

# The *Jouissance* of Influence: Being and Following the Writer in Michiel Heyns's *The Typewriter's Tale*

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## Summary

In Frieda Wroth's attempts to balance the demands of her role as amanuensis with her desire to be an author, we can also see Heyns speculate self-reflexively upon the problems and delights attendant upon writing creatively about a writer. The parallels between Heyns and Frieda extend beyond the merely allegorical: they inflect the novel's central ethical dilemma, as well as its negotiation between parody and homage. Writing is intimately associated with telepathy and mediation, activities which are associated, in turn, with the erotic. The effect of *jouissance* inspired by these metafictional correspondences may be regarded as a challenge to late-twentieth-century debates concerning authority and influence.

## Opsomming

In Frieda Wroth se pogings om die vereistes van haar rol as amanuensis uit te balanseer met haar begeerte om outeur te wees, merk ons ook Heyns se self-refleksiewe bepeinsinge aangaande die probleme en vreugdes wat die kreatiewe skryf oor 'n skrywer vergesel. Die ooreenkomste tussen Heyns en Frieda oorskrei die bloot allegoriese: hulle flekteer die etiese dilemma wat aan die kern van die novelle staan, asook die teks se verhandeling tussen parodie en eerbetoon. Skryf is intiem verbind met telepatie en nabetragting, aktiwiteite wat op hul beurt geassosieer word met die erotiese. Die effek van *jouissance* wat geïnspireer word deur hierdie ooreenkomste kan beskou word as 'n uitdaging aan laat twintigste eeuse redetwiste aangaande gesag en invloed.

One of the earliest observations Frieda Wroth makes in Michiel Heyns's third novel, *The Typewriter's Tale* (2005),<sup>1</sup> about her position as amanuensis to the writer in Henry James's household is that she is "neither guest nor servant". This rueful remark is prompted by her perception of the "distinctions and boundaries, differences subtle but strong, between 'living in' servants and 'living out'" (*TT*: 6); boundaries which govern her relations

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1. Hereafter referred to by the abbreviation *TT*



with the domestic staff and dictate, for example, which entrances she may or may not use to enter James's house; and yet others which define her relations with James and his guests: "She was the typewriter, *tout court*, and persons of quality did not as a rule dine with their typewriters" (*TT*: 33). However, the liminal condition of being "betwixt and between" – to use Victor Turner's helpful phrase (1992: 50) – extends beyond the petty imperatives of domestic and social privilege. It also describes her status as both writer and amanuensis; of being, on the one hand, in possession of a keen "intellectual hunger" (*TT*: 76) and in an exclusive position of physical and mental proximity with her master, but fated, on the other, to be little more than a device, or a "wistful presence peering in at the windows, as it were, of the stronghold of his art" (*TT*: 77). Intriguingly – and this will be the subject of this essay – the conditions that describe Frieda's occupation, as well as the role she plays in the novel, index Heyns's own narrative practice in *The Typewriter's Tale* as a writer of biographical fiction. My interest here is in the particular characteristics, opportunities and pitfalls associated with writing a novel about a historical person who is also a *writer*. This type of novel represents a relatively new and increasingly popular trend in contemporary fiction, and one in which Henry James has been given a startlingly central and recurring position.<sup>2</sup>

The most obvious connection between Frieda and Heyns, wherein the allegorical dimension of the story is established, is suggested in the penultimate sentence of the novel, where Frieda sits down at her typewriter, and writes the opening sentence of the novel we have just finished reading. The boundaries between narrator, central consciousness and author are substantially blurred thereby, and the sympathetic link between Frieda and Heyns is made clear. Like Frieda, Heyns is neither "guest nor servant" of Henry James. Heyns's status with respect to his subject is similarly liminal: he is neither exclusively a reader of James's work (a "guest"), nor biographer of his life (a "servant"). Nor is he purely an "author" in the Romantic, pre-Barthesian sense of one who "originates". His position is characterised by an unavoidable belatedness, yet his imaginative participation in James's life story is in many respects primary, creative and original, too. Like Frieda, Heyns is "betwixt and between". His erratic tenancy of these domains (reader, biographer, author) is motivated and complicated by a conflict that might be considered particular to writers of biographical fictions *about authors* – and especially about Henry James, who famously maintained a

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2. In *The Year of Henry James*, in which he ruefully gives an account of his own experience of writing a novel about the author, David Lodge notes that "the biographical-novel-about-a-writer has recently acquired a new status and prominence as a subgenre of literary fiction" (Lodge 2006: 10) and provides a comprehensive list of recent novels (and plays) that "focus on *writers* as subjects" (pp. 8-10). For a discussion of other fictions about Henry James, see Scherzinger (2008).



vigilant resistance to personal exposure, much to the chagrin of his biographers and the editors of his letters.<sup>3</sup> Just as Frieda cannot repress her need to write, in spite of James's demand that she be "blank" (*TT*: 15) and "*non-participatory*" (*TT*: 16; italics in original), so Heyns cannot resist the temptation to "write" Henry James. On the one hand, to write a fiction about Henry James, to turn him into a partially fictional character, is to succumb to the beguiling chimera of intimacy that is created by a deep-seated familiarity with James's texts: an illusion of transparent access instantiated by automatic writing in *The Typewriter's Tale*. On the other hand, this fantasy of untrammelled access is attenuated because neither James's material being nor his imaginative self can be satisfactorily or completely recuperated, and the writer's relationship with his subject becomes uncomfortably similar to that of the "living out" servant. Like Frieda, Heyns finds himself figuratively "peering in at the windows", seeking admission to "the precinct of that citadel in which [James's] meticulously qualified and amplified ruminations were forged" (*TT*: 77).

