I will suggest a way to go “beyond” those labels.
2. James’s “philosophy”

2.1. Introduction

Henry James’s fictional writings, his novels as well as his short stories, have become part of our cultural heritage over the years and can now be regarded as part of our common knowledge. His other writings, however, including his non-fictional reviews, criticisms, biographies and travel writing, are often unknown and, to some extent marginalized by the general public. Nevertheless, after browsing through this non-fictional discourse, in particular his literary criticism, one cannot dismiss it without recognizing its eminent position in James’s oeuvre. James was extremely preoccupied with the art and the form of the novel and fiction in itself. According to F.O. Matthiessen (1965, p.1), this feature of self-consciousness can be seen as characteristic of James: ‘No other writer of fiction has bequeathed a comparable body of discourse for the understanding of his art’. Moreover, Matthiessen (1965, p.13) states that this is the direct result of, or as he calls it ‘a compulsive reaction against’, the lack of art and the preoccupation about it in the American literary scene. Be that as it may, it remains a fact that James had an extensive interest in theorizing about his art. This is also reflected in his role as a critic, or, as he saw it, as ‘the helper of the artist, a torch-bearing outrider, the interpreter, the brother’ (James cited Roberts 1948, p.218). He collected his literary criticism in four volumes: *French Poets and Novelists* (1878), *Partial Portraits* (1888), *Essays in London and Elsewhere* (1893) and *Notes on Novelists* (1914). Admirers of James also collected two other volumes, namely *Views and Reviews* (1908) and *Notes and Reviews* (1921). In these writings James was particularly interested in the French literary production. Leon Edel (1956, p.xii) attributes this to a combination of practical and intellectual reasons. In the practical sense, the market was more receptive to articles on French literature than English literature. Besides this commercial motive, the French novelists
were more appealing to James because they themselves were self-consciously involved with issues on art and form. Through his critical notes on these French writers he conveyed much of his discussion on the art of fiction. This aspect of discussion was primordial for James, since he considered critical reflections as an essential part of the development of art in general and of fiction in particular:

Art lives upon discussion, upon experiment, upon curiosity, upon variety of attempt, upon the exchange of views and the comparison of standpoints; and there is a presumption that those times when no one has anything particular to say about it, and has no reason to give for practice or preference, though they may be times of honour, are not times of development – are times, possibly even, a little of dullness. The successful application of any art is a delightful spectacle, but the theory too is interesting […]. […] Discussion, suggestion, formulation, these things are fertilizing when they are frank and sincere. (James 1988, 1970, p.376-377)

In this perspective, James feels called upon to do justice to the two sides of the medal. On the one hand, he vouches for the application of art by being himself a novelist. On the other hand, he functions as a critic who fuels the discussion which keeps the constantly changing stream of art flowing. This is perfectly illustrated by the prefaces that accompany his stories in The New York Edition, first published between 1907 and 1909. In these prefaces James enlightens his readers not only with regard to his artistry applied to that particular story, but he, furthermore, broadens his discourse on fiction in general. Morris Roberts (1948, p.xvi) defines them as ‘[…] the story of a story – the thing caught in the act […]’. Similarly, Richard P. Blackmur (1948, p.viii) states that they represent an ‘artist’s consciousness’. However, despite these adequate assessments, James leaves his reading audience puzzled with these prefaces, since he wrote in 1888 in his essay on Guy de Maupassant the following:

The first artists, in any line, are doubtless not those whose general ideas about their art are most often on their lips – those who most abound in precept, apology, and formula
and can best tell us the reason and the philosophy of things. We know the first usually by their energetic practice, the constancy with which they apply their principles, and the serenity with which they leave us to hunt for their secret in the illustration, the concrete example. (1888, 1970, p.243)

Although these prefaces may at first sight then appear to be contradictory to his own principles (otherwise he may have underestimated his own qualities), they actually are quite compatible with his act of self-creation, as I will touch upon later in this dissertation.

The fact that James devoted his attention in his entire career as a critic pre-eminently to the domain of literature and its representatives is commensurate with the advantages he ascribed to the genre of the novel and its form. He (1888, 1970, p. 407) considers it a form which is free from the rigid conditions under which other arts have to operate. This freedom is a principle that James considers of paramount importance and which he emphasizes strongly in his critical reflections on fiction. Moreover, the novel is in his eyes ‘the most comprehensive and the most elastic [of all pictures]’ (James 1900 cited Edel 1956, p.33). He regards these two features of its freedom and elasticity as the future of the novel when he states:

   The more we consider it the more we feel that the prose picture can never be at the end of its tether until it loses the sense of what it can do. It can do simply everything, and that is its strength and life. Its plasticity, its elasticity are infinite; there is no color, no extension it may not take from the nature of its subject or the temper of its craftsman. (1900, 1956, p.35-36)

Since the novel has this “chameleon” quality to make every subject and temperament its own, it is able to render every experience digestible for its readers. In this aspect lies its third advantage as James (1900 cited Edel 1956, p.33) states that man will always crave after more experience and through this medium of the novel he can get this experience cheaply by living the life of others. This led him to assume boldly that ‘[t]ill the world is an unpeopled void
there will be an image in the mirror’ (1900 cited Edel 1956, p.41). All these advantages, and perhaps also his personal predilection, fed his unwavering belief in the form of the novel and the magic of fiction insofar as he even wanted to deny its obstacle of demanding effort when he replies to a friend who complains that it is too difficult a form: ‘Too difficult indeed; yet there is one way to master it – which is to pretend consistently that it isn’t’ (James 1905 cited Edel 1956, p.119).

After a close reading of James’s non-fictional discourse on fiction it is possible to gather his thoughts and distil a kind of “philosophy”. This encompasses James’s rigorous attempts at dissecting and describing the essence of his art and, thus, providing himself and his contemporaries with a system of principles that tries to explain the “art of fiction”. In my opinion there are four general “categories” in this “system” that summarize best James’s vision. Firstly, there is the overall principle of freedom that constitutes the very starting point of the novel for James. Secondly, I discern his demand for resembling life and be true to it in all its aspects, especially in the rendering of the character’s humanity. Thirdly, there is James’s ideal of unity which arises from the balanced harmony between the story and the form. Fourthly, James provides us with some guidelines on the nature of the novelist.
2.2. The principle of freedom

The requirement of freedom is for James *the* founding principle from which every form of art needs to arise: ‘A healthy, living and growing art, full of curiosity and fond of exercise, has an indefeasible mistrust of rigid prohibitions’ (1888, 1970, p.286). The artist, and especially the novelist, cannot be hampered by restrictions involving thematic or formal issues\(^2\). This means that the conditions that qualify a “good” novel cannot be fixed and the only means to achieve a satisfactory result is, according to James (1888, 1970, p.384), exercise: ‘It lives upon exercise, and the very meaning of exercise is freedom’. It is only when the novelist is granted his freedom that he can develop his subject and arrive at the perfect form which gives this subject its due. James (1905 cited Edel 1956, p.117) calls this freedom of subject choice as ‘*the* great sign of the painter of the first order’. Ultimately, this prerogative of freedom has even internalized itself as it has become an intrinsic part of the creation of art. According to James (1888, 1970, p.398-399), one will be overwhelmed with a sense of freedom when one enters the world of artistic creation.

However much James insists that there must not be pre-established boundaries and demands for the development of a “good” novel, he also believes that such a novel should be interesting. Besides, the principle of freedom also plays a role in achieving the second goals since it leads to a diversity of form and treatment of a subject and, hence, the novel will be of greater interest to its readers. Therefore, James (1888, 1970, p.394-395) advises his fellow critics to leave issues of subject matter to the novelist:

> We must grant the artist his subject, his idea, his *donnée*: our criticism is applied only to what he makes of it. Naturally I do not mean that we are bound to like it or find it interesting: in case we do not our course is perfectly simple – to let it alone.

\(^2\) Although this is James’s basic presumption, he himself is sometimes led to prescribe in his criticism what a “good” novel should emanate. For example, in his view a novel has to deal with issues from the human scene.
This is the only way that James sees the future of the novel secured. There will be subject matter as long as there are people, however, what is to be done with it is of greater importance. The great diversity of genres is the direct result of this freedom and the cause of the continued interest in the novel. James has expressed this idea of a variety of treatment very wittily by means of an already famous metaphor, namely “the house of fiction”, in his preface to *The Portrait of a Lady*:  

The house of fiction has in short not one window, but a million – a number of possible windows not to be reckoned, rather; every one of which has been pierced, or is still pierceable, in its vast front, by the need of the individual vision and by the pressure of the individual will. These apertures, of dissimilar shape and size, hang so, all together, over the human scene that we might have expected of them a greater sameness of report than we find. They are but windows at the best, mere holes in a dead wall, disconnected, perched aloft; they are not hinged doors opening straight upon life. But they have this mark of their own that at each of them stands a figure with a pair of eyes, or at least with a field-glass, which forms, again and again, for observation, a unique instrument, insuring to the person making use of it an impression distinct from every other. (1907-1909 cited Blackmur 1948, p.46)  

The novelist is the spectator at the windows who is looking over the entire human scene in search for a choice of subject. Every pair of eyes beholds this scene from its own angle, through its own ‘apertures’, in order to eventually, after a close scrutinizing with the ‘field glass’, fit the things he sees into his own mould of the literary form.

