

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



The Year of Henry James

David Lodge

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The Year of Henry James

or, Timing Is All:
the Story of a Novel

With other essays on the
genesis, composition
and reception of literary fiction

David Lodge



Harvill Secker
LONDON

The genesis, composition and reception of a novel may be loosely likened to three stages in the life of a human being (very loosely, because literary genesis is usually parthenogenetic). There is a moment of conception, when one of the myriad thoughts that continually stream through the consciousness of a writer penetrates his or her imagination and fertilises it.^{fn1} This is usually described as ‘getting an idea for a novel’. Many such ideas quickly die, or miscarry, and are forgotten. Even if they survive to full term, the writer may be unable to recall the precise moment of conception, but sometimes – with several novels discussed in this book – we have reliable accounts of when and how it happened. The initial idea, however, always has a pre-history in the writer’s life, in his experience and in his reading, which it is interesting to try and trace. That is also part of the work’s genesis, as is the process by which the idea is developed, brooded on and modified, in the writer’s mind or notebook before the actual writing begins.

In this analogy, the composition of a novel corresponds to parents’ nurturing and education of the offspring from birth until the time when the child ‘leaves home’ and becomes independent of parental control. Much of this compositional work also goes on in the writer’s head, or in memos to himself or in a notebook, as well as in the actual production of the text in a growing pile of numbered pages. One tries to make one’s novel as strong, as satisfying, as immune to criticism as one can, a task that usually involves a great deal of rereading and rewriting; but when the novel is published and passes into the hands of other readers it has an independent life which the writer can never fully anticipate or control (though he may of course seek to influence it by commenting publicly on the work or taking issue with his critics). In some, rather rare cases – Henry James’s *Daisy Miller* being an example – a writer may significantly revise and reissue a work of fiction after its first publication, but in that case he has written another work, which will then have its own reception, distinct from the reception of the original.

‘Reception’ is a term that covers several different phenomena. It can mean the process by which an individual reader negotiates a text, from sentence to sentence, paragraph to paragraph, chapter to chapter, ‘making sense’ of it, or ‘producing’ it, as a fashionable academic jargon says. All descriptive and analytical criticism is this kind of reception in action, and there is a good deal of it in the essays in this volume. Such criticism also, by implication, throws light on the process of composition, since it describes effects of which the author is the conscious or unconscious cause. But ‘reception’ can also have a more institutional meaning, i.e., the evaluative response of the literary community, the media and the reading public to a particular book, as measured by reviews, sales, prizes and other evidence. Reception in that sense is a recurrent topic in this book.

The person best qualified to give an account of a novel’s genesis and composition is the author. He or she is also the person most affected by its reception. In the first part of this book I describe in some detail all three stages in the life of one of my own novels, *Author, Author*. Such an undertaking obviously risks seeming narcissistic or presumptuous – all the more because the novel is about Henry James, whose Prefaces to the New York Edition of his novels and tales probably constitute the most impressive feat of authorial self-examination in the English language. It seemed to me, however, a story worth telling because it had several curious and unusual features, notably the near-simultaneous publication of several other novels about or inspired by Henry James, a phenomenon

which stirred up considerable interest and speculation in the literary world, and had for me personal some painfully ironic consequences. I have called this piece ‘the story of a novel’, but it is also the story of a novelist, over a few years of his professional life, and much of it is written in an anecdotal autobiographical mode. I hope that ‘The Year of Henry James’ may have some general interest and value for the light it throws on the psychology, sociology and economics of authorship in the early twenty-first century, as well as on the creative process itself.

The essays collected in Part Two are more conventional literary criticism. They were written for different occasions (although three of them are published here for the first time), as introductions to reprints, as reviews, and in one case as a lecture, and they do not apply a common or systematic method to the texts they examine. The degree of emphasis on genesis, composition and reception respectively, varies from one essay to another, though most of them deal with all three aspects of a single novel. Two essays discuss a wider range of texts. The one on Graham Greene focuses on the sources of a writer’s work in his reading, and also on the way he may use his criticism of other writers to try and influence the reception of his own. ‘The Best of Young American Novelists, 1996’ examines a very recent development in the reception of literary fiction, the public listing of meritorious books or authors, usually attached to the award of a prize, which in this case began as a marketing wheeze and then acquired institutional status.

In arranging the order of the contents, it seemed appropriate to follow ‘The Year of Henry James’ with an essay about one of James’s own tales, and that with an essay on Wells’s *Kipps*, the reception of which included a notable appreciation by James. After backtracking in time to take in George Eliot the essays are ordered historically, according to topic. ‘Henry James: *Daisy Miller*’ is closely based on the introduction to my forthcoming edition of the novella for Penguin Classics. ‘H. G. Wells: *Kipps*’ is substantially the same as my introduction to the Penguin Classics edition of that novel, edited by Simon J. James, published in 2005. ‘The Making of “George Eliot”: *Scenes of Clerical Life*’ is a substantially revised version of the introduction to my edition of the three tales for Penguin Classics originally published in 1973. ‘Graham Greene and the Anxiety of Influence’ is the text of a lecture delivered at the Graham Greene Festival at Berkhamstead, October 2004. ‘Vladimir Nabokov: *Pnin*’ was written as an introduction to the Everyman Library edition, published in 2004. ‘Umberto Eco: *The Name of the Rose*’ will be the introduction to the Everyman Library edition of that novel to be published in 2006. ‘The Best of Young American Novelists, 1996’ was originally published in *The New York Review of Books*, 8 August 1996, and ‘J. M. Coetzee: *Elizabeth Costello*’ in the same journal, 20 November 2003. I am grateful to the editors and publishers concerned for the original stimulus to write these pieces, and to Colm Tóibín for permission to quote passages from his book *The Sign of the Cross* (1994), and from his article ‘The Haunting’, published in the *Daily Telegraph*, 1 March 2004. I am indebted to Professor Michael Caesar of the University of Birmingham for advice and information regarding *The Name of the Rose*. Bernard Bergonzi, Tony Lacey, Geoff Mulligan, Jonathan Pegg, Tom Rosenthal, Mike Shaw and my wife Mary read various parts of this book when it was in preparation and made useful comments, for which I am very grateful.

D.

[fn1](#) Henceforward in this preface, and throughout the book, for the sake of stylistic economy and smoothness I use the masculine pronoun alone to refer to ‘the writer’, ‘the author’, ‘the novelist’, ‘the biographer’, and ‘the reader’, but all such generalisations are meant to apply equally to male and female writers and readers unless otherwise indicated or implied.

PART ONE

THE YEAR OF HENRY JAMES

or, Timing Is All:
the Story of a Novel

I

If anyone deserves to win this year's Man Booker Prize, it's Henry James. During 2004, he has been the originator of no fewer than three outstanding novels.

Thus began Peter Kemp's review of my novel, *Author, Author*, in the *Sunday Times* of 29 August 2004, a few days before its official publication date. The other two novels to which he referred were Colm Tóibín's *The Master*, published in March of that year, and Alan Hollinghurst's *The Line of Beauty*, published in April. Henry James is the central character of both *The Master* and *Author, Author*. The central character of *The Line of Beauty*, which is set in the 1980s, is a young man who is writing a postgraduate thesis on Henry James, and Hollinghurst's novel was seen by several critics as a stylistic *hommage* to him. In due course *The Line of Beauty* won the Booker Prize, and *The Master* was shortlisted for it.