In this essay, I explore what Heyns's presentation of Frieda Wroth, in her roles as amanuensis, author manqué, and telepathic medium, tells us of the business of writing author-centric biographical fiction, and how the parallels between Frieda and Heyns work themselves out textually in *The Typewriter's Tale*. The plot has Frieda Wroth at its centre, and it is through her consciousness that we are asked to observe events. But the self-reflexive deep narrative of the text – its experimentations with style; its preoccupations with the relationships between privacy and publicity, and between discretion and betrayal; its investigation of what it means to be a writer; and above all in the way its sustained chord of wistful yearning is counterpointed by a sensual expression of the heady delights of writing (about) Henry James – demonstrates that the novel is as much about James and Heyns as it is about Frieda.

Frieda's professional and personal interjacency is captured both in the title of the novel and in the first of seven epigraphs, in which it is made clear that the term "typewriter" refers to both a "writing-machine" and "[o]ne who does typewriting, esp. as a regular occupation" (*TT*: v). The disconcerting effacement of the distinction between machine and person in the term "typewriter" strips the subject of individuality and selfhood, causing Frieda to rail against being treated as "the animating principle for a machine" (*TT*: 1). The contrast between Frieda's imaginative, vibrant self and the "utilitarian" (*TT*: 1) value to which she is reduced by her profession is made especially poignant because of her proximity to James's person, her keen sense of his prodigiousness and her daily exposure to his expressions of

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3. James makes his distaste for biography abundantly clear in his essay on George Sand (James [1877]1984a: 737-743). He burned his private papers in 1909 (Edel 1987: 664; *TT*: 220-224).



imaginative liberty. She alone, amongst James's readers, hears the words of James's fiction from the/her Master's voice, as she observes when she works on James's revisions for the New York Edition: "It occurred to Frieda that at the end of this process she would be the person on earth most closely acquainted with the Novels and Tales of Henry James" (*TT*: 105). Frieda's half-smug, half-rueful tone expresses her double bind: her privileged proximity to the product of James's creative freedom ironically serves to make her own devalued and mechanical status all the more painfully apparent.

Heyns's own authorship and his own freedom to originate are similarly circumscribed by the same tension between intimacy and deferral. Heyns and Frieda are both *mediums*, a position also sketched out in two of the epigraphs to the novel: one from James's short story, "In the Cage", which describes James's anonymous telegrapher as "read[ing] into the immensity of their intercourse stories and meanings without end"; and another from Pamela Thurschwell (whose book, *Literature, Technology and Magical Thinking*, is a significant source for Heyns), who observes that secretaries are "never themselves unmediating" (*TT*: v). Both Frieda and Heyns are thoroughly involved with their subject, and privileged, passionate witnesses to the creative process. But their status as medium and witness – as "typewriters" – is the very thing that forecloses upon full imaginative participation, either by dint of employment (Frieda) or of sheer distance in time and space (Heyns), and certainly by the refusal of their subject to permit them meaningful access. The scene in which James burns the letters he has received and protests against invasions of privacy provides the climax of the novel (*TT*: 220-225), as well as a dramatic reminder of the determination with which he resisted inquiries into his personal life.

Of course, Heyns's creative licence is considerably more substantial than that accorded an amanuensis. As a writer of fiction, he is not simply taking dictation, and he is less constrained by the strictures of objectivity and proof that circumscribe the biographer's project. But the dilemma pertains all the same, albeit in a different degree. Heyns's freedom comes at a price – imaginative autonomy is always already restricted by the historical fact of James life and texts, and authority, as a consequence, depleted and conditional. As John Mullan astutely notes of biographical fiction in general: "[t]he more it stacks up its evidence, its sources, its academic credentials, the more it condemns itself to a secondary status – something perhaps more entertaining than the truth, but something less than the truth, also" (Mullan 2005: 32). An enactment of the compromises and negotiations with truth that dog the heels of biographical fiction is played out in the central ethical dilemma of *The Typewriter's Tale*; and it is in the course of this drama that the parallels between Frieda and Heyns become more complex and oblique. Morton Fullerton, determined to retrieve what he considers to be incriminating letters from him to James, asks Frieda to help him. He asks her, "Are you totally and completely averse to a certain degree of duplicity?", to