---

3 ‘Till the world is an unpeopled void there will be an image in the mirror. What need more immediately concern us, therefore, is the care of seeing that the image shall continue various and vivid’ (1900 cited Edel 1956, p.41).

4 This wonderful phrased metaphor deserves to be quoted in its entirety, despite its lengthiness.

5 For the sake of brevity I will always use the masculine pronouns when I speak of the author or the reader, but, of course, it also refers to the feminine writer.
As long as the novelist will stand at his own “window” and seize the freedom that he is handed, the novel will survive and maintain its resplendent position between the other arts. James (1900 cited Edel 1956, p.36-37) assumes that the novel is only to disappear if it is being executed in a superficial and timid way. He states that the future of fiction in general depends upon the society in which it is produced and consumed. He was especially critical about and preoccupied with the literature that was being produced in Anglo-American society at that time. According to James (1900 cited Edel 1956, p.40):

There are too many sources of interest neglected – whole categories of manners, whole corpuscular classes and provinces, museums of character and condition, unvisited; while it is on the other hand mistakenly taken for granted that safety lies in all the loose and thin material that keeps reappearing in forms at once ready-made and sadly the worse to wear. The simple themselves may finally turn against our simplifications; so that we need not, after all, be more royalist than the kind or more childish than the children.

James hoped that English and American writers would be granted more freedom in their writing. One obstacle of considerable measure for these writers was the possibility of handling sex as a subject matter. Edel (1956, p.ix) points out that James himself was also prevented from doing this by his magazine editors, although he found a way to circumvent this problem by using the potential duplicity of words. James regarded the female readers as the main cause of this restricted freedom, which led him to develop a misogynist attitude, as we can infer from these rather harsh enunciations:

A novelist with a system, a passionate conviction, a great plan […] is not now to be easily found in England or the United States, where the storyteller’s art is almost exclusively feminine, is mainly in the hands of timid (even when very accomplished) women, whose acquaintance with life is severely restricted, and who are not conspicuous for general views. The novel, moreover, among ourselves, is almost
always addressed to young unmarried ladies, or at least assumes them to be a large part of the novelist’s public. […] Half of life is a sealed book to young unmarried ladies, and how can a novel be worth anything that deals only with half of life? (James cited Edel 1956, p.94)

The high prosperity of fiction has marched, very directly, with another “sign of the times”, the demoralization, the vulgarization of literature in general, the increasing familiarity of all such methods of communication, the making itself supremely felt, as it were, of the presence of the ladies and children – by whom I mean, in other words, the reader irreflective and uncritical. (James 1900 cited Edel 1956, p.34)

[…] [T]he novel is so preponderantly cultivated among us by women, in other words by a sex ever gracefully, comfortably, enviably unconscious (it would be too much to call them even suspicious) of the requirements of form. (James cited Edel 1956, p.146)

Although, we cannot generalize this attitude since he gave praise on their behalf in an essay on Anthony Trollope, which was collected in Partial Portraits in 1888:

Women are delicate and patient observers; they hold their noses close, as it were, to the texture of life. They feel and perceive the real with a kind of personal tact, and their observations are recorded in a thousand delightful volumes. (1888, 1970, p.101)

Moreover, James had multiple friendships with female writers such as Edith Warton and Constance Fenimore Woolson.
2.3. Life’s mirror

James strongly emphasises that a novel should be a reflection of life. This constitutes his most basic prescription for the novel once the condition of the novelist’s freedom is guaranteed. According to James (1888, 1970, p.384):

A novel is in its broadest definition a personal, a direct impression of life: that, to begin with, constitutes its value, which is greater or less according to the intensity of the impression. But there will be no intensity at all, and therefore no value, unless there is freedom to feel and say.

With this definition James establishes the core of what he believes to be the worth of the novel. The novel should resemble life and its value depends on the degree of its fulfilment. The more it emanates this feeling of life, the greater its value will be for its reading audience. Therefore, James (1888, 1970, p.378-379) sees it as a failure when a novelist drops the pretence of presenting reality and, all the more, when he is being apologetic. A novelist should assume the tone of an historian, likewise occupied with the task to bear witness to man’s actions. The difference with the historian, however, lies in the fact that the latter attempts to represent the whole of life (or at least most of it). The novelist, on the contrary, can only try to capture a meaningful piece of it. James (1907-1909 cited Blackmur 1948, p.120) was well aware of this as he says in his preface to The Spoils of Poynton:

Life being all inclusion and confusion, and art being all discrimination and selection, the latter, in search of the hard latent value with which alone it is concerned, sniffs round the mass as instinctively and unerringly as a dog suspicious of some buried bone.

The degree in which the novelist finds this ‘hard latent value’ constitutes his way to success. James (1907-1909 cited Blackmur 1948, p.312) warns the novelist that, although he has to ‘pluck [his] material […] in the garden of life – which material elsewhere grown is stale and uneatable’, he can ‘[sow] his seed at the risk of too thick a crop’. It is of the utmost
importance to know what to leave out and how to cut to the core of the thing itself. This way there can be no chance that the veil of obscurity blinds the reader’s understanding. Once the material for the subject is found and selected, it is important to render it most sincerely and true to life. James (1888, 1970, p.390) regards this production of the illusion of reality as the novel’s ‘most supreme virtue’. Nevertheless, he also realizes that it is difficult and hazardous to establish absolute categories of reality. Reality can differ according to which perspective is taken and how this translates itself into his experience of it. Therefore, James (1888, 1970, p.390) introduces the notion of having a ‘sense of reality’. The measure for this “sense” is again impossible to pinpoint, but James (1888, 1970, p.388) believes that ‘when the mind is imaginative – much more when it happens to be that of a man of genius – it takes to itself the faintest hints from life, it converts the very pulses of the air into revelation’. If the “imaginative mind” has been able to capture this “sense of reality” in the form of the novel, it does not mean that the function of the novel is now reduced to making the things that surround us accessible for us to comprehend. James (1888, 1970, p.398) has vigorously protested against this assumption:

Many people speak of [the novel] as a factitious, artificial form, a product of ingenuity, the business of which is to alter and arrange the things that surround us, to translate them into conventional, traditional moulds. This, however, is a view of the matter which carries us but a very short way, condemns the art to an eternal repetition of a few familiar clichés, cuts short its development, and leads us straight up to a dead wall. Catching the very note and trick, the strange irregular rhythm of life, that is the attempt whose strenuous force keeps Fiction upon her feet.

It is clear that James attaches much importance to the representation of life and reality in a novel. He wants a novel to convey an impression of life, but an important aspect of this claim is that it is a personal and direct impression. In other words, the novel has to be inspired by experience. The novelist has to write from experience and expertise in a certain field or he
has to report upon other people’s experience. James (1907-1909 cited Blackmur 1948, p.64-65) defines experience as follows:

   Experience, as I see it, is our apprehension and our measure of what happens to us as social creatures – any intelligent report of which has to be based on that apprehension.

Since James considered the novel as an ‘intelligent report’ of experience he thought it necessary that the novelist should be intimate with the experience of the characters that he writes about. In his discussion of Flaubert, for example, he (1902 cited Edel 1956, p.150) exemplifies this by pointing out that Flaubert had three major bourgeois themes because this was the world that was most accessible to him by experience. It is this aspect of experience that he regards as a determining factor for the production of prime art as well as criticism: ‘[…] [t]he best kind, the only kind worth speaking of, is the kind that springs from the liveliest experience’ (1893 cited Roberts 1948, p.218). Moreover, if this experience is brought about as a familiar one, recognizable in the eyes of the reader, it enhances the feeling of beauty. According to Roberts (1948, p.xii), James emphasized this aspect of felt life and experience too much which resulted in an idealized form of experience.

   James applied these intertwined principles of a sense of life and experience to the evaluation of the characters’ constitution in a novel. For James (1907-1909 cited Blackmur 1948, p.257) a story does not appeal to its readers by means of the incidents but by means of the human emotions. This human interest radiates from its centre which is located in the characters of the story. These personages have to be represented in all their humanity. Moreover, their humanity can be augmented by familiarizing the reader with the character by describing his or her identity as fully as possible. It is only this way that the novelist can convey any understanding of the general human character. This notion of the character’s humanity is a recurrent theme in James’s reviews. It is, for example, in this respect that he (cited Edel 1956, p.79) calls Dickens ‘the greatest of superficial novelists’. Dickens is too
artificial for James, because the characters are manufactured instead of “felt”\(^6\). They add nothing to our knowledge of the human character. Similarly, in his criticism on Zola’s *Nana* James stumbles over this absence of completely developed human characters:

The human note is completely absent, the perception of character, of the way that people feel and think and act, is helplessly, hopelessly at fault; so that it becomes almost grotesque at last to see the writer trying to drive before him a herd of figures that never for an instant stand on their legs. (1914 cited Edel 1956, p.96)

In Trollope, however, he praises this author’s natural and unforced gift for character:

His knowledge of the stuff we are made of, his observation of the common behavior of men and women, was not reasoned nor acquired, not even particularly studied. All human doings deeply interested him, human life, to his mind, was a perpetual story [...]. (1888, 1970, p.104)

As a result of this necessary condition of involved humanity and to render the experience of the characters more accurately, James is also concerned with the amount of consciousness that the characters hold. To attract the interest of the reader the characters have to be conscious of their situations (James 1907-1909 cited Blackmur 1948, p.62). They have to feel their condition and, consequently, extract the maximum sense out of it. It is through the characters who give meaning to what happens to them that the reader can empathise with them and their situations. However, James realizes, at the same time, that this consciousness may not become too heavy:

They may carry too much of it for our credence, for our compassion, for our derision. They may be shown as knowing too much and feeling too much – not certainly for their remaining remarkable, but for their remaining “natural” and typical, for their having the needful communities with our own precious liability to fall into traps and be bewildered. (James 1907-1909 cited Blackmur 1948, p.63)

\(^{6}\) This concerns the review of Dickens’s story *Our Mutual Friends.*
The reader has to be able to believe in the character. Therefore, a character has to be properly identified and be equipped with an intensified consciousness that, nevertheless, allows the character to remain natural and its experiences familiar. Despite James’s pleas for the human and natural tone of a character, Roberts (1948, p.xii) states that James ‘could not conceive of a novel without a hero’. Instead of being human, this hero appears to be of a superior character who is able to extract meaning out of his experiences and of life in general. The question as to whether or not James prefers a superior hero can be dismissed as a difference of semantics. What can be defined as “superior” can differ from person to person. For James this supposedly “superior” character is human in all its aspects, just as a projected “inferior” character can be human. What matters is that both are the result of the novelist’s mind that reflects upon a piece of life out of which he took his subject and character. Only when the novelist does not limit himself to the superficial, but, instead, invests in creating an intimacy with the subject will he produce a character that is intrinsically human. Therefore, in the distinction that James sees between the English and the French writers of his time, he does not take sides. The English writer is, according to James (1888, 1970, p.124), more concerned with moral issues, whereas the French writer finds this an inferior preoccupation. James, as a critic, finds the golden means between these two opposite poles: as long as the novel presents life and human characters that are fully developed there is no reason to criticize. For example, he (cited Edel 1956, p.79-96) condemns Zola’s Nana as well as Dickens’s Our mutual friend for its absence of felt life and humanity; nevertheless, he (1914 cited Edel 1956, p.187-191) praises Zola’s oeuvre for the sense of life it emanates despite the writer’s scientific approach.
2.4. The ideal of unity

James thought of the novel in dualistic terms: its story and its form. He had no specific prescriptions of what either should be made of. Every story is for him a story, whether it is built up around a series of adventures or around a psychological issue (1888, 1970, p.403). He considers the form of the novel to be its execution - how the thing is done – which in itself may hold beauty. Although, the ultimate beauty can only arise when the story and the form work in unison like the needle and the thread:

> The story and the novel, the idea and the form, are the needle and thread, and I never heard of a guild of tailors who recommended the use of the thread without the needle, or the needle without the thread. (James 1888, 1970, p.400)

Matthiessen (1965, p.15) observes that James was certainly not an aesthete since he was well aware of the importance of subject matter. Nevertheless, he realized that that importance was interconnected with how the subject was filtered through the meshes of the net that is the novelist’s own experience and which is transmitted through the form. James’s anti-aesthetic attitude is illustrated in his praise of the form much as that of Flaubert’s Madame Bovary:

> The form is in itself as interesting, as active, as much of the essence of the subject as the idea, and yet so close is its fit and so inseparable its life that we catch it at no moment on any errand of its own. (James cited Edel 1956, p.137)

The subject finds its origins in the idea, whereas the form constitutes the novelist’s angle on the idea and his style of writing. Style is in itself not enough for James (cited Edel 1956, p.154-155), not even when we are reading with an eye for the literary. A reader needs more than style and form to enjoy the novel: material and form are ‘the inevitable faces of the same medal’ (James cited Edel 1956, p.229). It is only when all these components are fused into a complete picture that the result may approach perfection (James 1905 cited Edel 1956, p.120).
2.5. The character of the novelist

In his critical writings James (1905 cited Edel 1956, p.108) has discerned an additional of the novel: the presence of the author. This concerns an atmosphere that is comparable to the nature of the novelist’s mind. According to James:

There would be much to say […] on this question of the projected light of the individual strong temperament in fiction – the color of the air with which this, that or the other painter of life (as we call them all), more or less unconsciously suffuses his picture. I say unconsciously because I speak here of an effect of atmosphere largely, if not wholly, distinct from the effect sought on behalf of the special subject treated; something that proceeds from the contemplative mind itself, the very complexion of the mirror in which the material is reflected. (1905 cited Edel 1956, p.108)

The spirit and temperament of this “imaginative mind” are being projected unconsciously into the novel, creating the sense of his presence that becomes tangible through the act of reading. However, it is impossible to capture it in an accurate description since this is a mere subjective notion that has not come from a pre-established design. The author himself is not conscious of this process and, therefore, not able to manufacture – by means of his genius – a desired emanation of himself. In order to leave behind such an impression, the author, first of all, has to be intimate with his subject and the world that he creates. James (1905 cited Edel 1956, p.115) requires of the author an intense engagement, a ‘saturation’, without which there can be no persuasive illusion of life: ‘When saturation fails no other presence really avails; as when, on the other hand, it operates, no failure of method fatally interferes’. Therefore, James sees the task of the novelist as being twofold: he has to feel his subject and convey it to the reader (James cited Edel 1956, p.156). These two objectives are mutually dependent: the more he gets involved with the subject the better he can render it, and vice versa.
If the novelist, just like other artists, succeeds in suffusing his work with the necessary saturation James regards him, as Edel (1956, p.xv) nicely summarizes, as ‘the one individual who gives a permanent and enduring shape to a life that is evanescent and perishable’. Herein lies his great privilege: that of recording something as valuable and transitory as life in a form that is equally valuable but lasting. This form provides the novelist with the benefit of freedom in terms of its execution. Nevertheless, this freedom simultaneously constitutes the novelist’s burden of responsibility. He has to answer the call of high expectations and safeguard the overall quality of the novel. In order to record life the novelist has to be equipped with a special gift, as James (1888, 1970, p.389) expresses it:

The power to guess the unseen from the seen, to trace the implication of things, to judge the whole piece by the pattern, the condition of feeling life in general so completely that you are well on your way to knowing any particular corner of it.

The novelist must be acquainted with every aspect of life and humanity. Therefore James (cited Edel 1956, p.79-80) advances that ‘a novelist very soon has need of a little philosophy’. The novelist has to develop a special eye for the condition of not only men, but, especially, of man in general. Like a philosopher, the novelist has to understand the nature of man and this can only be achieved through the process of generalizing. By presenting concrete representatives of men and women and their ordinary, human conditions the novelist has to be able to draw generalizations that can enlighten the perspective on human nature. Although the novelist has to be intimate with the passions and human emotions he represents in his novels, he has to keep a sort of intellectual distance in order to deliver them truthfully and thoroughly fathomed. However, James (cited Edel 1956, p.89) warns against becoming too “philosophic” and losing the simplicity that is necessary when one wants to avoid obscurity. This is why, for example, James rejects Eliot’s *Middlemarch* and its ‘transcendental flights’.

When a novelist has mastered all these guidelines, he can become a “novelist’s novelist” for James. He speaks of this notion with relation to Turgenev and Flaubert, for
example, and the phrase refers to ‘an artistic influence extraordinarily valuable and ineradicably established’ (cited Edel 1956, p.228). From this follows that a novelist does not stand alone, but is positioned in a long tradition of preceding and contemporary fellow writers to which they can compare themselves.
2.6. Conclusion

These observations are in a nutshell what we could call James’s “philosophy”. Not a philosophy in the sense that James uses the word when he speaks of the novelist’s understanding of mankind, but in the sense of his creation of a system of principles that constitutes his vision of fiction and of art in general. He abides by these “rules” which provide him with a closed and profound value system. These values are centred around the notions of freedom, sincerity, humanity and intellectuality. For James the novelist is free from any restrictions, not even formal ones, as long as he is concerned with life itself. The scene of life has to be the novelist’s source of inspiration. Nevertheless it does not suffice that the subject matter reflects life, the novel has to be surrounded by a veil of life and experience. The characters have to shed their roles of puppets and come to life in this novelesque world. To fulfil this task the novelist needs to be closely involved with his subject and penetrate into its folds until he reaches the bottom.

Now that I have established the contents of this “philosophy”, it is of greater importance to survey its implications for the reception of James’s critical writings. How have scholars made use of these reflections, what have they done with it?
3. The pitfall of labels

3.1 Introduction

Such a “philosophy”, dispersed by a vast body of critical writings, cannot and has not been neglected by various critical responses since James until this day. Over the years James’s ideas, and by extension the application of these in his fiction, have been closely scrutinized from various angles. In this period of more than 90 years the critical reception of Henry James has not stagnated or frozen into a monolithic approach and vision. The critical interest in James has known several revivals which brought about innovative perspectives on the whole figure of Henry James. This way we can speak of several “Henry Jameses”, placed in different interpretive frameworks that focus on his cultural, national, sexual or literary position. These frameworks include among others New Criticism, deconstruction, feminism, Marxism, and New Historicism. Moreover, more recent critical reflections have adapted their concerns to the changing times through which the study of James has entered the realm of postcolonialism, race issues and sexual queerness, as Jonathan Freedman (1998, p.1) and many others have already observed.

