

Beyond Philology No. 16/2, 2019  
ISSN 1732-1220, eISSN 2451-1498

<https://doi.org/10.26881/bp.2019.2.01>

**Rethinking the biographical canon:  
Silences and gaps in Colm Tóibín's  
*The Master***

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*Received 31.01.2018,  
received in revised form 15.10.2018,  
accepted 30.11.2018.*

**Abstract**

Over the last number of decades, the biographical canon has become the focus of scholarly attention for several reasons: revision of the essential concepts of (self)-identity, keen interest in liminal literary forms, searches for new forms of assessment of the artist's creative output and new interpretive methodologies. Biofiction as a genre encompassing both documentary and fictional elements represents not only the biographical subject proper but also the author's subjective orientation. The case study of a recent biofiction about Henry James (*The Master* by the Irish gay writer Colm Tóibín) suggests that silence as a semiotic practice and cognitive failure plays an important role in this particular example of the numerous biographies of James and functions not to uncover the sites of suppression of a presumably gay protagonist but acquires a universal, ontological meaning, signifying the fatal solitude of the artist, which is very close to the main credo of James' own writing.

**Keywords**

silence, biofictions, Henry James, Colm Tóibín, gay literature

## **Kanon biograficzny na nowo: przemilczenia i luki w *Mistrzu Colma Toibina***

### **Abstrakt**

W ciągu ostatnich kilka dekad kanon biograficzny zyskał na znaczeniu z kilku powodów: nastąpiła rewizja podstawowych konceptów (auto) tożsamości, pojawił się wzrost zainteresowania granicznymi formami literackimi, zaczęto poszukiwania nowych sposobów oceny twórczości artysty oraz nowych metodologii. Biofikcja, która jako gatunek obejmuje elementy zarówno dokumentalne jak i fikcyjne, ukazuje nie tylko sam przedmiot biografii lecz również subiektywne nastawienie autora. *Mistrz Colma Toibina*, której tematem jest życie Henry'ego Jamesa sugeruje, iż przemilczenie jako praktyka semiotyczna i porażka poznawcza odgrywa w niej istotną rolę, funkcjonując nie aby zdemaskować miejsca, w których domniemany homoseksualizm bohatera został stłumiony, lecz zyskuje uniwersalne znaczenie ontologiczne, znacząc fatalną samotność artysty, tak bliskie credo pisarstwa samego Jamesa.

### **Słowa kluczowe**

cisza, biofikcja, Henry James, Colm Toibin, literatura gejowska

### **1. Introduction**

Over the last few decades the biographical canon (both in the epistemological and generic meanings of the concept) has been at the center of interest of the academe and public at large; it has also been essentially revised for several reasons. The tremendous popularity of biofictions at the beginning of the new millennium has maintained its momentum up to the present time. In a very broad sense, the boom of memoirs and biographical literature is connected with the sociocultural situation of postmodernism and the cultural period that is replacing it, which might be called *post-postmodernism*. If a couple of decades ago the proliferation of memoirs and biography fiction

obviously relied upon the postmodern revision of the essentialist concept of (self)-identity and poststructural interest in liminal or hybrid literary forms (fiction/non-fiction, among others), after the postmodern tenets started to lose their influence, biographical writing, displaying various degrees of fictionalization, still retains its enormous popularity. Probably because of its very close relation with “real-life stories”, the biographical genre has relatively easily acquired new rules and conditions imposed by the new sociocultural situation of post-postmodernism. It seems evident that biographical narratives again seem to be part and parcel of the new cultural logic which, according to Alison Gibbons, brings such transformations as “a rehabilitated ethical consciousness”, “popularity of historical fiction” and “revival of realism”, which means that “when real elements appear in fiction now”, it is to “signal realism, rather than to foreground the artifice of the text” (Gibbons 2017), breaking with endless language games, moral relativity and all-embracing irony.