which her answer is “No” (*TT*: 30). Her decision to collaborate with Fullerton inaugurates the construction and consequences of perfidy that are the central concerns of *The Typewriter’s Tale*; concerns given an added dimension by Heyns’s admission that writing a novel about James might be considered a betrayal equal to that of Frieda’s rifling through James’s personal belongings. In an essay entitled “The Curse of Henry James”, in which he reflects upon why James has attracted the attention of so many writers, Heyns observes that his novel (and those of Tóibín, Lodge, and Tenant) are “treason to the high Jamesian ideal of privacy, discretion [and] proportion” (Heyns 2004: 3). Commenting on the extraordinary coincidence of meeting Colm Tóibín at Lamb House, Heyns writes that James’s home, his “retreat from publicity and scandal and inquiry, had become the site of betrayal: the tower of art had been scaled, the enemy was within the walls. We defied the prohibitions of the man in order to bring tribute to the master” (Heyns 2004: 4). Heyns’s apprehension is translated into *The Typewriter’s Tale* itself, where James proclaims: “I had believed Lamb House to be my stronghold against betrayal, to which I admitted only those whom I had selected on the basis of trust and affection; and I found that I had welcomed to it those who did not scruple to use me as an element in their own designs” (*TT*: 224). The striking similarities here between the fictional James’s injunction and sense of betrayal, and Heyns’s own rueful acknowledgement that he has “used [James] as an element in [his] own designs” are suggestive of an unmistakable personal and self-reflexive impetus in Heyns’s project. Both Frieda and Heyns find themselves caught up in a double bind: deeply respectful of James, they nevertheless cannot resist the temptation to pry. And while Heyns is candid in his essay about the nature (and consequence)<sup>4</sup> of his betrayal, he is not quite as forthcoming about his reasons for persisting with his fictional perfidy. He agrees with David Lodge that James’s appeal for novelists lies in the fact that he is a “writer’s writer” (Lodge quoted in Heyns 2004: 4), adding that James’s life was characterised by intriguing absences that demand fictional elaboration. But we might find a more subtle reason in the novel itself, and in the fine gradations of blame and approbation that are explored there.

When Fullerton asks Frieda if she is “totally and completely averse to a certain degree of duplicity”, he insinuates that betrayal and disloyalty are

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4. At the time of writing this essay (2008), *The Typewriter’s Tale* has yet to find international publication. Heyns (perhaps only half-jokingly) muses, “as yet another letter of rejection arrives”, that perhaps “James’s curse is taking effect – at least on one writer” (Heyns 2004: 4). Ironically, his novel seems to anticipate its reception: Frieda acknowledges that literature is not a “gainful employment for any but its most successful practitioners. The problem with literature was that short of writing it oneself there wasn’t very much one could *do* with it .... [W]riting was one thing, selling another ...” (*TT*: 7-8).



not absolutes, but distinguishable by “degree”; the hyperbolic “totally and completely” suggesting a moral probity only reasonable in the very virtuous and probably very boring. For a large part of the novel, Heyns lightens the reader’s approbation by showing Frieda’s deception of James to be the consequence of seduction and the promise of sexual freedom that is sadly absent from her quotidian existence (*TT*: 47). Throughout the novel, Heyns conflates Frieda and two of James’s most admired characters, Isabel Archer (“a certain young woman affronting her destiny” (James [1881]1981: x-xi)) and Lambert Strether (“Live all you can it’s a mistake not to” (James [1903] 1987b: 215)), most notably when he suggests that by participating in Fullerton’s plan, she would be “taking possession of her life and her own destiny” (*TT*: 47). The sympathetic association contributes towards the sense we have of Heyns’s desire to ameliorate her crime. In addition, he makes Frieda’s betrayal – caught as she is in the thrall of Fullerton’s charm and beauty – seem less reprehensible by placing it alongside the elaborate deceptions exercised by Edith Wharton and Fullerton himself. Their abuse of James’s hospitality, naivety and friendship, coming as it does from persons considerably more worldly – and from within James’s inner circle – is described by Heyns in substantially more damning terms (see *TT* 176, 201-203, 224). Yet more nuances are attached to the ethics of betrayal when Frieda faces up to her guilt (*TT*: 54), whereas Fullerton and Wharton do not seem to be in the least bit put out. Frieda’s abuse of James’s trust, by contrast, seems to be the lesser sin, all the more so because it is her consciousness that drives the narrative of the novel, and has thereby a sure purchase on the reader’s sympathies.

Fullerton seizes upon the opportunity provided by the semantic slide from “stealing” to “retrieving”, arguing that “stealing” is a “moot point” and wondering “whether it is theft to retrieve, in your excellent word, a letter of which one is oneself the author” (*TT*: 46). His brazen self-interest and abuse of Frieda’s body and conscience describe his ethical landscape as a wasteland against which Frieda’s must be regarded as substantially more finely drawn. The whole complicated business is given a witty lustre by the fact that the most vocal and rigid moral arbiters of the novel are James’s dachshund Max (*TT*: 57, 80-81) and the puppy-like and similarly devoted Hugh Walpole (*TT*: 203). James’s writing itself is characterised by explorations of moral degrees and compromises – we might think of the ways in which the often competing claims of identity, self-preservation, love and morality are woven together in *The Golden Bowl* and *The Wings of the Dove* – and it is precisely this fine-tuning of ethical responsibility that preoccupies Heyns in *The Typewriter’s Tale*.