Peter Kemp did not mention another novel about Henry James which had been published in November 2002 and was reissued as a paperback in the spring of 2004, Emma Tennant's *Felony*, which spliced together an account of James's relationship with the American novelist Constance Fenimore Woolson and a speculative retelling of the source story of his novella, *The Aspern Papers*. Nor did Kemp mention – probably he was not aware of its existence – yet another novel about James by the South African writer Michiel Heyns, which was being offered to London publishers in 2004. Entitled *The Typewriter's Tale*, and narrated from the point of view of James's secretary, it concerned James's involvement, in the years 1907–10, in a love affair between two of his closest friends, the novelist Edith Wharton and Morton Fullerton, bisexual journalist and man of letters. We know all the details about a book which is still unpublished because Michiel Heyns wrote an eloquent and poignant article in the magazine *Prospect* in September 2004 about coming last in the procession of James-inspired novelists. These were its opening words:

My agent forwards to me another polite letter of rejection: 'I am so sorry but timing is all – and there has been a spate of fiction based on the life of Henry James published here. I don't know how such coincidences happen . . . something in the atmosphere? So regretfully I must say no.'

Henry James was unkindly portrayed, thinly disguised as 'Jervase Marion', by Vernon Lee in her story 'Lady Tal' in 1893, and there may have been other fictionalised portraits in his lifetime, or after.

his death in 1916, but as far as I am aware he never appeared as a character in a novel under his own name prior to Emma Tennant's novel in 2002. Yet within two years of the appearance of *Felony* two more novels about him were published and a third was looking for a publisher.^{fn1} It can be inferred from the available evidence that the preparation and composition of all these books overlapped chronologically and that none of the authors was aware of the projects of the others until their own was under way or actually completed. On the face of it, this convergence of novelistic attention is a remarkable phenomenon, and the anonymous publisher who regretfully declined Michiel Heyns's novel is not the only person to have wondered what could explain it. Something in the atmosphere, or, to use a more philosophical term, the *Zeitgeist*? Needless to say I have given the question some thought myself, and have come to the conclusion that it was a coincidence waiting to happen.

Although Henry James's reputation suffered a certain eclipse in the decades immediately following his death, he has been firmly established as a major modern writer for at least the last sixty years, required reading for any serious student of the English and American novel, and the subject of a steady stream of scholarly books and articles. He has always been a writer's writer because of his technical skill and dedication to his art, a critic's writer because of the challenge his work presents to interpretation, and a biographer's writer because of the intriguing enigmas of his character and personal relationships. The facts of his private and professional life have been available in rich detail since the completion of Leon Edel's massive five-volume biography, published between 1953 and 1972. So what's new that would explain the appearance of a clutch of novels about him in quick succession between 2002 and 2004?

There have been two fairly recent developments in the academic study of literature which have some bearing on this question: feminism and so-called Queer Theory. Probably no male novelist of the period created so many memorable women characters as Henry James, from *Daisy Miller* and Isabel Archer at the beginning of his career to Milly Theale and Maggie Verver in his late, 'major phase'. Feminist critics, or critics influenced by feminism, have taken a keen interest in this aspect of his work, and they have also been intrigued by his intimate personal relationships with women, notably his cousin Minny Temple, who died young of consumption in 1870, his sister Alice, who died of cancer in 1892 after years of neurasthenic illness, and Constance Fenimore Woolson, who took her own life in 1894. Although James was attracted to Minny, and enjoyed close companionship with Fenimore (as he called her), he never committed himself emotionally to either of them, and there is evidence that he felt some guilt on this account after their deaths (he had less with which to reproach himself in his treatment of Alice). The most thorough and persuasive investigation of this aspect of James's life and character is Lyndall Gordon's *A Private Life of Henry James*, published in 1991, which may have inspired Emma Tennant to write *Felony*. She states that she is 'deeply indebted' to it in a prefatory note to her novel. I too am deeply indebted to this remarkable book, but I read it fairly late in my preparatory research for *Author, Author*. It convinced me that I would have to find room in my novel for extensive treatment of James's relationship with Fenimore, but it was not one of the original stimuli of my project.

James's ambivalence towards women is inevitably associated with the belief of most of his biographers, including Edel, that he was a repressed homosexual who probably never admitted his orientation explicitly to himself or acted it out in a physical relationship. Not surprisingly James has been the object of intense interest from exponents of Queer Theory, which asserts the centrality of literature and the human condition of forms of sexuality traditionally regarded as deviant and transgressive. They have combed his work for rhetorical clues to suppressed homoeroticism (Edel and Kosofsky Sedgwick's claim to have discovered imagery of anal fisting in the Prefaces to the *Ne-*

York Edition of James's *Novels and Tales* being a notable example),¹ and are sympathetic to the view that he may not have suppressed it after all. In his biography, *Henry James: the Young Master* (2000) Sheldon M. Novick argued that James was initiated into sexual love in the spring of 1865 by the jurist Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr.² Both Colm Tóibín and Alan Hollinghurst are identified as gay writers and are interested in this aspect of James's life and work. Tóibín has a scene in which the young James is affected by sharing a bed with Holmes, both being naked (though nothing happens between them), and deals with James's much later and better documented attraction to the sculptor Hendrick Andersen (an episode in his life which falls just outside the chronological scope of my own novel). But comments and asides of both novelists in articles and reviews suggest a certain scepticism about the efforts of Queer theorists to co-opt James into their cultural mission, and Tóibín has stated that for him the initial stimulus to write a novel about James came from reading Edel's biography, which he picked up at a writers' colony where he was working on a quite different subject.³

In short, although these currents in the stream of critical and biographical commentary on Henry James may have contributed something to the almost simultaneous composition of several novels about him, they do not wholly explain the phenomenon. Each of the novelists had their own 'take' on the subject, and their own starting point. A more important factor, in my view, is that the biographical novel – the novel which takes a real person and their real history as the subject matter for imaginative exploration, using the novel's techniques for representing subjectivity rather than the objective, evidence-based discourse of biography – has become a very fashionable form of literary fiction in the last decade or so, especially as applied to the lives of writers. It is not of course a totally new phenomenon. Anthony Burgess wrote a novel about Shakespeare, *Nothing Like The Sun*, in 1964, and later published *Abba, Abba* (1977) and *A Dead Man in Deptford* (1995) about Keats and Marlowe respectively; Peter Ackroyd's second novel was *The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde* (1986) and he subsequently produced *Chatterton* (1987), *Milton in America* (1996) and *The Lambs of London* (2004) a novel about Charles and Mary Lamb. But both these novelists are, among their contemporaries, distinguished by a consistent interest in historical and biographical subjects of all kinds as sources for fiction. What is notable about the last decade or so is the number of novelists who have taken up the biographical novel at a relatively late stage of their careers, and their focus on *writers* as subjects. Emma Tennant published such a novel about Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes, *The Ballad of Sylvia and Ted* (2001), before she turned her attention to James and Constance Fenimore Woolson. Other examples which come to mind include J. M. Coetzee's *Master of Petersburg* (1994), Penelope Fitzgerald's *The Blue Flower* (1996), Michael Cunningham's *The Hours* (1999), Malcolm Bradbury's *To the Hermitage* (2000), Beryl Bainbridge's *According to Queeney* (2001), Edmund White's *Fanny: a fiction* (2003), Kate Moses's *Wintering* (2003), Alberto Manguel's *Stevenson under the Palm Tree* (2004), C. K. Stead's *Mansfield* (2004), Andrew Motion's *The Invention of Doctor Cake* (2004) and Julian Barnes's *Arthur and George* (2005), novels about Dostoevsky, Novalis, Virginia Woolf, Diderot, Dr Johnson, Mrs Frances Trollope, Sylvia Plath, Robert Louis Stevenson, Katherine Mansfield, Keats, and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, respectively. It is important to distinguish the biographical novel from the romantic biography, a once popular but now somewhat discredited genre which purports to be history but insinuates a good deal of authorial invention and speculation into the narrative. The biographical novel makes no attempt to disguise its hybrid nature, though each writer sets himself or herself different rules about the relationship of fact to fiction. Some keep very close to the historical record, as I did in *Author, Author*, and others invent freely, sometimes to the point of travesty – for example, Lynn Truss's amusing *Tennyson's Gift* (1996), which brings together on the Isle of Wight in July 1884 the poet laureate and his wife, Charles Dodgson (Lewis Carroll), the painter