Starting from James’s “philosophy” as described above, many critics have focused on a discussion of James’s literary position. Generally, James is immediately associated with realism. From the most popular sources, like the online encyclopaedia of Wikipedia for example, to the more well-informed opinions in the academic world James has been discussed as a representative of the realist tradition. In what follows in this chapter, I have traced the line of thought of those who have labelled James and his work as “realist”. These discussions are selected randomly to show that this label of “realism” is prevalent throughout the times and the different domains of expertise in James studies. Besides this “realist” label, James’s work has also been explored, although in a lesser degree, in the literary context of
melodrama. In this tradition, *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama, and the Mode of Excess* (1976, 1995) by Peter Brooks is of prime interest. This work is of primordial importance for any study of melodrama and it is rather notable that it includes a discussion of James’s position in this genre.

Although these labels have their inner logic and can be helpful to orientate the average reader, this process of labelling limits a full appreciation of the author’s artistic sensibility and creations. It categorizes the fruits of an artistic mind and, thereby, reduces its implications solely with the purpose to grasp it more easily and make it more accessible. The production of an author should be evaluated on its own terms without feeling the necessity to confine it to pre-existing formal categories. Also James’s artistic ideas have felt the burden of this labelling practice, as I will show in this chapter. Ironically, James (cited Roberts 1948, p.218) has already warned against such practices from his own experiences as a critic:

> There are a hundred labels and tickets, in all this matter, that have been pasted on from the outside and appear to exist for the convenience of passers-by; but the critic who lives in the house, ranging through its innumerable chambers, knows nothing about the bills on the front.

For James a classification of fiction is besides the point. As pointed out in the first chapter, every writer must have his freedom and this leads to diversity. It is not a label that defines an author and his work, but rather how he interprets the impression of life that he wants to represent:

> […] [W]hat the sincere critic says is, “Make me something fine in the form that shall suit you best, according to your temperament.” This seems to me to put into a nutshell the whole question of the different classes of fiction, concerning which there has recently been so much discourse. There are simply as many different kinds as there

---

7 I discussed James, for example, in my bachelor paper *Melodrama and emotionality: Austen, Brönte, James* (2008).
are persons practicing the art, for if a picture, a tale, or a novel be a direct impression of life (and that surely constitutes its interest and value), the impression will vary according to the plate that takes it, the particular structure and mixture of the recipient.

(James cited Edel 1956, p.195)

However, the future has worked out differently. James has not escaped the labels which have brought him forth as an heir of Balzac, either as a follower of the realist tradition or as an author deeply influenced by melodramatic traits.
### 3.2 The label of realism

It requires only a small effort to hear a realist voice in James’s “philosophy”. He insists repeatedly on the importance of representing life and being true to it. From the subject matter over the author's involvement to the representation of the characters, it must all emanate the “air of reality”. Therefore it is not surprising that many a scholar has been drawn to the pitfall of the label “realism”. Peter Brooks (2005, p. 12) defines realism as follows:

Realism as we know it, as a label we apply to a period and a family of works, very much belongs to the rise of the novel as a relatively rule-free genre that both appealed to and represented the private lives of the unexceptional – or rather, found and dramatized the exceptional within the ordinary, creating the heroism of everyday life.

Starting from this definition, Brooks guides the reader through the world of realism in *Realist Vision* (2005). With respect to literary realism he selects authors like Balzac, Dickens, Flaubert, Eliot, Zola and James to discuss the impact of the genre. Realism as defined above can be traced through time following these selected authors. Also James can be seen as a part of this tradition, although in a later stage of it. This practice of tracing back James’s influences and trying to secure his position in the literary landscape is not exclusive to Brooks. Roberts (1948, p.xii), for example, points out that James thought of himself as ‘a disciple of Balzac and Maupassant as well as Turgenev’, placing himself in the realist tradition. However, Roberts disagrees with this assessment since he does not find enough of the ordinary life in James’s work. In other words, James does not comply to realism as it is defined previously by Brooks (2005). Lyall Powers (cited Linda Simon 2007, p.90), on the contrary, does not only place James among realists but goes a step further in determining James’s naturalist influences. He states that James was influenced by writers such as Gustave Flaubert, Ivan Turgenev, Emile Zola, Edmond de Goncourt, Alphonse Daudet, Guy de Maupassant and, subsequently, also Balzac. According to Powers, it is due to these writers
that James changed his literary technique and subject matter so that James now did tackle social issues that included the lower classes.

Although most of these critics trace more or less the same genealogical “realist” tree, Matthiessen (1965, p.14) points out that James himself thought of realism ‘as mere literal reporting’. Whether or not James considered himself part of this tradition, most attention has been dedicated to James’s statements about the realist spirit that a novel must set forth and how he has put this into practice himself. One of the first to comment on this is Leon Edel (1956, p.xii) when he credits James for ‘devising methods by which the narrative technique itself could add further dimensions of reality to his story-telling’. This way Edel ascribes to James the merit of changing realism’s mere reporting techniques. In a similar way, Naomi Lebowitz (1962, p.vii) has made an effort to determine these methods that Edel (1956) discerns as the guarantees of James’s reality:

The emphasis upon the controlled point of view in a highly conscious character, upon the immediate rendering through that character of scene and picture (replacing the authorial “telling” of the story), upon the careful use of metaphor which distinguishes one character’s vision from another’s – these are the very guarantees of what James calls “solidity of specification,” guarantees against “leakage” of the novel’s “air of reality”.

As Lebowitz (1962) indicates, the reporting technique or the authorial “telling” that James regarded as the feature of realism has been changed into a “showing” through the senses of a conscious character. This narrative technique is a means to secure the idea of life and reality in the novel, a point at which James kept hammering away. According to Lebowitz (1962), this transformation led to a realism that accounts for life in all its complexities. Moreover, she considers the novel as the only literary form that has the capacity to render James’s realism in all its due. This issue of the relation between the genre of the novel and realism has been a great source of frustration for H.G. Wells. He was for a certain period of time James’s
neighbour in Rye and a friend. Their relationship had been one of master and disciple whereby James instructed Wells in his views on the art of the novel. However, their artistic ideas and ambitions had been too divergent so that had ultimately meant the end of their friendship. One of the obstacles between the two of them had been their ideas about the intrinsic characteristics of the novel. Also Wells labelled James as a realist on the basis of this latter’s insistence on the novel’s resemblance of life:

> And the only point upon which I might have argued but which I did not then argue, was this, that the Novel was not necessarily, as he assumed, this real through and through and absolutely true treatment of people more living than life. It might be more and less than that and still be a novel. (H.G. Wells in *Experiment in Autobiography* cited Edel, Ray 1959, p.219-220)

This shows that both contemporaries of James and critics that came after him alike have focused on James’s own “philosophy” to attach the label “realism” to him. Nevertheless, whereas Wells was more concerned with the novel’s realism on a meta-level in terms of its purpose and function, Lebowitz discusses James’s realism more concretely. She makes a statement for James’s representation of real life in all its complexities. For example, she (1962, p.viii) points to the element of the open ends in several of James’s greater works as to illustrate James’s accurate realism and to oppose the ideas that his is an artificial reality. Many scholars have followed her in this line of thought when they commented on the psychological accuracy of the Jamesian character. One of these is Linda Simon (2007, p.23) who regards James’s quality to represent ‘palpable’ characters in their struggle with ‘social, political, cultural and even sexual passions’ as a part of his success as a realist. Peter Brooks (2005) proceeds in a similar way, but contextualizes it in the broader world of realism. According to Brooks (2005, p.2):
It claims to offer us a kind of reduction – *modèle réduit* – of the world, compacted into a volume that we know can provide, for the duration of our reading, the sense of a parallel reality that can almost supplant our own.

Nonetheless, in order to create this sense of *ersatz* reality its inhabitants have to resemble real people. Brooks (2005, p.5) specifies that “real” does not only apply to dress and appearance, but, especially, to social function and psychology. It is only when the reader can empathise with the character that he can fully experience the life represented. This idea is almost literally compatible with James’s view on the matter. Moreover, James insisted on the pretence of reality that had to be held up by the novelist himself to fully create a fictional world in which the reader could believe. This is another characteristic of the realist that Brooks (2005, p.228) discerns: ‘The realist needs to believe that fictional worlds, people and things represented in language, are seriously important’. Next to Simon and Brooks, also Edel observes James’s talent for psychological exploration. In his introduction to *Partial Portraits* (1880, 1970) Edel (1970, p.viii) draws the line further in the sense that he sees in James a ‘great natural psychologist’ because of the form of literary portraiture that James’s criticism takes in this collection of essays.

Although it is clear that these critics are all involved in the practice of labelling, this does not mean that some of them are not conscious of this and understand the danger of it. Peter Brooks (2005, p.180), especially, is very much aware of this when he says: ‘Henry James’s relation to the realist tradition is complex, nuanced, evolving over time […]’. Brooks (2005, p.20) recognizes that this ambivalent relation does not have to be problematic, but can actually hold the key to great literature: ‘[…] [W]e discover that any label such as “realism” is inadequate and that great literature is precisely that which understands this inadequacy’. However Brooks has reached the insight that James is certainly an author who escapes the label “realist” and is aware of this himself to a certain degree, he still makes his case for James’s realism. Besides stressing repeatedly James’s vision of the novel as a representation
of life, he also points to the fact that James’s criticism nearly always centred around the failure to represent (2005, p.180). Brooks is not the only one who realized the complexity of labels, since recent critical work has developed more complex labels. Sam Ludwig (cited Simon 2007, p.108), for example, has studied the connection between realist fiction and pragmatism in Pragmatist Realism: The Cognitive Paradigm in American Realist Texts (2002). Furthermore, there is Victoria Coulson’s study of James’s “ambivalent realism” in Henry James, Women and Realism (2007). She discusses the fact that in realism the world is often filled with innumerable objects which ‘bear a great weight of semiotic importance’ (2007, p.11-12), but goes on to say that in James it has the function to express an ambivalence towards authority: ‘[…] James uses the difference between overt and covert meaning to encode conflict within representation, structuring the text as a site of resistance to semiotic authority’ (2007, p.18).
3.3 Conclusion

This concise chapter has brought to light some of the dangers of the practice of labelling. Despite the fact that many acknowledge its dangers, it still remains a pitfall which is not easily avoided. The brief discussion (supra) of James’s possible position in the realist tradition is just exemplary as one among the many labels that have been attached to James during the years. It is also a logical starting point in the comparison of such a label that defines James’s literary position with the labels which are different in nature and that will follow in the next chapter.
4. Going beyond the labels

4.1 Introduction

In his career James himself has warned time and again against labelling and categorizing. Any classification of fiction was artificial and unnecessary, or as James (cited Edel 1956, p.15-16) puts it:

There are bad novels and good novels, as there are bad pictures and good pictures; but that is the only distinction in which I see any meaning. [...] [T]he only classification of the novel that I can understand is into that which has life and that which has it not.