If we can legitimately regard Frieda as Heyns’s alter ego in this novel, then the many different ways in which Heyns seeks to exonerate her might well be regarded as constructing an *apologia pro vita sua* from a writer uncomfortably yet defiantly aware of his own literary misconduct. Heyns



also suggests, if indirectly, that James himself must share some of the burden of Frieda's actions. As Frieda is "plundering Mr James's archives", she muses that "[i]t was to her a kind of compensation for her seclusion from life as other people knew it, to be admitted, or to claim admittance, to that larger world which Mr James, for all its illusion of solitude, commanded" (*TT*: 72), the implication being that by placing Frieda in such an invidious position within his household, James has inadvertently set in motion the intrigue in which they are all ensnared. Having taken the letters, and pondering on how to get away from Lamb House in order to give them to Fullerton, Frieda muses: "It was curiously also as if, having robbed Mr James, Frieda felt obscurely wronged by him: what had she done but what had been urged upon her by her situation? And what was her situation if not created by Mr James?" Frieda's justification is Heyns's:

If asked to elaborate on the nature of this situation in whose name so much was sanctioned, Frieda could have been eloquent: could have expounded with passion on the invidiousness of a situation that placed her day after day face to face and nose to nose with flights of the imagination, with a range of human possibilities so other than hers that they seemed to take place in another dimension, only to remind her that her place in all this was as typewriter. Surely anyone so deprived, and so conscious of deprivation, was justified in grabbing whatever was offered her of that vivid life that she dealt with daily at second hand? Disregarded, or regarded only as a medium of transmission, she needed to demonstrate, as much to herself as to others, her own agency, her own capacity for independent action.

(*TT*: 218)

The desire for "agency" and a "capacity for independent action" is no doubt as much a preoccupation of the writer of biographical fiction as it is of the amanuensis. In this flurry of mitigation, James, the erstwhile victim, becomes implicated in the crime, simply by placing himself in the perpetrators' ambit. In addition, elsewhere in the novel it is suggested that James himself is not "totally and completely averse to a certain degree of duplicity" himself. Helping James with the revisions for the New York Edition, Frieda thinks that "there was a kind of disingenuousness amounting almost to deception in presenting to the world a revised product as if it were the first fruits of one's inspiration" (*TT*: 143). At one stage, she even regards James as "the enemy" (*TT*: 116), a strange reversal of the "enemy within the walls" as Heyns describes himself and other writers at Lamb House. Frieda's desire to find culpability in the injured party of her own misdeed is another self-appeasing strategy: Heyns's project in *The Typewriter's Tale* might be labelled as equally disingenuous, in which the "revised product" – his Henry James – is not always easily entangled from "the fruits of [*his*] inspiration", notwithstanding his fine distinction in his "Author's Note" between "borrowings" and "plagiarism" (*TT*: 237) (which sounds discomfitingly similar to Fullerton's distinction between "stealing" and "retrieving").



However, Frieda feels keenly the pangs of betrayal, and at the end of the novel she faces squarely the deeply uncomfortable fact that relativism is ultimately an unsatisfactory ethical position and often little more than a by-product of moral dereliction. Acknowledging that “she had not been the only one to betray him”, she nevertheless admits to herself that this fact “was not available to her in mitigation of her own guilt, it could serve only to make him feel how conditionally he had been loved by those whom he had loved unconditionally” (*TT*: 225). She redeems herself by burning the letters she has stolen. The gesture’s effect is remarkable: it seems to release her from her secondary, liminal status, granting her the recognition from James she so deeply desires, and she sits down to write a book. Significantly, however, acknowledgement of guilt does *not* foreclose upon indirectly reaping the benefits of deception. She needs to have stolen the letters in order to burn them, and in order to learn the moral navigatory skills befitting a Jamesian heroine. The ethical challenges presented in the novel, all of which cluster around assaults upon James’s privacy, have as their undeniable and positive consequence the production of her novel – and Heyns’s. Heyns’s sympathetic treatment of Frieda and his reluctance to condemn her out of hand might be read as revealing gestures of *self-forgiveness*. Heyns and Frieda both betray “the high Jamesian ideal of privacy”, but both of them get their book. And while Heyns is rueful in his essay on this matter, he is ultimately unrepentant.

The ambiguities attached to Heyns’s position as one who writes under “the curse of Henry James” in full knowledge of his indiscretion, are given symptomatic relief in the tension he creates between parody and homage in the novel. Frieda attempts to enter James’s mind by anticipating his next word, often with hilarious effects. These episodes gently satirise both James’s famed circuitousness and Frieda’s often clumsy attempts at emulating the Jamesian manner. Heyns’s clever mimicry of the extremes of James’s late, recondite style is demonstrated when he provides evidence of Frieda’s initial attempts to write a book:

It had ever been his habit, of a morning, to take the air before indulging in such matutinal sustenance as his undemanding system, understood in a physical as well as a philosophical sense, required – even if that were not too grossly imperative a designation for the modest promptings of a constitution that seemed never to want as much for itself as Mrs Blythe was inclined to throw at it.

(*TT*: 25)

The elaborate qualifications, the proliferation of subordinate clauses, the deferral of the subject from its predicate, the dainty circling and ferreting away of the main point (in which Jamesian discretion is given syntactical expression): in Frieda’s untrained hands, James’s subtlety becomes ridiculously contrived. Mimicking James’s style is, however, not a simple matter,



and it requires a keen awareness of both James's stylistic tics as well as his nuance. Pastiche, as Martin Middeke observes, paradoxically celebrates and subverts originality: "although a well-conceived pastiche may challenge the idea of originality and genius by accentuating the contextual factors in the production of a work of art, it cannot throw all originality overboard. After all, it is highly original to write a good pastiche ..." (Middeke 1999: 19). Middeke's point here is especially apposite if applied to Heyns's novel, because it allows us to view all three writers – Frieda, Heyns and James – not alternately, in such a way as to privilege origin over representation, but simultaneously.