G. F. Watts and his sixteen-year-old wife, Ellen (née Terry), and the pioneering photographer, Julia Margaret Cameron, with farcical consequences that are entirely fictitious.

Why the biographical novel should have recently attracted so many writers as a literary form is an interesting question, to which there are several possible answers. It could be taken as a symptom of declining faith or loss of confidence in the power of purely fictional narrative, in a culture where we are bombarded from every direction with factual narrative in the form of 'news'. It could be regarded as a characteristic move of postmodernism – incorporating the art of the past in its own process through reinterpretation and stylistic pastiche. It could be seen as a sign of decadence and exhaustion in contemporary writing, or as a positive and ingenious way of coping with the 'anxiety of influence'. The same trend is observable in contemporary drama – for example: Tom Stoppard's *Travesties* (1975), about James Joyce, Lenin and Tristan Tzara, and *The Invention of Love* (1997), about A. E. Housman and contemporaries; Michael Hastings's *Tom and Viv* (1985), about T. S. Eliot and his first wife, Vivien, and *Calico* (2004), about James and Nora Joyce, Samuel Beckett and Joyce's daughter Lucia; Alan Bennett's *Kafka's Dick* (1987), and April de Angelis's *A Laughing Matter* (2002), about David Garrick, Dr Johnson and Oliver Goldsmith.

In short, the biographical-novel-about-a-writer has recently acquired a new status and prominence as a subgenre of literary fiction, and it was only a matter of time before this kind of attention was turned on Henry James. That is what I meant by saying that the decision of several novelists to write independently but at approximately the same time, to write novels about James was a coincidence waiting to happen.^{fn2} Speaking for myself, I would certainly not have thought of writing a book like *Author, Author* twenty years ago; not because I was uninterested in James – I have been reading, teaching and writing criticism about him since I was an undergraduate – but simply because my concept of what constituted a novel, especially my own kind of novel, did not then include the possibility of writing one about a real historical person. The fact that for much of my life I pursued a dual career, split between writing fiction and literary scholarship, publishing books of each kind in alternation, may have delayed my perception of the possibility of combining both kinds of interest and expertise in a biographical novel. For the same reason I perhaps overlooked the professional pitfalls of such a project.

There is a sense in which all literary novels published in the same year or season compete with each other – for readers, for sales (not quite the same thing, though the two are of course connected), for critical approval, and (a fairly new phenomenon, this) for prizes. The proliferation in the last few decades of literary prizes like the Booker, with their published shortlists and (more recently) longlists, has intensified and institutionalised the element of competition in the writing and publishing of fiction – a development which may have been good for the Novel, inasmuch as it has increased public interest in literary fiction, but not for the equanimity of novelists, publishers and agents. Normally, however, novels compete in all these ways as independent works of art, not as different treatments of the same subject matter. If it happens that two new novels have a theme in common, or the same historical background, they are likely to be compared and contrasted more directly. Writers are always uncomfortable when they find themselves in this situation, because it threatens to detract from the originality of their work – originality being a highly valued quality in modern literary culture.^{fn3} But in such cases there is bound to be a significant difference between the two narratives. It is impossible to imagine (outside the pages of Jorge Luis Borges) two novelists independently inventing the same fictional story enacted by identical characters, except at the very deep structural level where narratologists work, reducing all possible plots to a few basic archetypes. When two novelists take the

life of the same historical person or persons as their subject, however, the possibility of duplication is much more real, the element of competition between the two novels becomes more specific and overt, and the stakes are higher. Biographers are familiar with this danger, and live in dread of finding that someone else is working on the same subject as themselves. Such a coincidence is invariably bad news for one, if not both, of the writers involved. There have been men and women whose lives were so interesting and important that there is always a receptive readership for a new biography of them – but seldom for two or more in the same year. If they are published simultaneously, the potential audience is split; if separated by an interval, the earlier book is likely to arouse more interest than the later. The same conditions apply to the biographical novel.

Of the recent spate of novels about Henry James, the two that were most directly in competition with each other in 2004 were *The Master* and *Author, Author*. *The Line of Beauty* merely alludes occasionally and glancingly, to the life and character of Henry James. Heyns's novel was unpublished. *Felony* had been first published over a year before; only about half of its brisk 190 pages were about James, and that part was narrowly focused on his relationship with Constance Fenimore Woolson, treated in a manner highly prejudicial to James. Colm Tóibín's novel and mine had much more in common than either had with any of the others. (For reasons to be explained, I have not read *The Master*, but I have assimilated some information about it indirectly, and have had the facts checked by others.) Both are long, extensively researched books, sympathetic to James, which attempt to represent known facts of his life from inside his consciousness, using a novelist's licence to imagine thoughts, feelings and spoken words which can never be reliably documented by a biographer. It is true that the structure of each book is different, and that they deal in part with different aspects and episodes of James's life. The backbone of my novel is Henry James's friendship with George D. Maurier, who does not figure in Tóibín's book at all; he deals extensively with James's relationship with Lady Louisa Wolsey, who is not mentioned in mine. Both of us have invented some incidents – Tóibín perhaps more boldly than I (at least, I have received that impression) and I feel safe assuming that these additions to the record are quite different in each book. The main story of my novel is framed by an account of Henry James's last illness and death, which is not covered by Tóibín. But there is nevertheless a significant amount of overlap between the narrative content of the two novels. The calamitous first night of James's play *Guy Domville* in January 1895 is central to both. Tóibín begins with this traumatic experience, and traces James's gradual recovery from it and his rededication to the art of prose fiction, following his life, with occasional retrospective digressions, until and just beyond his acquisition of Lamb House in Rye in 1897. The first half of my main story leads up to the first night of *Guy Domville*, and the second half corresponds almost exactly to the chronological span of *The Master*.