James refers here to the distinction that was being made between the novel of incident and the novel of character. Nevertheless, it is also applicable to the labels that have been pasted on fiction, and by extension on the author, ever since. Not only literary labels like those discussed in the previous chapter can limit an author’s legacy, but also those labels that address the author’s identity. Since the late nineteenth century a fascination involving the figure of the author grew in connection with the commercialization of the cultural space. This brought about a celebrity cult that revolved around the author. The private and the public sphere of the author got confounded and which led to an awareness among authors of their public image. James got also involved in these complex developments and his dual relation to the phenomenon of “publicity” has been eloquently traced by Richard Salmon in Henry James and the culture of publicity (1997). Salmon (1997) shows the ambivalent dynamics of the author’s position that arose with this mediatised culture. These developments have only been intensified throughout the years to the extent that a novel’s cover now usually contains biographical information about the author. This culture of publicity has also infiltrated the academic world: the author’s identity is also being labelled. Particularly in James studies many critics peruse his fictional and non-fictional writings in search of evidences that corroborate their theories about James’s cultural, sexual, political or authorial identity. Many
of these critics agree with the statement that James has created himself an authorial image, but, more importantly, many have unconsciously created themselves an image of James. Queer studies, for example, have tried to determine James’s alleged homosexuality or homoeroticism on the basis of his fictional and his critical “autobiographical” writings. The conclusions to which these studies have led can offer insightful perspectives on the figure of Henry James on their own terms. However, they remain reductive labelling practices that answer to a certain self-fulfilling prophecy. Leon Edel *par excellence* created his own “Henry James” by holding back bits of James that did not correspond to his picture (as will be discussed later on).

In what follows, a closer look will be taken to the creation of this “self” image. Particularly how this “self” image has come into existence and what scholars have done with it. Subsequently, the notion of this “self” image of James will be denounced and brought into a more relative perspective.
4.2 The creation of a “self” image

In the latter half of the nineteenth century the literary and cultural space changed drastically. It is more specifically the author’s situation that felt the impact of the transformations that the commercialization of the literary market place brought with. The most prominent transformation in this respect is the changing dynamics of the phenomenon “publicity”, which has been described in depth by Richard Salmon (1997). In the eighteenth century this phenomenon emerged as a tool to rein in the state’s authority. The public’s interests came together in the formation of a critical body that had the task of exposing the private interests concealed behind public policy. This changed in the nineteenth century that witnessed the rise of a culture based on a market economy and mass media principles. Moreover, the political landscape democratized which led to a fragmentation of public interests and made a unified critical voice superfluous. The critical function that dominated the eighteenth-century form of publicity was now being replaced by a pre-capitalistic one in which private interests have the upper hand. Whereas the former notion of publicity encouraged the separation of private and public affairs, the latter and modern form promotes an infiltration of the private sphere by the public, and vice versa. This atmosphere of “publicity” translated itself to the situation of the author: ‘Whereas, formerly, authorship had occupied a space between private and public spheres, in the latter half of the nineteenth century it was increasingly subsumed into the latter’ (Salmon 1997, p.78). Authors were now increasingly being confronted with the presence of the public and their own public status. This preoccupation was only intensified by the fact that this period knew an expansion of readership. Salmon (1997, p.46) mentions an important consequence of this development:

The belief that literary ‘success’ was increasingly determined by the ‘demand’ of a mass publicpowerfully reshaped existing conceptions of the relationship between authors and readers’.
The writer had lost some of his artistic autonomy since he became more dependent on the reader’s tastes for the appreciation of his work. At this point, the relationship between the author and the reader had been completely subverted. A status of celebrity was being attributed to the figure of the author on the basis of his whole identity instead of his work. An important factor that enabled this culture of publicity was the new biographical and journalistic practices. One of these was the so-called New Journalism that saw the light in the 1880s and 1890s (Salmon 1997, p.108). The innovative aspect was the technique of the interview in which a journalist’s presence was crucial and which sought to uncover the private sphere of its subjects, which were mostly authors. Salmon (1997, p.34) also points to a practice that started in the 1870s that is another clear example of the intrusion of the private sphere of the author by the public drive of curiosity. This new trend consisted of the publication of illustrated articles in British and American newspapers and periodicals in which well-known authors would be interviewed in their homes. These homes would be described in detail and often ‘figured as a world of bourgeois domesticity, refined tastes and luxurious consumption’, as Salmon (1997, p.34) observes.

All these new developments clearly reinforced the blurring of the private and public sphere of the author. Nothing was safe anymore from the public’s thirst for consumption. Nevertheless, it is not that black-and-white since most authors take a rather ambivalent stance towards this commercialized and popularized literary market. On the one hand, these authors are attracted by a wide, varied readership and the ensuing financial profits. On the other hand, they feel uncertain about the intrusion that their private life has to endure. James was no exception in this respect:

---

8 This opened the debate between, on the one hand, ‘art for art’ and, on the other hand, ‘art for the public’, as Salmon (1997, p.46-47) summarizes.
Henry, Alice, Constance and Edith are driven by an intense desire to write for a public readership, while at the same time experiencing an unrelenting anxiety about what they feel to be the risk of this public presence – psychological vulnerability. What each fears is that, through their relationship with their published texts, their private being may become public meaning. (Victoria Coulson 2007, p.20)

James’s ambivalent attitude towards this modern phenomenon has been discussed and analysed in depth. Michael Anesko (cited Salmon 1997, p.47), for example, has made us aware of James’s hunger for popular acceptance and his understanding of the financial benefits of such a literary market. Jonathan Freedman (1998, p.18) also endorses to this viewpoint:

Striking the stances of the Flaubertian aesthete and the avid businessman; searching high cultural distinction and a financially remunerative popular success; incorporating mass cultural topoi into his texts and yet at the same time proclaiming his distaste for its overt manifestations: these define a distinctive position of the Jamesian artist standing both inside and outside the literary marketplace at one and the same time.

Furthermore, Freedman (1998, p.17) highlights the fact that James was the first major writer of his time to take on a literary agent and use the new invention of the typewriter to record his works. However, James also saw the other side of the picture. Salmon (1997, p.2) claims that James was troubled about the new trends of publicity – especially concerning those that affect the author’s position – during the whole span of his career. In both his critical writings and his fiction, references to this preoccupation keep recurring. In ‘The Aspern Papers’, for example, James is concerned with the invasive practices that biographers and journalists can apply to an author’s private manuscripts. Another illustration can be found, somewhat ironically, in an anecdote from James’s notebooks. James comments in his notebook’s entry of 17 November 1887 on a story of an American woman who had sent a letter to the New York World in
which she describes the Venetian society and its hospitality in which she had just spent some time:

One sketches one’s age but imperfectly if one doesn’t touch on that particular matter: the invasion, the impudence and shamelessness, of the newspaper and the interviewer, the devouring *publicity* of life, the extinction of all sense between public and private. It is the highest expression of the note of ‘familiarity’, the sinking of manners, in so many ways, which the democratization of the world brings with it. (cited Salmon 1997, p.14)

According to James, this was yet another example of the craze of publicity. However, James indulged in a similar practice when he wrote his prefaces to the New York Edition in which he describes, often in detail, the place and the circumstances of the origin of a certain story. All these details clarify James’s ambivalent attitude, which Salmon (1997, p.76) has nicely summarized as: ‘If James refused to sever his links with the mass market, equally he wished to maintain his distance from it’.