In Frieda's early attempts at writing a novel, Heyns follows in the caricaturing tradition of Max Beerbohm's "A Mote in the Middle Distance" (1912);<sup>5</sup> and in his depiction of James he is not above making what he can of the writer's famed circuitous conversational style (*TT*: 71 and 164), his penchant for incongruously bright attire (*TT*: 14), his hypochondria (*TT*: 162) and some of his more eccentric personal habits, such as his commitment to "Fletcherising" (*TT*: 35, 162-163) at every meal: all of which are observed and wondered over by Heyns as they are by Frieda. These personal foibles are grist to any novelist's mill; especially, I think, because they provide such an incongruous contrast with the quiet reticence of James's finest prose.

However, Heyns's fond satire of James's writing extends beyond mere gimmickry. Frieda gives expression to Heyns's own engagement with what Harold Bloom famously described as the "anxiety of influence" (Bloom 1997: xviii) when she acknowledges the sway James innocently holds over her style, the necessity of misreading (of which parody, in *The Typewriter's Tale*, is surely symptom), and the difficulty of establishing her own voice in the shadow of the Master's:

She knew that she was doomed to Mr James's influence, that she could as little escape him in her own writing as she could disregard his looming presence. She intended her story, though, to be in its modest way a corrective to Mr James's methods and assumptions, perhaps even a gentle parody of a style that she knew by now as intimately as Mr James himself – indeed, in a sense more fully, in that to him his style was instinctive, unpremeditated, whereas to her it remained an element knowable all the more sharply for being perceived from the outside. To him style was like oxygen, necessary but unnoticed, whereas to her it was like an exotic perfume, obtrusive and available to analysis and emulation.

(*TT*: 25)

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5. This is the first line of Beerbohm's parody: "It was with the sense of a, for him, very memorable something that he peered now into the immediate future, and tried, not without compunction, to take that period up where he had, prospectively, left it" (Beerbohm 1912: 4).



The conflicting language in this passage effectively captures the pleasures and perils of writing about James, and in his medium. The acolyte is both “doomed” yet conscious of the heady pleasures and seductiveness of participation as one would be in the presence of “an exotic perfume”; the novelist writing about James is similarly torn between an intimate understanding of James’s manner at the same time as being in possession of an independent creative will. Heyns’s manner in *The Typewriter’s Tale*, revealed in the narrative voice of the novel (a voice that, we discover, belongs to Frieda herself, and demonstrates just how far she has matured and developed as a writer from her early, awkward attempts), is unmistakably Jamesian *without* being heavy-handed or satirical. In this case, the sustained participation in, and inflections of, James’s idiom and syntax can be regarded as a tribute, rather than a joke. Heyns’s celebration of James’s writing extends from direct reference,<sup>6</sup> to characterisation,<sup>7</sup> to the borrowing of memorable phrases from James’s novels,<sup>8</sup> to an approximation of style,<sup>9</sup>

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6. To cite just a few examples: during the course of the novel, James dictates the preface to *The Portrait of a Lady*; is also working on “Julia Bride”, and the advice from Strether to Little Bilham to “live” in *The Ambassadors* is given by James to Frieda (*TT*: 87, 223). Heyns provides a list of the sources he has used at the end of the novel, with the caveat that he has taken “considerable liberties ... with the literal truth” (*TT*: 235) – the word “literal” indicating that in a novel such as this there are indeed different types of truth.
  7. Mrs Dew-Smith, for instance, is modelled on Miss Birdseye in *The Bostonians* (*TT*: 113; James [1886]1983: 25), Frieda Wroth’s name is distinctly reminiscent of Fleda Vetch in *The Spoils of Poynton*, and her secretarial function is the same as that of the telegrapher in “In the Cage”.
  8. For example, one of the opening remarks of the novel (“She waited, Frieda Wroth, watching his broad back retreat to the far end of the room” (*TT*: 1)) recalls the opening lines of *The Wings of the Dove* (“She waited, Kate Croy, for her father to come in, but he kept her unconscionably” (James [1902] 1982: 5)) – that most Jamesian of words, “unconscionably” making a reappearance a few pages later (*TT*: 22). The last line of the novel (“And Frieda, following the promptings of her fingers, began typing – for life, as it were” (*TT*: 233)) echoes the last line of *Washington Square* (“Catherine, ... picking up her morsel of fancy-work, had seated herself with it again – for life, as it were” (James [1880]1979: 174)); Frieda, in the manner of Isabel Archer, is concerned with “affronting her destiny” (*TT*: 76; James [1881] 1981: x-xi); and the relationship between Morton Fullerton and Edith Wharton is described by the beguiled James as a “virtuous attachment” (*TT*: 204), which is precisely the description given to the relationship between Madame de Vionnet and Chad Newsome by Little Bilham in *The Ambassadors* (James [1903]1987b: 187).



the segues between James's words and Heyns's own serving as a deeply felt tribute throughout *The Typewriter's Tale*. Examples of all of these gestures abound in the novel, but perhaps one sentence in particular is worth special mention here, as a fine example of how Heyns writes *about* James's style *in* James's style:

And all the men and women so tenuously inhabiting his plays had been created in his image, and spoke like their creator: an idiom adapted to the slow lucubrations and deliberations and considerations of Lamb House, dependent upon the affectionately patient attention of friends content to await the slow unfolding of a sentence as much for the beauty of its sinuous movement as for the elusive insight it guarded jealously in its coils.