It never occurred to me when I was researching my novel that another writer might have had a very similar idea. Much later, when I was already well into the composition of the book, I experienced a qualm of uneasiness on reading a piece by Colm Tóibín in the *London Review of Books* which showed a remarkable familiarity with some fairly obscure details of the life and work of James, who was not the ostensible subject of the book under review. But there were many possible reasons for this interest – a work of non-fiction in progress, for instance. Tóibín's most recent book at the time was a biographical study of Lady Gregory, *Lady Gregory's Toothbrush* (2002). If any fears that he might be engaged on a novel about James flitted through my mind, I quickly suppressed them, and forgot all about the review until later events reminded me of it.

I first learned about the existence of *The Master* at the end of September 2003, a few weeks after delivering the typescript of *Author, Author* to my publishers, as I recorded in the last paragraph of the

‘Acknowledgements, etc.’, appended to the novel. At a literary party some six months later, the writer and television presenter Joan Bakewell told me she was much moved by this note, and asked me if I burst into tears on hearing the news. I did not, but I appreciated her understanding of the emotional impact of such a discovery on a writer who had just brought three years’ work to a satisfactory completion. I was at first incredulous, then divided between dismay (that a novel by a highly respected writer on much the same subject was due to be published before mine) and relief (that I had not known about it sooner). It would have been deeply disturbing if I had made this discovery while I was actually writing my book, and had I made it very much earlier I might have abandoned or never started what turned out to be one of the most satisfying creative projects I have ever undertaken. But I immediately recognised the damaging effects that the prior appearance of *The Master* was likely to have on the way my novel would be read and received, and in due course all my fears were realised. I can truthfully say of *Author, Author* that I have never enjoyed writing a book more, and publishing one less.

I am usually secretive about my work-in-progress. I am afraid of being excessively influenced, and perhaps discouraged, by the reactions of others to what would be, if I were more open, an account of something in a fluid and incomplete state. I want to know what effect the novel will have on readers in its fully finished form, and that depends to some extent on their not knowing in advance what to expect, so I keep the subject to myself, even though it is in a way what I would most like to talk about since it is what I am thinking about most of the time, whether or not I am at my desk. Perhaps I am afraid that some other writer might ‘steal my idea’ if I were to broadcast it widely; or perhaps there is a more devious and largely unconscious motivation at work: a denial of the possibility that anyone else might have had the same idea, illogically combined with a wish not to know about it if they have because that might entail giving up the cherished project. However, there are inevitably a few people in my family, friends, agent, publishers – in whom I confide sooner or later, and as the book approaches completion, and its form and content are pretty well established, I become more relaxed about mentioning it in casual conversation. There are writers – my friend Malcolm Bradbury was one – who take the opposite route: they announce the subject of their next novel in advance and read at public events from the work-in-progress. This may be a way of warning other writers off the subject, or a way of making themselves finish the promised novel. In Malcolm’s case I think he genuinely wanted to try out his ideas and his texts on others, and found the feedback of audiences useful.

I do not know in which category of writers Colm Tóibín would place himself, but I suspect it is the same secretive clan to which I belong. Even so, it was surprising that I had no inkling (a word which has a punning appositeness in this context) of the existence of *The Master* until several months after he delivered it to his publishers and a few weeks after I delivered mine. Once his novel was received by his publishers, in the spring of 2003, I might have picked up news of it on the literary grapevine. But, long before that, our common involvement in researching the same subject, consulting some of the same sources and visiting some of the same places, might well have alerted either of us to the other’s project. Michiel Heyns tells the story of an encounter with Colm Tóibín at Lamb House in Ryde (Henry James’s principal residence from 1898 until his death in 1916) which might as easily have happened to me as to himself:

On a summer afternoon, shortly before the completion of my novel, my agent and I made a pilgrimage to Lamb House, now a National Trust property. There we met Colm Tóibín, whose presence was the first ominous inkling either of us had of his intentions. The custodian of the house kindly allowed us upstairs, normally closed to the public. Both of us made surreptitious

notes, Tóibín's, it seems, enabling him to write the passage in his book in which Henry James, in his bedroom, can hear his young guest and the object of his adulation, Hendrick Andersen, undress in the adjoining guest room.⁴

Colm Tóibín told the same story, with more amusing details, in an article in the *Daily Telegraph* March 2004, when *The Master* was published. He described going to visit Lamb House, 'on a bright Saturday afternoon two years ago, when I was close to completing a draft of my novel about Henry James', and being moved on discovering a piece of needlework by Constance Fenimore Woolson over the mantelpiece of the front parlour. Then:

Suddenly, that day, as I stood staring at this object, a voice called my name. It was a London literary agent whom I knew. She was with one of her clients. She asked me what I was doing in Lamb House. I said that I was writing a book about Henry James.

'So is my client,' she said. She introduced me to her client, who was standing beside her.

'Are you writing about this house?' the agent asked.

I told her I was. As I spoke, I noticed a neatly dressed man whom I presumed was American listening to us carefully, moving closer.

'Did you both say you are writing books on James?' he asked. 'Because so am I.' He shook our hands cheerfully.

By this time a small crowd had gathered, marvelling at three writers pursuing the same goal. We were very careful with each other, no one wishing to say exactly how close to finishing we were. We were also very polite to each other. Then the man who rents the house from the National Trust and has the upstairs rooms as his private quarters, having heard all this, invited us to view James' old drawing room on the first floor, as a special privilege.⁵

Tóibín does not identify the American writer, but one may safely assume from his cheerful demeanour that he was a scholar rather than a rival novelist. For me there are other intriguing features of the episode, and the two reports of it. If we put Tóibín's 'two years ago' and Heyns's 'a summer afternoon' together, it took place in the summer of 2002. I also visited Lamb House with my notebook and pencil that summer – on 1 August, to be precise – privately, by appointment. Tony Davis, the tenant/curator of Lamb House mentioned by Tóibín, is sure that my visit preceded that of the other writers, which he thinks took place in October, or September at the earliest. This sequence of events put him in a unique and sensitive position: he was the only person in the world who knew that both Colm Tóibín and I were working on novels about Henry James, because I had told him and his partner Sue confidentially of the reason for my interest in Lamb House when I arranged my visit. He was subsequently very helpful to me in supplying information and documents relating to Henry James's servants, but he did not tell me about Colm Tóibín's interest in James, nor Tóibín about mine, which was entirely the right and proper thing to do, and for which I am grateful, since the information would only have disturbed me. There was never any chance of my overtaking Colm Tóibín in the Henry James stakes even had I known there was the possibility of a race, since he was near to completing a draft of *The Master* when he went to Lamb House, whereas my visit was the last piece of research I did before actually starting to write *Author, Author*. But I had been in Lamb House – and indeed slept in Henry James's bedroom – three years earlier, when *Author, Author* was just a gleam in my eye, so to speak. I first made a note about the relationship between Henry James and George Du Maurier as a subject for imaginative treatment in November 1995. I had just finished reading Du Maurier's novel *Trilby* for the first time. An independent television company had approached me about adapting the

work as a drama serial, so I obtained the Penguin Classics edition, edited by Daniel Pick, and read it. I thought the early chapters had a certain period charm, but as a narrative it was poorly constructed, melodramatic and sentimental. Pick records that Sir Frank Kermode told him it was the worst novel he had ever read. This seemed to me a rather harsh judgement, but I told the company, via my agent, that I could see no way of making the story credible or interesting to a modern television audience, and as far as I know the project was never realised.⁶ But two facts in Daniel Pick's introduction made a strong impression on me. The first was that Henry James had been closely involved in the genesis of *Trilby*. The two men were good friends and often took walks together, on Hampstead Heath and in London. On one of these walks, in March 1889, Du Maurier summarised the story of *Trilby* and Svengali (both as yet nameless), which he had dreamed up as a young man, when he was toying with the idea of trying his hand at fiction, but never completed, and offered it to James, who had been complaining of a dearth of ideas for plots. According to Du Maurier's later account of this episode, James said that he lacked the requisite musical knowledge to write the story, and suggested that his friend should write it himself. Du Maurier, whose sight was failing and threatening to curtail his career as an artist and illustrator, was prompted by this conversation to start writing a novel – but on another subject. This was *Peter Ibbetson*, published in 1891. Its modest success encouraged him to try again, this time with *Trilby*, which appeared in 1894. The second fact in Pick's introduction that struck me – indeed, astounded me – was that *Trilby* is thought to have been the bestselling novel of the nineteenth century. I had known it was popular, but not *that* popular.