It is quite obvious that in such a “public” time an author like James is sympathetic with the image of the author and, more particularly, his own. In his introduction to *Partial Portraits*, Leon Edel (1970, p.vi) points to the fact that James was very much preoccupied with the notion of “portrait”. In this book of collected essays James sketches the figures and the works of famous nineteenth-century befriended writers. Moreover, James believed that a writer could not leave himself out of his work and should be considered together with it in any constructive criticism (Edel 1970, p.vii). This had led Edel (1970, p.xvi) to assert that ‘it must be said that no figure in the book [*Partial Portraits*] is more interesting than that of Henry James himself’. Edel does not stand alone with such a claim since many scholars have been interested in determining various aspects of *the* “Henry James” by studying his writings. It is actually James himself who has inspired these investigators through the creation of an image of himself. In fact, James is said to have ‘edited his image for posterity’ (Linda Simon...
out of his longing for popular acclaim and, as Freedman (1998, p.1) states, his ‘desire for canonical status’\(^9\). Another possible source of James’s preoccupation with his image for his contemporaneous as well as his future reading public can be found in his ‘biographical anxieties’ (Coulson 2007, p.186). James dreaded the possibility that his private papers could enter the public sphere nor did he like the idea of the publication of a biography of him that would appear after his death (Salmon 1997, p.86). As Salmon (1997, p.84) asserts, James regarded ‘the publication of private texts to be a violation of the author himself’. With this anxious thought in the back of his mind, James destroyed several times parts of his private documents like some of his letters. Coulson (2007, p.186) mentions the incident when James, after the death of Constance Fenimore Woolson in 1894, destroyed the letters that she had received from him during the fourteen years of their friendship. Nevertheless, James was certainly not that naïve as to believe that this act of destruction would hold off future biographers. Coulson (2007, p.187) points out that the destruction actually entails the opposite effect:

> […] [F]ar from protecting private information, the burning of personal documents is a gesture of such self-conscious drama that it works rather to heighten the volatile

\(^9\) Part of this "self" image is his authorial status. An illustration of this is James’s tendency in *Partial Portraits* (1880) to place himself among his famous literary friends. According to Edel (1970, p.xi):

> They [the essays that are included in *Partial Portraits*] show us James in his artist’s world looking at his fellow artists. Yet he keeps his distance; he does not fall into the error of personal description; he will not invade privacy; and he will not commit the human fault of self-aggrandizement by the company he has kept.

So, maybe he does not aggrandize himself by describing in what literary company he had walked, yet he may have created himself an image as an author who was well settled in the literary high society of his day.
relationship between privacy and publicity. In other words, the destruction of papers consolidates the existence of scandal: the contents of the letters become less important than the very existence of the letters themselves, which take over the function of signifieds at the moment of their ostentatious destruction.

According to Salmon (1997, p.86), James realized that trying to keep these “intruders” at a distance could be considered an impossible task. Therefore, James turned it into a game to make it them as difficult as could be. However, history has confirmed this “law of curiosity”.

Despite (or maybe due to) James’s efforts to destroy his letters to Woolson, there has been much speculation about the nature of their relationship, for example in Lyndall Gordon’s *A Private Life of Henry James* (1998).

James’s creation of a “self” image has not only inspired scholars in their investigation into the concrete contents of this image. It has, for example, also influenced Leon Edel’s own “self” image. Besides creating his own ‘Mr. Edel’s Henry James’, as Kenneth Graham (cited Simon 2007, p.69) coins, he also created his own image in the course of his James study:

Edel did not only damage the image that James elaborated for himself by manipulating the documents of his private letters and notes, he also created himself an own image as *the biographer* of Henry James (Linda Simon 2007, p.65).

This manipulation of James’s documents finds its source in the nature of Edel’s relation towards James which Fred Kaplan (cited Simon 2007, p.72) denominates as ‘a myopic hero-worship’. This way Edel did not want to consider the possibility of James being homosexual because this did not fit his image of him. Moreover, Simon (2007, p.63) places Edel’s actions in the light of a ‘feeling of identification’ with James. However, she regards Edel’s ‘desire for recognitions of his talents and even for fame’ as *the* point of correspondence with James. In the case of James we can say that his dream for fame has come true: he has even inspired other novelists to use him as a character, like Colm Tóibín’s *The Master* (2004) and David Lodge’s *Author, Author* (2004) for example.
For the study of this “self” image, most scholars have focused themselves on James’s non-fictional writings. Parts of these have already been discussed in James’s “philosophy” in chapter 2. This chapter will further provide an account of the remaining texts that constitute James’s “self” portrait. These include *The New York Edition* (1907-1909), his notes and letters, and his three autobiographical volumes *A small Boy and Others* (1913), *Notes of a Son and Brother* (1914), and *The Middle Years* (1917).¹⁰

### 4.2.1 The New York Edition

Between 1907 and 1909 James’s *New York Edition*, bearing the official title of *The Novels and Tales of Henry James*, was published by Charles Scribner’s Sons. In this twenty-four volume edition James collected carefully his novels and tales that had to be preserved and serve as a safeguard for his literary reputation. Alfred Habegger (cited McWhirter 1995, p.185) asserts that ‘[b]y July 30, 1905 […] [James] was aware he had not yet imposed his monument on the world’. According to Simon (2007, p.27), this nostalgic mood was related to James’s return from a trip to America in 1905. James had not seen his motherland for a long time and found himself confronted with a culturally transformed scene. This made him reminisce about his past life and career. These reflections gave rise to the publication of a collection of essays in *The American Scene* (1907) and of a compilation of his best works, known as the *New York Edition* (1907-1909). Michael Anesko (cited McWhirter 1995, p.77) states that this latter work ‘might be seen as an attempt to repair the novelist’s esteem among his native audience, a gesture of reconciliation’. Hence, the reference to the city of his birth and the place of publication in the title of this ambitious edition. Its ambitiousness is reflected in many of its aspects. One of these is its material appearance as a deluxe edition. Eric

---

¹⁰ It is not my intention to provide a full discussion of these works, but, rather, to situate them and explain their self-representational character.
Leuschner (cited Simon 2007, p.29) points out that the “deluxe” format was a nineteenth-century phenomenon that was meant to place its author on a pedestal. These deluxe editions were not sold in bookstores, but by subscription. This made them into a valuable collector’s item and allowed them to avoid competition with the ordinary editions of the individual works (Anesko cited McWhirter 1995, p.78). James was drawn to this format because of its promising reading audience and the financial profits that he hoped it would make. Moreover, Ira Nadel (cited McWhirter 1995, p.4) asserts that James even put aside his doubts concerning accompanying illustrations to enhance his commercial chances. Therefore, he contacted Alvin Langdon Coburn to equip each volume with a photographic frontispiece. Nevertheless, James was involved in the selection process of the illustrations. These pictures do not represent familiar scenes or characters drawn from the fictions, because James did not want his stories to be supported by pictorial material (Paul B. Armstrong cited McWhirter 1995, p.127).

Although this embellished publishing format had its desired results in the nineteenth century, the early twentieth-century market did not favour it any more. Despite James’s initial belief in his project, he soon experienced a rude awakening when he received in 1908 a check for a meagre $211 from his literary agent (Simon 2007, p.39).

Although this *New York Edition* may resemble nineteenth-century deluxe books in its physical appearance, it is quite unique on its own. James has not only collected the works that he deemed worthy to represent his legacy\(^{11}\). Firstly, he revised some of the included works *in extremis* with the purpose of ‘[bringing] them to the level of his maturity’, as Edel (1956, p.42) claims\(^{12}\). Jerome McGann (cited McWhirter 1995, p.109) regards the places of revision

---

\(^{11}\) He actually left out several works – the ‘potboilers’ as Edel (1956, p.42) has called them – such as *Washington Square* (1880) and *The Europeans* (1878) for example.

\(^{12}\) Philip Horne (cited Freedman 1998, p.69) explains in his essay *Henry James at Work: The Question of Our Texts* an important consequence of these extensive revisionary practices. The fact that an author like James has produced several versions of one text has made later editorial decisions more difficult. Should the original text of
as ‘signs of an interpretive move, a commentary (“close notes”) which he is making upon his own text’. Then, this sort of commentary is also present in the prefaces in which he acted as a critical reader of his own works. Simon (2007, p.5) interprets these prefaces as follows:

Despite James’s appreciation by some early critics, as his style became increasingly difficult, and his critics grew increasingly impatient with convoluted sentences and repetitions of theme, James took on the role as advocate for his own works.

As an ‘advocate’ James tries to establish a more intimate relationship with his reader. In most of the prefaces he describes the origin of the story or the circumstances in which he elaborated upon it. This way James tries to present the reader with a glimpse into his private creative process. Furthermore, he comments on the status of the reader himself as he calls for more active participation of the latter one. With such a request James ironically foreshadows the reading process of his own prefaces. As Paul Armstrong (cited McWhirter 1995, p.8) already remarks, these prefaces are sometimes problematic if they are seen as introductions to the fictional texts. It is often hard for the reader to follow James’s lines of thought without having read the fictional text to which it is the introduction beforehand. It is only the reader who has already submerged himself in the fictional world of the story who can properly read the preface. Therefore, these prefaces are more in-depth critical epilogues instead of prefaces (Paul B. Armstrong cited McWhirter 1995, p.126). Nevertheless, R.P. Blackmur has collected the prefaces separately from the fictional narratives in The Art of the Novel (1948). Due to the general comments on narrative theory that the prefaces contain, they have often been studied

an author be used for a later edition or simply the latest version that the author has left behind in his lifetime?
The first option has the advantage of providing the reader with the text as it was first published and which brought about the socio-cultural impacts at the time. On the other hand, the reader is equipped with the text as the author eventually, in all his creative « maturity », has meant it to be.
on their own account\textsuperscript{13}. According to Armstrong (cited McWhirter 1995, p.127), James adopted a middle course when he created his prefaces in all their ambiguity:

The trick is to create an indirect relation between the prefatory document and the main text which suggests kinds of interpretive attitudes without closing off analysis and imagination as a definitive statement would.

These features – the revision of his novels and his own critical prefaces to them – constitute the very factors that make this edition unique. Jonathan Freedman (1998, p.19), however, mentions a downside to these singularities:

Some may cite this self-revising tendency as an example of the very worst of the narcissistic self-concern and grandiosity that define our very worst image of Henry James: that of a figure who, in the words of his brother William, chewed more than he bit off\textsuperscript{14}.