(*TT*: 83)

Heyns deftly constructs a "slow unfolding ... sentence" in appreciation of sentences that slowly unfold. To write approvingly of a way of writing and to write in that manner while one is doing so could be regarded as a form of literary showmanship; and perhaps it is. However, it is also more than simply performance. The caricaturing extremities of parody that we found in Frieda's description of Spencer and Mrs Blythe (*TT*: 25) are nowhere in evidence here. In their place, in that vivid image of James's snake-like sentences, at once hypnotic, elegant and obscure, is an expression of awe and appreciation. Heyns makes his purpose clear, in his "Author's Note": "As dedicated Jamesians will have noticed, I have found myself at times appropriating phrases from the writings of Henry James. I have retained these borrowings, not as plagiarism, but as homage to the works to which this novel is above all indebted" (*TT*: 237). Just as Heyns must forgive himself for obtruding upon James's privacy in writing about Henry James, so he

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9. Compare the conversation between Fullerton and Frieda on page 28 and this one between the governess and Mrs Grose, in *The Turn of the Screw*:

Mrs Grose, at this, fixed her eyes a minute on the ground; then at last raising them, "Tell me how you know," she said.

"Then you admit it's what she was?" I cried.

"Tell me how you know," my friend simply repeated.

"Know? By seeing her! By the way she looked."

"At you, do you mean – so wickedly?"

"Dear me, no – I could have borne that. She gave me never a glance. She only fixed the child."

Mrs Grose tried to see it. "Fixed her?"

"Ah, with such awful eyes!"

(James [1907]1984b: 184)

Both encounters are characterised by fractured phrases, oblique allusions, repetitions, nonlinearity, and answers that are more questions than solutions, the combined effect of which suggesting innumerable possibilities for interpretation, both by the reader and the characters involved.



fashions a path between parody, performance and homage when he writes “about” (both “on the subject of” and “in the manner of”) James’s writing.

The reticulation of parody and homage in the novel demonstrates the fine distinction that the biographical novelist must draw between creative representation and brutal exposure. To simply mimic James’s style would be, equally simply, to poke fun at the source. But to engage with James’s style at the level not only of allusion, but of the very syntax deployed by the narrative voice of the novel is to create a palimpsestic text in which James’s writing glimmers through Heyns’s: a feature that is given specific reference in an allusion to James’s revisions to Frieda’s copy:

Mr James usually started dictating at a quarter past ten in the morning, but Frieda liked to come in earlier, at about nine o’clock; he often, having revised a previous day’s dictation in the evening, left her the corrected spaces for the purpose – as if some pernicky and very literate ghost had in the course of the night presumed to improve upon the Master’s labours.

(*TT*: 24)

The suggestion here that there is another “James” who is at work on the text – a “very literate ghost” – serves further to undercut the stable identity of the author, as well as any unequivocal sense of priority and origin.

The ebullience of parody and the earnestness of homage in *The Typewriter’s Tale* are also expressed in the risky pleasures and sexual delights that are Frieda’s reward for her participation in Fullerton’s design. Indeed, the letters themselves that Frieda seeks to purloin are considered, by Fullerton at least, to provide evidence of illicit desire, underscoring how betrayal, writing and the erotic are intimately implicated in the novel. This begs the question: is figuratively rifling through a writer’s drawers an erotic act for the writer of biographical fiction? Heyns’s appropriation of James’s words expresses a fantasy of intimacy, a possibility most clearly articulated in the presentation of mediums and telepathy in the novel.

Heyns’s treatment of telepathy is (like his deployment of pastiche) far from simply satirical. The practice is lent gravitas by the inclusion of not one, but at least three epigraphs that assert its legitimacy, apparently quite free of irony: two comments from William James and one from Edith Wharton. Wharton’s comment, in particular, establishes a correlation between telepathy and the work of writing fiction: “[W]hat I want to capture is an impression of the elusive moment when these people who haunt my brain actually begin to speak within me with their own voices ... I become merely a recording instrument” (*TT*: vi). These epigraphs inaugurate the novel’s persistent hint that some union with the dead might be possible. Writers of fiction about Henry James may despair at the impossibility of uncomplicated communion with their Master and muse, but this is counterpointed by the fact that the promise of admission to the citadel remains. Frieda rejects telepathic communication as a function of passive receptivity, however: as



her accomplishments as a medium increase, she argues that “mediating between the living and the dead was an active process, involving certain choices and particular procedures” (*TT*: 127). Heyns’s epigraphs and his half-critical, half-wishful incorporation of the phenomenon of automatic writing into his novel provide a nuanced self-legitimizing defence against the protestations of his subject. They also suggest the possibility of his having a privileged position vis-à-vis Henry James, of being a medium in possession of a discrete and mysterious power.

The second point to be made with regard to telepathy in the novel is that it is pointedly associated with sexual pleasure. Frieda is amused to read, in the *Journal for the Society for Psychical Research*, correspondence describing “one unfortunate wretch ... [who lost] control of her own person through the invasion of her mind by a young man to whom she had been unwise enough to grant access, and to end up on the parish” (*TT*: 79), the implication being that granting access to one’s mind is as illicit and direly consequential as granting access to one’s maidenhead. Amused as Frieda might be at this example, she finds herself in a not entirely dissimilar state: she describes what she takes to be Fullerton’s telepathic communications to her in a manner in which the physical supersedes the mental: “it was as if, entering her mind, he recalled to her mind, he recalled to her whole body the very feel of his skin and smell of his hair”, and (if we were in any doubt at all as to the sexual delights of telepathy), she is “overwhelmed by a sensation of his entering her” (*TT*: 80). Heyns wryly puns upon the sexual nature of telepathy when he describes Frieda as the “receiver” of Fullerton’s “transmissions” (*TT*: 93 and elsewhere).