There is another reason for the blossoming of biofictions which is embedded in the present situation in Literary Studies as an academic discipline. In this respect, it seems only natural that a number of authors of biofictions are professional literary scholars (David Lodge, to give the most telling example). My assumption is that after the dominance of “New Criticism” which excluded the author’s biography from the realm of Literary Studies as an unnecessary, if not harmful context; after structuralism which declared “the death of the author”; after post-structuralism which claimed the author to be just a space for intertextual games – after all these academic oscillations, nullifying the real author, the reaction was inevitable, and it took the form of the biofiction boom.

Biofiction is a specific mode of biographical writing where fictional elements co-exist on presumably equal terms with non-fictional, biographical ones. As Michael Lackey aptly puts it, “biofiction ‘is’ literature that names its protagonist after an actual biographical figure” (2016: 3). In his survey of criticism about biofiction, the American professor refers to the 1991 ar-

gument of the French writer and literary scholar Alain Buisine, which, in my opinion, appears to be extremely useful for an understanding of the postmodern preponderance of the biofiction genre (living well into post-postmodern times):

Postmodernism underscores the degree to which fiction necessarily plays a role in the construction of a biographical subject and why, therefore, an accurate representation of the biographical subject is ultimately impossible. For Buisine, these intellectual developments led to the rise of biofiction, which is a postmodern form of biography that implicitly concedes through its dramatization that it cannot accurately signify or represent the biographical subject because *the author's subjective orientation will always inflect the representation*". (summarized in Lackey 2016: 5; italics mine – O.A.)

M. Lackey seems to support this stance in a post which reads:

Biographical novelists are different from biographers, because they are more committed to the sacred art of imaginative creation than biographical representation. Thus, they take unapologetic liberties with the life of their subject in order to communicate their own vision of life. (Lackey 2016a)

What is important for the case under study is that in biofictions the artistic message is conditioned not only by the protagonist's life, but also by the personality of the biographer. As will be further demonstrated, this thesis gives a rationale for my choosing the concept of *silence* as the cornerstone of interpretation.

Although Henry James' life was mostly uneventful, paradoxically, the American writer has been a favourite with biographers. Quite a number of academic biographies (F. O. Matthiessen, L. Edel, F. Kaplan, L. Gordon, Sh. Novik etc.) have been published, and this can hardly be surprising. However, the proliferation of *biofictions* focusing on Henry James may seem embarrassing. Suffice it to say, the article on Henry James in *Wikipedia* contains a special rubric "Portrayals in

fiction” where the “incomplete” list of literary texts comes to sixteen.

I have already had an opportunity to analyze the existing canon of Henry James biographies, both in its documentary and fictional modes (Antsyferova 2017). In a recent publication I have also elaborated on this curious phenomenon and put forward the assumption that the biographers of the new millennium turning to Henry James’s life might be attracted and challenged by the following: “(1) James’s personal aversion towards invasions of his privacy and his firm belief that the essence of the art should be sought not in an artist’s life, but in his work; (2) the paradoxical combination of James’s extreme privacy with his huge correspondence and dramatic tensions around his archives, worthy of *The Aspern Papers*; (3) James’s propensity for self-fictionalizing and self-mythologizing; (4) fictionalizing as an intrinsic feature of all preceding writing about James, both fictional and non-fictional” (Antsyferova 2017: 119). Here I would like to focus on the case of Colm Tóibín’s novel *The Master* (2004) and to demonstrate that to estimate its place among other James’ biographies and to critically assess the book along with its reception, it is equally important to consider both the personality of the protagonist and the personality of the biographer and his aesthetic and ideological credo.

Upon reading the novel, without knowing that John Updike had entitled his review of Tóibín’s book “Silent master. Henry James becomes the hero of a historical novel” (Updike 2004), I perceived *silence* both as the main structural and narrative strategy, as well as a significant ideological stance of Tóibín. Ironically, another review, published in *The Guardian*, was entitled “In his master’s voice” (Mars-Jones 2004), which only speaks for the controversial nature of silence of Henry James as a biographical subject.