Whether or not James can be called narcissistic or grandiose is not really the question here. Rather, the issue at hand is Henry James’s self-preoccupation. McWhirter (1995, p.1) corroborates this as he states that ‘surprisingly little attention has been paid to the Edition itself as a text, and to the extraordinary, deeply ambiguous act of self-presentation that it embodies’. Scholars such as Linda Simon (2007, p.34-35) and Peter Collister (2007, p.3) agree that James actually created himself a sort of ‘intellectual autobiography’ (Simon 2007, p.34-35) by writing the \textit{New York Edition}, and especially the prefaces. Throughout the edition, James is constructing an image of himself. For example, the reader gets to know the surrounding circumstances of the origin of a story and the process of its writing. Besides intimate details such as these, James also elaborates upon his narrative theorizations and

\textsuperscript{13} They have proven their merit, for example, in the establishment of James’s «philosophy » in chapter 1.

\textsuperscript{14} This expression can actually be interpreted quite literally because James was known to follow ‘a punitive dietary regime according to the system of Horace Fletcher’ (Philip Horne 2004) which consisted of chewing one’s food a certain number of times before swallowing it.
corrects earlier statements that he made concerning the art of fiction. All these self-concerning elaborations have led Michael Millgate (cited McWhirter 1995, p.15) to regard this *New York Edition* as the ‘testamentary act’ of an author who wanted to provide posterity with an image of himself. Although his legacy has lasted until now and has been thoroughly explored, it seemed at the time that James’s project had failed immensely. Therefore James felt the need to continue his quest to preserve his reputation for eternity through other projects. Simon (2007, p.39) remarks:

> Yet his desire to shape his reputation for posterity still was alive: he turned to autobiography, which gave him a new opportunity to select, revise, and invent the past [...].

4.2.2 Autobiography

After the adventure of the *New York Edition*, James focused on his image from a different angle through the project of the autobiography. Frederick W. Dupee (1956, p.xi) wittily states that ‘[t]he prefaces are his critical justification of his practice as a novelist; the autobiography is his revelation of the man within the novelist’. According to Fred Kaplan (1993, p.540), James was driven to reveal himself by a need for money and recognition:

> He had, he felt, more likelihood of publisher and profits from an autobiographical volume than from fiction. His assumption was sensibly dictated by his awareness that, though widely acknowledged to be among the greatest of living authors, he was also among the most unread. His fame determined that there would be more of an audience to read about him than to read him. With an autobiography, he could purvey both, a book that would have readers because it would be about himself and other famous people with the additional advantage to him, and perhaps to others, that he would also be its author.
James embarked on this self-exploring quest after the death of his brother William in 1910. Initially, James intended his writing to be a tribute to William and, more broadly, ‘a family-centred enterprise’ (Collister 2007, p.7) which combined his own recollections with William’s letters. However, his original plan resulted in a three-volume autobiographical work. The first of these volumes was published in 1913 as A Small Boy and Others. Herein James describes his childhood years ranging from age four to twelve (Alfred Habegger cited McWhirter 1995, p.196). James spent this period from 1847 until the summer of 1855 in New York City. It seems that this city’s sensations have had a deep impact on the little James, as we can read:

There was at any rate another way home, with other appeals, which consisted of getting straight along westward to Broadway, a sphere of a different order of fascination and bristling, as I seem to recall, with more vivid aspects, greater curiosities and wonderments. The curiosity was of course the countryplace, as I supposed it to be, on the northeast corner of Eighteenth Street, if I am not mistaken; a big brown house in “grounds” peopled with animal life, which, little as its sight may appear to know it to-day, lingered on into considerably later years. I have but to close my eyes in order to open them inwardly again, while I lean against the tall brown iron rails and peer through, to a romantic view of browsing and pecking and parading creatures, not numerous, but all of distinguished appearance: two or three elegant little cows of refined form and colour, two or three nibbling fawns and a larger company, above all, of peacocks and guineafowl, with, doubtless – though to this I am vague – some of commoner ornaments of the barnyard. I recognize that the scene as I evoke it fails of grandeur; but it nonetheless had for me the note of greatness – all of which but shows of course what a very town-bred small person I was, and was to remain. (Henry James 1913 cited Dupee 1956, p.16)

In this fragment James describes himself as a small boy who finds himself gawping at trivial phenomena in the city which seem like big attractions to his little eyes. Habegger (cited McWhirter 1995, p.196) also notes that the experiences expressed in this volume are ‘richer in
feeling and detail’ than the ones he describes in his second autobiographical volume *Notes of a Son and Brother* (1914). In this sequel, which deals with his youth, James remains more true to his original plan since it includes many family letters. Then, in 1914 when the First World War broke out, James left this project since his mind had been preoccupied with other, more pressing concerns (Dupee 1956, p.ix). A fragment of the third volume called *The Middle Years* appeared in 1916 at his death and was to comprise a large portion of James’s mature life. The resulting effect of these three volumes is rather overwhelming, because the reader is being bombarded with so many detailed fragments of James’s associative memoirs. The reader, however, has gained direct insight into the development of James’s mind and artistic vocation. Dupee (1956, p.vii) has rightly summarized James’s endeavour to produce a family portrait:

> What he finally produced was an extended account of his own early development – an account in which William James figures brightly, if intermittently, as elder brother but scarcely at all in his objective character.

Through these autobiographical writings the reader is presented with a more personal and informal James. Although James was rather ill-disposed toward the public phenomenon of biography, he indulges here in a portraiture of himself and his family. Dupee (1956, p.xi) remarks that James was intent on establishing an ‘understanding of his existence in its complicated wholeness’.

---

15 James often relates his experiences through the method of association. This may be due to the fact that from a certain point in time James started to dictate his narratives to a woman called Theodora Bosanquet because James suffered from writer’s cramp (Fred Kaplan 1993, p.540; Leon Edel 1987, p.xv).


4.2.3 Notes and Letters

Other important sources of information concerning James’s private and professional legacy are his surviving letters and notes. Although they can be studied alongside James’s New York Edition and his autobiographical work for the establishing of an image of James, these documents that comprise his letters and notes are different in character and intent. Whereas the former have been created by James with the purpose of being published, these latter ones only appeared publicly after his death. Moreover, James has actually burnt most of his private papers in 1910 (Simon 2007, p.39). According to Carol Holly (cited McWhirter 1995, p.167), James performed this destructive act out of frustration after he had received one of the disappointing royalty statements for the New York Edition. However, James had already been preoccupied by an anxiety about the publication of ‘letters and memoirs that reveal the private life and expose such matters as Flaubert’s epilepsy or the scandal in the pages of the Goncourts’ Journal’ (Roberts 1948, p.xxi). This anxiety may have driven him to the destruction of some of his letters, but it is interesting that others did survive. Whether or not James has selected which letters had to be burnt and which had to survive him, it is true that through this destruction ‘[a]s far as possible, he would control the future identity of Henry James’ (Simon 2007, p.39).

Currently there are still 10,423 letters of Henry James extant (Walker, Zacharias 2006 vol.I, p.2). We can only speculate how many James has actually written during his lifetime. Not only have some letters been burnt, but it may also be that there are still a number of letters not yet found since they have been scattered over different correspondents or ended up in private libraries. Pierre Walker and Greg Zacharias have undertaken the immense enterprise of compiling the letters that have stood the test of time. Given the amount of letters, they predict that this project will take up at least 140 volumes (Walker, Zacharias 2006 vol.I, p.lxvii). Preceding this collection of James’s letters, there has been the publication of the four-
volume *Henry James Letters* (1955) by Leon Edel. Edel has, however, edited these letters irresponsibly. Moreover, he even left out certain letters with the excuse of them being the ‘mere twaddle of graciousness’ (cited Walker and Zacharias 2006 vol.I, p.xlix). Nevertheless, collected in its entirety, James’s letters can satisfy different interests. They are a primary source for people who want to know more about James’s social and professional life. Furthermore, as historical documents they can provide useful insights into the socio-cultural context. Besides these functional motivations, reading them can be a source of pleasure since James can be considered a master of the English language (Walker and Zacharias 2006 vol.I, p.1). According to Habegger (cited Walker and Zacharias 2006 vol. I, p.xxxii-xxxiii), James achieved stylistically the perfect combination of a correct usage of the language with own playful and witty linguistic inventions. This way he could adapt his style accordingly to each correspondent without ever letting his manners dwindle.

Besides these letters, James has also left us with an ample collection of his notes. Leon Edel (1987, p.ix) describes in his introduction to *The Complete Notebooks of Henry James* how he came upon James’s surviving notebooks in 1937. He explains how he found – feeling himself a real archaeologist – nine journals of notes among other private documents (like seven pocket diaries for example) ‘in what looked like an old sea chest or footlocker sequestered in the basement of Harvard’s Widener Library’¹⁶. According to Edel (1987, p.x): ‘From his first maturity until his death – and even on his deathbed – note-taking was at the heart of James’s creation’. James did not only take notes for professional purposes – to record the evolution of the creative process of a story or of his general musings about fiction – but he considered it also as ‘a private mode of confession, a discourse on the tribulations as well as the blessings of art’ (Edel 1987, p.xi).