If Frieda’s story can legitimately be read as a parable about a writer and his contemplation of privacy, creativity and influence, then its explorations of the erotically charged aspects of telepathic communication can equally legitimately be read as representing the promise and fantasy of presence and physical closeness with the writer/muse that carries with it all the frisson and allure of forbidden sex. This relationship with the writer lends a new dimension to the already complex relations that extend between reader and writer, one that seems to efface distance and deferral: “But here, now, under the urgency of Mr Fullerton’s possession of her, her reservations seemed barrenly academic: what she was experiencing was so direct that it seemed to require no theoretical justification. What she could sense, feel, was Mr Fullerton’s thought; and what he was thinking of, through her, was the letters” (*TT*: 59).

Frieda’s desires are directed at Fullerton, where Heyns’s desires are focused upon James, but the analogical similarities between Frieda and Heyns that I have traced encourage, I think, a sense of the strong associations between mediation, writing and sexual bliss.

Heyns’s presentation of the erotics of mediation/writing is salvaged from the threat of seeming heavy-handed or ridiculous because its seriousness is



offset by Heyns's ironic self-regard. A case in point must be the epigraphical inclusion of an intriguing extract from the diary of Alice James, which Alice copied from *The Standard* newspaper. The extract, dated 1890, protests against plans to construct a channel tunnel from France to England, and insists upon the importance of preserving the impregnability of English territory and "liberties". Superficially, the allusion asserts the rights of national sanctity – a topic that seems quite at odds with the concerns of *The Typewriter's Tale*. However, when Frieda and Fullerton discuss cross-channel travel, both clearly understand this to be a metaphor for sexual intercourse. And given the context of the novel itself, as well as of twenty-first-century hindsight, the extract hints at a parallel between James's well-documented aversion to post-mortem intrusions and England's xenophobic sovereignty. Heyns seems to be suggesting that, like the Channel Tunnel, perhaps biographical fictions about James, based on the "principle of free access" as Fullerton rather salaciously colours it (*TT*: 41), are not altogether a Bad Thing. The epigraph could also be regarded as obliquely concerned with telepathy, the word "channel" itself used both in the novel and generally, to refer to the activity of a medium.

On the other hand, William James's weighty authority notwithstanding, telepathy for a twenty-first-century writer and reader is something to be regarded with at least some scepticism. In the first instance, its credibility is undercut by the frankly eccentric mediums with whom Frieda comes in contact. Second, Heyns is careful to show that all of the messages channelled by Frieda could be the results of a keen imagination, of which Frieda is undoubtedly the possessor. In addition, in their communications with Frieda, both Fullerton and Alice speak in voices characterised by an arch tartness that is distinctive of the narrating voice of the novel – that of Frieda herself. More significantly, towards the end of the novel Frieda seems to lose faith in telepathy's power to offer up pleasure and pure presence. Having watched two lovers embracing on the beach, Frieda makes the painful admission that

[s]he wanted the simple physical presence of Mr Fullerton. And for this presence no substitute would serve; there *was* no substitute. In the end all the theories that turned absence into presence broke down here: the claims of mediums to "bring back" loved ones, the chronicles of "contacts" with the departed, the documented reports of telepathic communication over long distances, the so-called consolations of separated lovers faithful unto death and beyond. Even the miraculous modern means of effecting contact over vast distances broke down into the ludicrous: a squeaky voice merging from a tube, a few meagre words unsyntactically pasted on a slip of paper.

(*TT*: 212)

Frieda's moment of insight is that of a writer beguiled by the possibility of recuperating a Master, and whose participation in that fantasy inevitably



leads to an acknowledgement of its impossibility. Telepathy is consigned to the same abyss of meaning as Fullerton's letters, which apparently contained protestations of illicit love, and represented the promise of sexual fulfilment to Frieda, but which turn out to be empty of meaning – not “a charter granting ... admission to the citadel” but rather “fraudulent, not valid for that purpose, valueless” (*TT*: 232) and consigned to the fire. But the matter does not rest here. In spite of Frieda's rejection of petty telepathy, neither she nor Heyns forswears completely the potential of telepathy and automatic writing as tropes for the mystery of the imagination. The novel's ending is triumphant in spite of momentary disillusionment: “She would start anew, write her own tale, not his. She inserted a fresh sheet, sat with her fingers poised .... [S]he knew how to become passive and expectant, a medium to another mind than hers, welcoming the invasion of an alien power” (*TT*: 231-232). The promise of presence lingers on, in the final lines of the novel, and in the evidence of the novel, confirmed by the physical proof of the object held in the reader's hands. Matters are further complicated by the fact that the author-persona of the novel is Frieda herself. She is ostensibly writing her own tale – thus effacing James and Heyns. But she also becomes “a medium to another mind than hers”. If Heyns's name is on the novel that we are reading, then it is as if Frieda is *his* medium, and he is channelling through her. With this intriguing twist, the novel's meta-fictional trajectory comes into sharpest focus, as authors act as secretaries, secretaries act as authors, and the competing priorities of origin and representation alternate endlessly.