However, before analyzing Tóibín’s biofiction, it seems necessary to provide an insight into the theoretical issue of silence.

## 2. Silence in literature and culture as a theoretical problem

The special significance of silence as a semiotic practice results from certain topical issues of today's cultural situation. A British academician who studied the preoccupation with silence in English-language literature before 1950s, puts it in the following way: "The prevalence of a fictional and theoretical recourse to silence in the twentieth century is [...] concomitant with the period's cultural and philosophical investment in language" (Dauncey 2003: 1-2).

The first scholars to explicitly involve themselves in the study of silence as an aesthetic phenomenon in the 1960s were George Steiner (Steiner 1967), Susan Sontag (Sontag 1966) and Ihab Hassan (Hassan 1967). In particular, Ihab Hassan writes that "McLuhan heralds the end of print; the Gutenberg galaxy burns itself out. Electric technology can dispense with words, and language can be 'shunted' on the way to universal consciousness [...] At a certain limit of contemporary vision, language moves towards silence (Hassan 1974: 36). Simultaneously, Susan Sontag remarked: "Silence can [...] be a physical/spiritual state, an aesthetic, and a cultural device" (Sontag 1967: 10).

Since then an obvious tendency can be traced which allows silence to be viewed more broadly — and to focus on the uses of silence within fictions where it is not always an explicit narrative or thematic concern. Nowadays, it would be more correct to speak not just about the *aesthetics of silence*, as Sontag did, but about the *culture of silence*. Thus, today silence can be studied not only as "a 'conscious' narrative device, with manifold expressive possibilities" (Dauncey 2003: 6); just as well, silence may be viewed as a manifestation of the text's ideological agenda. "Silence can be charged with socio-political significance, by reason of its ability to denote or uncover sites of oppression, at the same time as it can be invested with the capacity to subvert habitual modes of communication" (Dauncey 2003: 7). As Cheryl Glenn points out, the "rhetoric of silence"

has always relied upon notions of power, authorship, and agency (Glenn 2004: 26), while both Cheryl Glenn and Susan Sontag speak of silence as potential resistance against misrepresentation and imposition. In this way, silence frees the artist from “servile bondage to the world” (Sontag 1982: 190).

While theorizing about the difference between a biographer and a novelist (*aka* an author of biofictions), the most distinguished of Jamesian biographers Leon Edel claims that the difference “resides in the biographer’s having to master a narrative of inquiry. Biography has to explain and examine the evidence. The story is told brushstroke by brushstroke like a painter, and the biographer often has to say he simply doesn’t know – he cannot fill in the gaps” (Leon Edel 1985).

This, by contrast, is exactly what the author of a biofiction is free to do – to fill in the gaps. While doing so, the novelist (the author of biofiction) also has to solve another crucial problem – the problem of choice, which presupposes foregrounding some biographical facts and turning a blind eye to others appearing less necessary or contravening the ideology of the life-narrative. It is here that the cultural work of silence in the form of bypassing, suppression, and eliding starts.

### **3. *The Master* by Colm Tóibín**

Silence as a semiotic practice in *The Master* is mobilized by virtue of both ideological and aesthetical premises.

#### **3.1. Ideological premises of silence in *The Master***

In the wake of poststructuralism and deconstructivism, silence is viewed as having clear-cut sociological and ideological dimensions, which often relate to problems with self-identity (whether social or gender). To a certain extent, the national identity of the biographer is likely to be commended for his predilection for silence, especially in the light of some recent Irish studies. The argument of Irish literary scholars is noteworthy: “Silence continues to prove a forbearing presence in

literary, historical, cultural and political discourse in Ireland, North and South” (Beville, Dybris 2012: 1). However, Jamesian biography gives very little opportunity to touch upon the Irish issue, so it would be reasonable not to focus upon it, agreeing, nonetheless, that Tóibín’s book can be found to be in full accord with the statement that “silence in Irish literature becomes less the thing that one is unable to speak of, and more the thing that one decides not to say. In dealing with such literature we are presented not with the limitations of silence and language but instead, the power of silence and language” (Belville, Dybris 2012: 4).