¹⁶ These nine journals cover the period from November 1878 until March 1911. The pocket diaries, one for each year, comprise the period from 1909 to 1915 (Lyall Powers 1987, p.xx-xxi).
4.3 A problematic “self” image

To try to distil the image that James created for himself out of his works that have been discussed in this chapter is not an uncontested enterprise. In James’s case, the notion of a “self” image is fundamentally rather problematic. It has been shown previously that James was aware of the new possibilities that came with the modern phenomena of commercialization and publicity of the nineteenth century. Richard Salmon (1997, p.4) even speaks of James’s ‘strategic exploitation of the changing relations between authors, publishers and readers’. This awareness may indeed have led to a preoccupation with his image. Nevertheless, to what extent this has influenced James in his self-representational non-fictional works is impossible for us, almost a century later, to establish. Therefore the whole enterprise of figuring out distinct aspects of such a “self” image seems in vain. It is possible to discern at least two issues that make his “self” image problematic. First, there is the uncertainty as to the question if what James writes is veracious or a figment of the imagination. Victoria Coulson (2007, p.19) notices that “Henry James” is not a biographical secret hidden behind his public persona: we cannot find the ‘real’ Henry in his private texts, nor are his public texts mere façades’. As Coulson states here, to find “Henry James” – the man or the writer – is not that black-and-white. There is no logical reason to assume that James has created himself a separate public and private image nor that those images are true to life. The second problem resides in the fact that James’s “self” image has arisen as a result of his whole career and lifetime. Scholars have to search for aspects of James’s identity in his whole oeuvre. It is not a matter of one definitive work in which James decides to establish his image for posterity. Instead, it is the sum of all his attempts to define his art and himself, as artist and as person. This means that the resulting image is the culmination of a process. Therefore it is not strange to encounter contradictory lines of thought. An identity is an evolution and James’s was no exception in this. Consequently, to comment on, or even label,
certain aspects of James’s image or identity is to pinpoint something that resists every restraint. These two problems can be applied to James’s works that have been discussed supra.

The image that James sets forth in the New York Edition can be contested. In the prefaces James elaborates not only on the fictional texts they introduce, but also on himself as an author. He discusses, for example, the origin of a story or the circumstances in which the creative process developed. These recollections, however, are unreliable. Habegger (cited McWhirter 1995, p.186) asserts:

His memory of the rise and development of his works of fiction is so penetrated by strong purpose – the will to be great, a desire for fame and wealth, a wish to instruct critics in their neglected craft – that the historical accuracy of what James recovers as he “remounts the stream of time” is always to be questioned.

John Carlos Rowe (1984 cited Simon 2007, p.34), on the other hand, claims that James created himself a fictionalized version of the creational process in several instances, because he could not call the details of that moment to mind. Rowe speaks of ‘a threat of ontological dislocation’ since James could not recall the moment in which a story took on a life of its own in the author’s mind and, thus, the author’s identity could not be justified. Therefore James wrote down ‘dramatizations’ or ‘extemporized versions of that origin now lost’, as Rowe puts it. This means that ‘[t]he man with whom the reader becomes intimate, then, is a character as invented as any of the characters in James’s fiction’ (Simon 2007, p.37). Furthermore, there is also no definite answer as to whether James’s goals, that he set himself for the project of revision, were established beforehand or invented afterwards to justify the revisions (Simon 2007, p.32). All these uncertainties make the prefaces unreliable documents – especially since 1947 when F.O. Matthiessen and Kenneth B. Murdoch published James’s notebooks which contained contradictory statements with respect to what James asserted in his prefaces (Simon 2007, p.57). According to Habegger (cited McWhirter 1995, p.204), it is only normal that
these prefaces cannot be trusted since ‘a writer’s account of his own formation is always necessarily suspect’. Besides this problem of unreliability, there is also the issue of the conception of authorship. It is problematic to assume that James had a stable and consistent authorial identity. This would mean that he was ‘an author in control of his art, able to recover his original intentions for a work, to revise in order to achieve those intentions more precisely, and to articulate his aesthetic motivation and achievements’ (Simon 2007, p.31). As shown before, this is certainly not the case with James. Therefore the *New York Edition* must not be read as ‘a totalizing narrative of mastery’, as McWhirter (1995, p.15) has claimed, but as a text in which James has established ‘multiple, often contradictory lines of connection, relation, and responsiveness to the many Henry Jameses who inhabit this extraordinary text’.

In James’s autobiographical writings the problematic nature becomes even more apparent. In this autobiography – it is actually more a succession of memories – James produces ‘the creation, not the accounting, of a life’, as Meissner (cited Simon 2007, p.107) rightly observes. Basically, this is a problem that is inherent to the genre of autobiography. Every retrospective activity entails the danger that the account may be affected by a hidden agenda. Everything that is being written or told, is done so with hindsight. In James’s case the narrative is overshadowed by James’s awareness that he is one of the last remnants of his famous family and by his, conscious or unconscious, quest for the dawning of his artistic vocation. This latter motivation can be illustrated by the following fragments from *A Small Boy and Others* (1913):

> For there, incomparably, was the chance to dawdle and gape; there were human appearances in endless variety and on the exhibition-stage of a piazza that my gape measured almost as by miles; it was even as if I had become positively conscious that the social scene so peopled would pretty well always say more to me than anything else. (cited Dupee 1956, p.20)

And further on:
Louis De Coppet, though theoretically American and domiciled, was naturally French, and so pressed further home to me that “sense of Europe” to which I feel that my very earliest consciousness waked […]. (cited Dupee 1956, p.22)

In these excerpts James traces back the origins of some fundamental issues of his existence like his obsession to be a good playwright and the attraction that Europe had on him. It is most improbable that James was himself conscious, at the time, of the importance of things that only later on in his life were to play a prominent role.

In the case of James’s letters there is an additional problem. Habegger (cited Walker, Zacharias 2006 vol.I, p.xviii) observes that ‘each letter brings its own implicit sense of a precise before and after, neither of which is known to readers who come so remotely after’. The reader cannot take into account all its implications, because many letters are missing or the letters to which they are a response are scattered between James’s different correspondents. Moreover, James had the habit of adapting himself in his letters to the character of each correspondence (Habegger cited Walker, Zacharias 2006 vol.I, p.xvii-xviii). Therefore it is rather pointless to base one’s case on them if one tries to find “Henry James” (or one of them).
4.4 Conclusion

At the end of this chapter it has become clear how James’s “self” image has come into existence and survived until this day. Although this image can be studied from every imaginable perspective, I have argued that it is too problematic and complicated to define its contents. Trying to establish a “Henry James” can be considered a rather hazardous undertaking, because every practice of labelling implies an act of reduction. On the one hand, one would label something that is never beyond reasonable doubt. On the other hand, a label would capture only a fragment of a process that took James a lifetime. To call James queer (in the modern sense of the word), for example, is to reduce the sexual development of Henry James to a single period of his life and to advance one’s thesis on the basis of vague and partial premises.

I want to suggest that the only way to leave these labels behind and, thus, going “beyond” them lies in the recognition that James’s “self” image is ultimately indefinable. The main issue about this “self” image is not to try to establish its contents, but, instead, to appreciate the creative and existentialist enterprise an sich.
5. General conclusion

At the beginning of John Pearson’s *The Art of Self-Creation: Henry James in the New York Edition Prefaces* we can read:

Many have tried to relieve Henry James of the burden encumbered by the title “Master” that James sought for himself and that Leon Edel ultimately bestowed on him. As John Carlos Rowe notes, several recent studies, including his own book, *The Other Henry James*, transform ‘the pompous figure of James as master of the novel … into the vulnerable, sexually anxious, and lonely writer struggling with the new modern art and new age he had helped make possible’ […]. (cited Demoor 2004, p.40)

This illustrates the tendency to counter one label with another label. In both cases an attempt is being made to substantiate a certain image of James. This history of critics who want to bring to life the image that James supposedly created for himself has led to the idea of the existence of multiple “Henry Jameses”. Every perspective on James’s identity will have some merit in its own argumentative line, but, in the end, it proves to be reductive as it excludes other possible interpretations. It is true that, as McWhirter (1995, p.xxiii) states, ‘[w]e have not needed, then, to “revive” Henry James for the 1990s, because we continue to construct him according to our changing intellectual methods and literary concerns’.

It remains, however, a fact that James has created a “self” image for posterity. In the span of his lifetime he has been concerned with his public image which he has tried to define through that at which he was best: writing. When one peruses James’s “philosophy” alongside his other “non-fictional” works of the *New York Edition, A Small Boy and Others, Notes of a Son and Brother, The Middle Years* and his collected notes and letters, one could put the
pieces together in order to corroborate his or her theory about James’s identity\textsuperscript{17}. However, I have established \textit{supra} that the deduced image can be considered problematic. It has lost authority due to the fact that we cannot ascertain its veracity. Moreover, the image is the result of a process. Therefore, James’s “self” image is too complex to label it in its entirety or partially. Eventually, these labels cannot hold. I argue that the days of determining who James was or could have been are through. Instead, the time has come to read \textit{the} Henry James – the one that has left behind a remarkable legacy that keeps eluding us in all its greatness.

\textsuperscript{17} There are of course other non-fictional works of James that can be crucial to the construction of his image. \textit{The American Scene} (1907), for example, could tell the reader more about James’s national identity and his complex relation toward his homeland. However, I have considered this work as a form of cultural criticism and travel writing in which James did not started out with the intention to represent himself.
6. Bibliography