This was the starting point for *Author, Author* – the moment of conception, if you like. The basic facts were in Edel's biography, but I had not read that enormous work from cover to cover at that stage. I had only dipped into the parts that concerned my critical and editorial work on James, just as I had only dipped into *The Notebooks of Henry James* edited by Matthiessen and Murdock, which contains James's own, slightly different account of his seminal conversation with Du Maurier, and reveals that he himself was genuinely intrigued by the possibilities of the *Trilby* story. It was reading *Trilby* and Pick's introduction that prompted that first entry in my own notebook, which concludes:

I am much taken with the idea of a play (or even musical?) of the story of (behind) *Trilby*, in which H. James and Du M. would be the main characters, framing extracts from the more dramatic scenes of *Trilby*. It would turn on the irony of the great master of modern fiction turning down an idea that made his friend a bestseller, something J. hankered after and never achieved.

In retrospect it seems clear to me that I thought first of a dramatic rather than a novelistic treatment of the subject partly because, as mentioned above, it had never previously occurred to me to write a novel about a real, historical person. Also, in the late 1980s and the 1990s I had begun to combine novel-writing with writing scripts for film, television and the stage. I had written one play (*The Writing Game*) first produced in 1990, and had been working intermittently on another one (which became *Home Truths*, produced in 1998). As I noted earlier, there were lots of contemporary models for theatre pieces about writers and artists. I think I had particularly in mind Tom Stoppard's *Travesties* and Stephen Sondheim's *Sunday in the Park with George*. As I turned the idea over in my mind, however, I soon began to think of it as a novel. Only the discourse of prose fiction would allow me to render the effect of the success of *Trilby* on James's supersensitive consciousness, and even cursory reading around the subject revealed a richness of detail and ramification of effects that would require the expansiveness of the novel form to encompass them. I observed that Du Maurier's succe

with *Trilby*, first as a novel, and then as a play (adapted by other hands), in the years 1894–1895 coincided with the catastrophic climax of Henry James’s long campaign to achieve fame and fortune as a playwright, when he was booed onstage at the first night of his play *Guy Domville* on 5 January 1895. I had been fascinated by the story of that first night, and the people, some famous, others become famous, who were present at it, ever since I encountered it in Edel’s biography some ten years earlier. I was then editing the Penguin Classics edition of *The Spoils of Poynton*, the first work of fiction James started after the debacle of *Guy Domville*, and had acquired from researching the background to that novel a vivid sense of the pain of James’s humiliation and the effort it required to lift himself out of the consequent depression and resume his career as a novelist. The thought of exploring and exploiting this rich material in a novel was exciting, all the more so because I was aware of the element of risk involved: first, in writing a novel completely different in form and content from anything I had attempted before; and secondly in taking on a formidably difficult subject, a writer about whom a great deal was known, and on whose life and work there were many expert and proprietorial authorities.

I obtained and read Leonée Ormond’s excellent biography of George Du Maurier which confirmed my hunch that he was an interesting figure in his own right whose relationship with HJ would be worth exploring in some detail. But I did not begin serious work on the project for several years. If I had done so at once, I might have been the first instead of the third novelist to publish a novel about Henry James. When I made that initial note in November 1995, however, I was well into the preparatory research for another novel, which had priority. This was *Thinks . . .*, a novel about two contrasting and conflicting views of consciousness: the scientific and the literary (the latter being informed by both humanistic and religious ideas). These views are represented respectively by the hero, Ralph Messenger, a cognitive scientist specialising in Artificial Intelligence, and the heroine, Helen Reed, a novelist seeking distraction from the recent death of her husband by teaching creative writing for a semester at Ralph’s university. It was a long time before I felt I had acquired a sufficient grasp of the key issues and the vocabulary of consciousness studies to begin writing the novel, and then I progressed very slowly. I was always glad to have an excuse to put it aside for a while, to work on something else – film scripts of my novels *Paradise News* and *Therapy*, which were ‘in development’ during this period (and never emerged from it), and *Home Truths*, which finally reached the stage in January 1998, and which I turned into a novella early in 1999. But to begin work on another entire new novel would have been effectively to abandon *Thinks . . .*

Although the labour of researching and writing this book postponed systematic work on the Henry James–George Du Maurier project, that idea was always simmering quietly on the back burner of my own consciousness, and in consequence there are several allusions to and quotations from Henry James in *Thinks . . .*. He was probably the first novelist in the English language to have a theoretic as well as an intuitive understanding of the importance of ‘point of view’ in fiction – i.e., the perspective(s) from which a story, involving several characters through any or all of whom it could be focalised, is told; and he was a virtuoso in the art of telling a story through a limited or unreliable ‘centre of consciousness’ (to use his own term). It seemed useful and plausible therefore to make my heroine an admirer of Henry James, very familiar with his work from having once begun (but not completed) a DPhil thesis on it at Oxford. Early on in the novel there is a conversation in which Messenger explains that the problem for cognitive scientists is that consciousness is a first-person phenomenon but science is a third-person discourse. Helen quotes from memory the opening paragraph of *The Wings of the Dove* to demonstrate how novelistic discourse can overcome the first person/third person dichotomy through the device of ‘free indirect style’, in which the inner voice

the point-of-view character is fused with the voice of a covert narrator:

She waited, Kate Croy, for her father to come in, but he kept her unconscionably, and there were moments at which she showed herself, in the glass over the mantel, a face positively pale with the irritation that had brought her to the point of going away without sight of him.

The subjectivity of consciousness – the fact that we can never know for certain what anyone else is thinking – makes it easy for human beings to deceive each other, and this was a theme that Henry James often explored, though with the greatest reticence and decorum, in stories of infidelity. In a crucial episode of *Thinks . . .*, when Helen unexpectedly encounters Ralph's wife Carrie engaged in a romantic assignation with one of his colleagues (generally supposed to be a celibate homosexual), she is conscious of re-enacting a celebrated scene in Henry James's novel, *The Ambassadors*, where the hero Lambert Strether, on a solitary walk in the French countryside near Paris, sees and is seen by Chad Newsome and Madame de Vionnet in a rowing boat on the river and realises the true nature of the relationship he had been led to believe was entirely innocent. It is Helen's interest in James (and at a second remove my own) that brings her to the town of Ledbury where she makes this discovery.