With this intimation of aporia and the deconstructive possibilities suggested by *The Typewriter's Tale* – and by way of conclusion – it seems appropriate to consider briefly the questions Heyns's novel asks – or at least, causes me to ask – about how “the author” has been configured in contemporary literary theories. In the latter part of the twentieth century, the author was a beleaguered soul: riven by anxiety (in Harold Bloom's *The Anxiety of Influence*), morbid (in Roland Barthes's “The Death of the Author”) and/or replaced by a function (in Michel Foucault's “What Is an Author?”). I think that recent biographical fictions by writers such as Heyns, Tóibín and Lodge might legitimately be regarded as creative reactions to the literary/philosophical *Zeitgeist* in which the author's identity and authority have been significantly depleted. One way of describing the significance of biographical fiction in this context might be to borrow a suggestive grammatical double entendre pondered upon by Jacques Derrida during a round-table discussion on the subject of “Life. After. Theory”. Derrida is asked by Nicholas Royle about what he thinks will follow the great decades of high “Theory”. Derrida, characteristically, takes this opportunity to embark on a playful but nonetheless suggestive contemplation of how the first-person conjugation of the verb “to follow” in French is “je suis” – a precise homonym for the verb “to be” (Derrida 2003: 14). The simultaneity of *following*



(which implies a distinct hierarchy of priority over anteriority) with *being* in this homonymic coincidence, of anacoluthon with acolyte, perfectly describes the deconstructive turn of, for example, the palimpsests at work in *The Typewriter's Tale*: our unequivocal apprehensions of authorial origin are unsettled because we have James's words *at the same time as* (not prior to) Frieda's and Heyns's writing. The platonic convention of the superiority of copula over representation is also thus effaced: in order to *be* (a writer) Heyns must *follow*. He must acknowledge his status as anterior and acolyte – “je suis/I follow” – but to follow, suggests Derrida, *is* to be, to proclaim “je suis/I am”. To be and simultaneously to follow is not, significantly, simply a condition of *anxiety*: on the contrary, I would argue that with his deliberate embracing and experimentation with *degrees* of ethical literary responsibility, indebtedness and influence, degrees that demonstrate both a negative and positive affect, Heyns provides an important example of how biographical fiction provides a further turn of the screw to the anxiety of influence. Harold Bloom describes the anxiety that characterises the writer's anteriority and compels him to misread and rewrite the texts of his fathers in unmistakably negative terms: it is a “mode of melancholy”, a “dark and daemonic ground” (Bloom 1997: 25). However, what Heyns seems to present in his novel is not only a conscious engagement with the promises and perils of influence but also the libidinal bliss that this kind of literary encounter involves.

Homage counterpoints parody; moral relativism ameliorates bald betrayal; following becomes being. Writing against the dictates of the Master and within the confines of biographical fiction, Heyns nevertheless makes it clear that there are irresistible pleasures closely attached to betrayal, and that they might indeed be worth the price. This moral ambivalence speaks, I think, of the imaginative *jouissance* – daring, faintly illicit, compelling – that is a consequence of writing biographical fiction that John Mullan, and, indeed, writers of fiction about James themselves, have not openly admitted to. The term *jouissance* (as Roland Barthes (1975: 10ff) employs it, in *The Pleasure of the Text*) is especially useful here because it describes a near-erotic pleasure that carries with it joy that is at once delightful and unsettling and destabilising; sensations, as we have seen, that perfectly describe Frieda's and Heyns's channelling/mediating/writing.

When Roland Barthes proclaimed the death of the author in 1967, he was responding to uncritical mystification of the author as god-like, original and authoritative, and he sought thereby to rehabilitate the power and agency of the reader. Nearly forty years later, David Lodge, at the end of *Author, Author*, invites “students of the Zeitgeist to ponder the significance” of James's uncanny appearances in fiction (Lodge 2004: 389). To respond to Lodge's invitation, as I have attempted to do in this essay, is also to approach a sense of how biographical fiction responds to Barthes's proclamation. Indeed, in his excellent review of “The Life and Death of the



Author” (Bennett 2005: 2). Andrew Bennett points out that Barthes “(even Barthes, especially Barthes) reserves a certain desire for the author” (Bennett 2005: 127) and cannot keep the author interred. He cites, from *The Pleasure of the text*, Barthes’s often neglected acknowledgement that “in a way, *I desire the author: I need his figure ... as he needs mine*” (Barthes 1975: 27, italics in original; Bennett 2005: 19). It is precisely this pleasurable, anxious desire between writer and writer, and writer and reader that Heyns so vividly recuperates in *The Typewriter’s Tale*.

I began this discussion with the observation that Frieda and Heyns both occupy liminal positions in James’s literal and figurative household; I might end by suggesting that the consequence of liminality precisely describes the contribution that author-centric biographical fictions might make to our understanding of the position, death and possible resurrection of the author. As Turner notes, the liminal is an “often subversive condition”; “representing radical critiques of central structures” (Turner 1992: 57). The central structures subverted by *The Typewriter’s Tale* are those that defined late-twentieth-century conceptions of the author. Considered, once, as radical and marginal, they have become paradigmatic. And it is these now-normative positions that are timeously and suggestively unsettled by Frieda and Heyns’s defiant, blissful proclamation, “je suis”.

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