In the summer of 1999, by which time I was well into the writing of *Thinks . . .*, Philip Horne published *Henry James: A Life in Letters*, which told the story of the novelist's life through a generous selection of his letters, many of them not previously published, with linking passages of editorial commentary and comprehensive notes. It was just the book I needed to refresh my knowledge of James's life as the prospect of actually starting work on the James–Du Maurier novel appeared on the horizon. Among the early letters I was particularly struck by one from James to a friend in America (Charles Eliot Norton) describing a long walk he made in the spring of 1870 from Malvern, Worcestershire, where he was seeking a cure for his chronic constipation, to Ledbury, where he saw 'a noble old church (with detached campanile) and a churchyard so full of ancient sweetness, so happy a situation and characteristic detail, that it seemed to me . . . one of the memorable sights of my European experience'.⁷ I decided that Helen should come across this letter in a book (though in fact she couldn't have done, because Horne published it for the first time and the action of *Thinks . . .* takes place in 1997) and decide to make a literary pilgrimage to Ledbury, where she would encounter Carrie Messenger and her lover. Ledbury is no great distance from Cheltenham, Gloucester and environs where I had set the action of my novel, inventing the greenfield University of Gloucester for that purpose (having checked on the Internet that no such institution existed, but overlooking the fact that there was a Cheltenham & Gloucester College of Higher Education which was seeking university status, and would acquire it within a year of the publication of my novel). In October '99 I was in Cheltenham myself to take part in the literary festival, and I took the opportunity to drive the following day to Ledbury, where I lunched at the Feathers, a fine old black-and-white inn, the perfect setting for my projected scene, and noted other details of local colour which would be useful.

The festival event that had brought me to Cheltenham was a panel discussion with Andrew Davies and Adrian Mitchell about the adaptation of novels for TV, film and stage. It was a subject in which I had a personal interest, having adapted my own *Nice Work* and Dickens's *Martin Chuzzlewit* as series TV dramas for the BBC. But the main example I used in my brief presentation at Cheltenham was the juxtaposition of a passage from James's *The Portrait of a Lady* with the corresponding scene in Laura Jones's published screenplay for Jane Campion's 1996 feature film of that novel. I had been thinking a lot lately about the adaptation of James's fiction for the screen.

At the beginning of that same year, 1999, I had received an invitation to give the annual Henry

James lecture at the Rye Festival in September. It came from Hilary Brooke, the organiser of the festival. She and her husband Gordon were then the custodians of Lamb House. She mentioned that they would be glad to offer me hospitality at Lamb House if I accepted. I had been in Rye on two or three occasions in the past, and looked at Lamb House from the outside, but these visits never coincided with the limited hours when the interior and the garden were open to the public. The prospect of actually being able to stay there overnight as a guest was irresistible. I agreed to give the lecture, and proposed as my topic the feature film adaptations of James's novels, of which there had been several in recent years, notably *The Bostonians*, *The Portrait of a Lady*, *The Wings of the Dove* and *Washington Square*, while a film of *The Golden Bowl* was about to go into production. There had also been many adaptations of James's novels and tales for television, especially by the BBC, going back to the 1960s and '70s, and several successful stage adaptations including *The Heiress* (*Washington Square*), *The Aspern Papers*, and several versions of *The Turn of the Screw*, as well as Benjamin Britten's celebrated opera. These did not come within the scope of my lecture, but they reinforced the irony that Henry James, who always bemoaned the limited circulation and appreciation of his fiction and failed disastrously as a playwright, who was heard to exclaim late in life, 'I should so much have loved to be popular!',⁸ achieved a huge global audience posthumously through the adaptation of his work in dramatic form by other hands. This would in due course become a minor theme of *Author, Author*.

I went to Rye early in September, with my wife, Mary, who had been included in the Brooke's invitation, and gave my lecture, illustrated with video clips, in the Methodist Hall. I shall say no more here about the lecture, which was published later in a much expanded form,⁹ nor expatiate on the charms of Lamb House and its walled garden, which are amply described in the pages of *Author, Author*, but the occasion still glows in my memory with a kind of halo of happiness. It took place on a very warm evening, of a kind rare in England, when the heat of the day lasts long into the night and it is comfortable to be outdoors in shirt-sleeves or summer frocks as darkness falls. There was a drinks party at Lamb House after the lecture and guests sipped their white wine on the lawn and under the boughs of the mulberry tree which replaced the one blown down in the great storm of 1915. One of the pleasures of the occasion was a reunion with Graham Watson, who had been my literary agent from Curtis Brown until his retirement in 1979. He and his wife Dorothy had themselves been the curators and tenants of Lamb House at that time, though I was then unaware of it, and had subsequently moved to a pretty cottage on Church Square. Later in the evening there was a convivial supper kindly provided by our hosts in the modern extension discreetly attached to the back of the house. And so to bed – in Henry James's bedroom! Not in his actual bed, which was disposed of along with most of his other furniture long ago, but in the panelled bedroom on the first floor at the front of the house, known as the King's Room since George I slept there in 1726, having been shipwrecked in a storm on nearby Camber Sands, and where the Master slept during his occupancy of Lamb House. I had no idea that a few years later I would write a scene in which Henry James, waking early in this room, and lying contentedly in bed, as the rising sun peeps between the gap in his curtains, thinks back over his recent acquisition of the house, and looks forward to the work he hopes to accomplish there. My plans to write a novel about him were at that point extremely vague and fluid. I knew that the James–Dorothy Maurier relationship, and the contrasting fortunes of *Guy Domville* and *Trilby*, would be at the heart of it, but the structure and scope of the whole novel remained to be decided, or rather discovered, first in the process of reading and research, then in the process of writing. In September 1999 I was still preoccupied with the task of finishing *Thinks*

It was in fact not until April of the following year that I delivered the completed manuscript of *Thin* . . . to my publishers, and was free to begin serious preparation for the Henry James novel. I started by reading Edel's *Life* carefully from cover to cover, and rereading Leonée Ormond's biography of George Du Maurier, and worked outwards from those basic sources in all directions. I compiled a calendar of noteworthy events in the lives of the two men, and noticed some interesting convergences in the process. I began to get a much clearer idea of the shape of each man's life. But that did not give me the shape of my novel – 'life being all inclusion and confusion, and art being all discrimination and selection', as Henry James himself observed, in the Preface to *The Spoils of Poynton* in the New York Edition. No one wrote or spoke more eloquently about the connections and discontinuities between life and art, but of his many remarks on the subject the one that seemed most relevant to my task is in his Preface to *Roderick Hudson*:

Really, universally, relations stop nowhere, and the exquisite problem of the artist is eternally but to draw, by a geometry of his own, the circle within which they shall happily *appear* to do so.

Relations stop nowhere because the existence of each human being, and every action and every thought of each human being, are determined by pre-existing circumstances which themselves were subject to the same kind of determinations, and to trace the chains of cause and effect which extend outwards in space and time from even the most trivial event, in a complex web of connections, is a task which if, *per impossibile*, it were pursued exhaustively would eventually encompass the history of the universe. Laurence Sterne's Tristram Shandy discovers this to his cost when he sets out to give a faithful and comprehensive account of his 'Life and Opinions', starting with his own conception. He is led into so many explanatory digressions and retrospective sub-narratives that by the fourth volume he has progressed no further than the first day of his life, which has taken him a whole year to narrate, and it dawns on him that the longer he lives, accumulating more experience which demands the same exhaustive treatment, the less likely he is to complete his work:

– was every day of my life to be as busy as this – and why not? – and the transactions and opinions of it to take up as much description – and for what reason should they be cut short? As at this rate I should just live 364 times faster than I should write – it must follow, an' please your worships, that the more I write, the more I shall have to write – and consequently, the more your worships will have to read.

Will this be good for your worships' eyes?¹⁰

The ninth volume was the last, because Sterne himself died shortly after publishing it, but however long he had lived the novel would never have been finished in the usual sense of the word. *Tristram Shandy* is the ultimate metafiction, which achieved an unprecedented truthfulness to life by continually exposing the irreducible gap between the world and the book. Tristram's failure is Sterne's triumph. But if all novels were like *Tristram Shandy* we should soon become bored with them. The human mind demands pattern, order, cohesion and a certain degree of closure in narrative discourse, and can only occasionally be teased into accepting a radical departure from the conventions.

Readers bring such expectations to non-fictional as well as fictional narratives, but the method of the writer in each kind is quite different. The historian or biographer describes a circle which contains the facts he considers necessary for a proper understanding of his subject, and excludes an infinity

other connected facts. Skilful writers in these genres are able to give their narratives a satisfying form with elements of suspense, enigma and irony such as are found in novels, but their liberty to shape their narratives in this way is limited by a duty to historical truth-telling and the availability of evidence. The solution to the enigmas may be irrecoverable; the great climactic moments in the subjects' lives may never have been recorded. The writer of fiction is quite differently situated. He must draw a circle and then fill it with invented facts which connect interestingly, plausibly and meaningfully with each other to make a narrative which had no previous existence. Because his story is not in the ordinary sense 'true', it requires a much greater degree of patterning to satisfy the reader. In historical writing every discrete, documented fact about the subject has a certain value, but in fiction 'facts' are redundant if they do not have a literary function (metonymic, symbolic, thematic, didactic, etc.). In historical writing some facts *must* be included, whereas in fiction this is completely a matter for the writer to decide. It is hard to imagine a biography which did not, for instance, include an account of the subject's parentage. But many novels make no mention of their principal characters' parents (or, to put it another way, the novelist did not bother to invent these characters) simply because such information would have been irrelevant to the work's narrative content and design. (Philip Swallow and Morris Zapp, for example, characters who figure prominently in three of my own novels, are parentless.)

The biographical novel, being a hybrid form, brings both kinds of selection and exclusion into play. As the writer of such a book you are constrained by the known facts of your historical characters, but free to invent and imagine in the interstices between these facts. How free is a matter of individual choice. When I first conceived my book I assumed I would invent some minor characters, but the more research I did the more convinced I became that the historical persons in whose lives James's life was embedded were so interesting that there was no need to invent any more, and that it would immensely enhance the effect of authenticity I aimed at if all my named characters were real people.^{fn4} Writing, and preparing to write, *Author, Author* was an entirely new composition experience for me: instead of creating a fictional world which wasn't there until I imagined it, I was trying to find in the multitudinous facts of Henry James's life a novel-shaped story.

The connection between HJ and Du Maurier which had first prompted the idea of the book was its key structural component, because it gave me a criterion of relevance for the inclusion and exclusion of material uncovered in reading and research. I decided that my story should begin around 1880 when the two men first became friends, which meant that all James's previous life could either be excluded or alluded to briefly and retrospectively. The climax of the story was always to be the failure of *Guy Domville* and the contemporaneous triumph of Du Maurier's *Trilby*. The closing sequence would interweave Du Maurier's rapid physical decline and death following the success of *Trilby* with HJ's gradual recovery from his humiliation, his rededication to the art of fiction and his acquisition of Lamb House. I foresaw a potential difficulty in keeping the two strands of the narrative intertwined until the very end, because Du Maurier died in 1896 while HJ did not sign the lease for Lamb House until a year later, and did not actually move in until another year had passed. However, the posthumous publication of George Du Maurier's disappointing third novel, *The Martian*, in 1897, and James's long postponement of writing a memorial essay about his friend, happily (to adopt his own word) allowed me to keep Du Maurier in the foreground of James's thoughts and within the circle of the main narrative. But around this circle I planned to draw a second one – or, to change the metaphor, to enclose it in the story of Henry James's last illness and death, divided into two parts which act as bookends to the main story.

There were several reasons for wanting to include this material in my novel. First and foremost,

was an irresistible and well-documented human story, involving several interesting people with different and sometimes conflicting attitudes to the dying and periodically demented novelist. Among the members of the James family, his last secretary-assistant Theodora Bosanquet (who kept a diary of the events of this period on which Leon Edel drew extensively), and the servants who cared for him. Among the latter I was particularly interested in the character of Burgess Noakes, whom James shortly after moving into Lamb House, had hired as a house boy when he was only twelve or thirteen and subsequently trained to become his valet. With James's approval Noakes had volunteered for service in the British army at the beginning of the war in 1914, served in France as one of the 'O Contemptibles', was wounded and partially deafened by a mortar shell in the spring of 1915, hospitalised in England, and given indefinite medical leave to care for his dying master, which he did with great tenderness and devotion.

Another reason for having this frame story was that it would enable me to put James's literary career into a deeper and truer perspective than would be possible if my book ended in the late 1890s with James happily ensconced in Lamb House, and looking forward confidently to writing the masterpieces of his later career. One of the things I discovered (or rediscovered, with a keen apprehension of the pain involved) from my reading in the biographies and letters of James was that for the novelist himself his 'Major Phase', as critics would later term it, was a bitter disappointment as regards public recognition, culminating in the critical and commercial failure of the great New York Edition of his novels and tales, which triggered a nervous breakdown in 1910 even more severe than the depression he suffered and successfully overcame after the collapse of his theatrical ambitions. This second crippling experience of failure could be referred to in the frame story, and I also hoped somehow to work into this part of the book a reference to his posthumous success.

There was great poignancy as well as drama in the story of James getting the Order of Merit in the New Year's Honours list of 1916, just two months before his death. When Edmund Gosse brought him the news in his bedroom he seemed barely conscious, but after his old friend had left James told his maidservant Minnie Kidd to blow out the candle to 'spare my blushes'. He was, I believe, ironically exaggerating his gratification. The honour, though no doubt welcome, was too little and too late to make up for all the unfulfilled ambitions of his literary career. Edel mentions that among the many messages of congratulation which James received was a telegram from Sir George Alexander, the actor-manager who had mounted the doomed production of *Guy Domville*, and the man who at the end of the play had, either mischievously or foolishly, invited James on to the stage to take a bow whereupon he was loudly booed by the gallery. I imagined James, his customary decorum undermined by his dementia, responding to Alexander's message (which actually referred to the play, and claimed still to take pride in his association with it) with an angry expletive. I decided to invent another telegram (though it is not impossible that there was a real one) from Gerald Du Maurier, George's younger son and by this time a famous actor, which I thought would provide a convenient opportunity to suspend the frame story and begin the main story. And if I ended the main story with HJ hiring the young Burgess Noakes that would provide a fitting, and hopefully moving, link to the second half of the frame story.

This description of the structure of *Author, Author* gives a very misleading impression of how I arrived at it, as if in a smooth series of logical steps. In fact it evolved slowly and hesitantly while I was researching the novel, the subject of frequent speculative memos to myself in my notebook. The 'notebook' was actually a very capacious lever arch file in which I kept my research notes, correspondence and other documents, as well as ongoing thoughts about the projected novel. Most

the notes were also filed on the hard disk of my computer. Although it was my customary practice to make notes on reading and other research in handwritten form, I realised fairly early in working on this fact-based novel the advantage of having them instantly accessible by using the computer's Search facility. Partly for that reason, *Author, Author* was the first novel I wrote entirely on my computer. (Previously my practice had been to write a rough draft by hand, a few pages at a time, transferring it to the computer for revision and expansion.)

I did more 'field work' than usual for this novel, visiting several sites that were important to the story, beginning with De Vere Gardens, Kensington, where Henry James occupied a fourth-floor flat for most of the duration of the main action, and whence he would often walk up to Hampstead Heath on a Sunday in the 1880s, to visit the Du Mauriers. What astonishing distances the Victorians covered on foot! I did not walk up, but I did walk down the long steep incline of Fitzjohn's Avenue to Swiss Cottage, after I had located and photographed George Du Maurier's house in Hampstead, visited the parish church in whose churchyard he is buried, and walked over the heath, approximately retracing the steps of the two men on their Sunday strolls. I was unable to find the bench on which they liked to sit and talk, and which long after Du Maurier's death was photographed on James's instructions for the frontispiece to the volume dedicated to tales of literary life in the New York Edition, but no doubt it was removed or replaced long ago. I viewed the outside of Carlyle Mansions, Cheyne Walk, Chelsea, where James acquired a flat in 1913, and took photographs of this stretch of the Thames which he never tired of looking at from his front room windows until he died there at the end of February 1916.

I took opportunities that arose to view places with Jamesian connections further afield. After spending a weekend with friends in Leeds we drove to Whitby, a place with many other literary associations (Caedmon, Mrs Gaskell, Bram Stoker) where he often joined Du Maurier and James Russell Lowell when they were holidaying there, and then to the little fishing port of Staithes a few miles further up the north Yorkshire coast, a favourite walking destination of Du Maurier's. On another occasion I escaped from a family holiday in the Center Parcs holiday village at Longleat to stay overnight at the Osborne hotel, part of a striking white Regency crescent overlooking the sea just outside Torquay, where James spent a recuperative summer in 1895, the year of *Guy Domville*. Apart from the open-air swimming pool embedded in the front lawn, its appearance and situation have changed very little since James described it in his letters. I had never visited these places before, and doing so suggested scenes for my novel that I would not otherwise have thought of. Venice I had visited before, but I went back there after attending a literary festival in Mantua and, like James himself, hung around the environs of the Casa Biondetti on the south side of the Grand Canal, peering up at the second-floor window from which poor Constance Fenimore Woolson had fallen to her death in January 1894.

Researching a novel had never been so enjoyable. But there is no limit to the amount of facts you can discover about a relatively recent historical personage like James. At some point you have to decide that you have accumulated enough raw data to work with, and begin writing. In the summer of 2002 I decided I had reached that point. The last piece of fieldwork I did was to revisit Rye, spending three days there at the end of July and beginning of August, staying at the Mermaid, the medieval inn where Henry James used to dine when his cook and butler had a day off. My previous hosts at Lamb House, Hilary & Gordon Brooke, were no longer its tenants, but they gave me generous assistance. Through them I was able to visit the cottage at Point Hill, Playden, just outside and above the town which Henry James rented in the summer of 1896 from the architect Reginald Blomfield who built it, and to appreciate from its garden the view of Rye and the Romney marshes stretching towards the sea.

which caused James to fall in love with the place. The Brookes also introduced me to James Davidson, the custodian of the Rye Museum which occupies the ancient Ypres Tower on the town ramparts, whose wife was a great-niece of Burgess Noakes. When I asked him if Burgess Noakes ever married, he replied in the negative, and said that some members of the family suspected he was gay. When I subsequently spoke to Mrs Davidson, by phone, however, she told me that he did marry, some time after the death of Henry James (in fact, as I later discovered, in 1930, after returning from America where he worked for many years as butler to James's nephew Billy and his wife), a woman called Ethel, whom nobody in the family liked and whom they suspected of marrying Burgess for his money. There were no offspring from the marriage, which Burgess was heard to describe as the worst thing he ever did. From this and other evidence I formed the opinion that Burgess Noakes was, like his master, a man without a clearly defined sexual identity or an active sexual life – which would explain the bond between them. Mrs Davidson was very helpful later, sending me further useful information and documents relating to Burgess Noakes. I knew she was in poor health, but I was very sorry to learn from her husband, when I sent her an inscribed copy of my novel, with its acknowledgement of her assistance, that she died not long before its publication.

During that visit to Rye I drove around the delightful surrounding country, visiting the places James used to walk or cycle to – the neighbouring Cinque Port of Winchelsea, the villages of Lydd, New Romney, Newchurch and Brookland, with their ancient churches – and went as far as Folkestone where James visited the Du Mauriers, who were on holiday there in September 1895, when the success of *Trilby* was at its height. I planned a conversation between Henry and George as they walked up and down the clifftop promenade known as the Leas. And, as previously mentioned, I went back to Lamb House, to refresh my memory of its interior and garden, just a month or two before Colm Tóibín and Michiel Heyns encountered each other there.

In the article in *Prospect* from which I quoted earlier, Michiel Heyns reminded his readers of Henry James's extreme and uncompromising hostility to literary biography, and his almost obsessive desire to preserve his private life from public scrutiny even beyond the grave, recalling that the novelist confided to a correspondent in 1914: 'My sole wish is to frustrate as utterly as possible the postmortem exploiter . . . I have long thought of launching, by provision in my will, a curse not less explicit than Shakespeare's own on any such as try to move my bones.' It is a fair assumption that James would have anathematised novels about himself even more vehemently than biographies. Heyns concludes his article by saying, 'I am starting to suspect, as yet another letter of rejection arrives, that James's curse is taking effect – at least on one writer.' His suspicion was understandable in the circumstances, and if I were of a superstitious nature I might experience some uneasiness myself on this score, since I certainly feel that *Author, Author* has been an unlucky book. But if the outraged spirit of HJ were responsible, it is not obvious why Heyns should have suffered much worse luck than I, or why Colm Tóibín has enjoyed a seemingly trouble-free and favourable reception for *The Mast* (unless being shortlisted for the Booker Prize but not winning it counts as a misfortune).

No, I do not feel that I have been cursed, but rather that by daring to write imaginatively about Henry James I entered a zone of narrative irony such as he himself loved to create, especially in his wonderful stories (which are among my favourite works of fiction) about writers and the literary profession: 'The Lesson of the Master', 'The Death of the Lion', 'The Figure in the Carpet', 'The Middle Years', 'The Next Time', and several others. I became – we all became, Colm Tóibín, Michiel Heyns and I – characters in a Jamesian plot. Consider, for example, that comical convergence in the sanctum of Lamb House of three writers all secreting works-in-progress about its distinguished form

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