In the case of Colm Tóibín (and, presumably, Henry James), the overt predilection for silence as a thematic concept and ideological agenda might be primarily connected with the gay identity of the author(s). Michael Wood in the *London Review of Books* reminisces how Tóibín, himself an open gay, well before writing *The Master*, elaborated on the distinctive features of a gay artist’s psychology:

“The gay past,” Tóibín wrote then, “contains silence and fear as well as Whitman’s poems and Shakespeare’s sonnets, and this may be why it is so easy to find a gay subtext in Kafka’s novels and stories.” These works, Tóibín goes on, “dramatise the lives of isolated male protagonists who are forced to take nothing for granted, who are in danger of being discovered and revealed for who they really are or who are unfairly whispered about or whose relations with other men are full of half-hidden and barely hidden and often clear longings [...] It is astonishing how James managed to withhold his homosexuality from his work.” What he managed to do, Tóibín suggests, is depict the damage such withholding can cause, the waste and desolation it leaves in a life. (qtd. in: Wood 2004)

At first sight, the main import of *The Master* is exactly that. The Henry James of Colm Tóibín abstains from participation in politics (Civil War), from sexuality and from overt expression of emotions (both for men and women). The reader cannot but perceive that “the pillars of the narrative are failure, avoidance,



renunciation and withdrawal”, structuring the narrative “round the missed opportunity, the faulty choice, the golden bowl with its latent crack, the ‘beast in the jungle’ whose annihilating leap is delayed and delayed” (Mars-Jones 2004). The main personage, i.e. Henry James, seems devoid of compassion and empathy, shunning active participation in life and deep attachments. Presumptive homoerotic motifs (James’ long-ago feelings for the homosexual Paul Zhoukovsky and his mixed feelings for the handsome American Norwegian sculptor Henrik Andersen, as well as a queer attraction to the Irish valet Hammond) are described in the novel as an innuendo. While the whole chapter is given to James’ reaction to Oscar Wilde’s trial, the portrayed writer remains absolutely reserved about it. As a reviewer notices, “James listens attentively but without betraying any personal interest. Edmund Gosse wonders if James himself might not have some secrets to protect” (Mars-Jones 2004).

Eventually, however, Tóibín’s version of James’ life evokes a different conjecture: the main reason for Henry James’ melancholy, coldness, and aloofness might be of a somewhat more complicated nature. As Hermione Lee puts it, “*The Master’s* structure is more interesting, and less obvious, than the outing of Henry James. It becomes apparent that James [...] has repeatedly resisted demands, controlled intimacy and avoided commitment in order to do his writing” (Lee 2004).

This appears to be one of the most unexpected and inspiring surprises for critics and readers. What actually happens is that the gay author does not confine himself to revealing the homoerotic propensities of his hero, but turns to more universal problems such as the genesis of art and to an unresolvable conflict between James’ infinite devotion to art and personal responsibility “to live all you can”. This effect is achieved largely through selection and silence.

Just like David Lodge in his *Author, Author* (Lodge 2004), Colm Tóibín limits himself to four years of James’ life, called the “treacherous years” by Leon Edel – the years of deep crisis caused by the humiliating failure of James’ play “Guy

Domville” in 1895. The novel ends with his brother William’s family stay at Henry’s house in Rye, in 1899. The prevailing tonality of the book is that of bereavement and loss. Among the numerous attachments of Henry James, Tóibín skillfully selects those which turned out to be most traumatic for him. The correlation of silence and trauma is quite evident: many a trauma has to be bound by silence, and “trauma theory has much to contribute to the issue of silence” (Belville, Dybris 2012: 15).

Though the plot develops in the late 1890s, the book deploys diverse and persistent movements in time – mainly flashbacks. The first phrase of the book sets the tone: “Sometimes in the night he dreamed about the dead – familiar faces and the others, half-forgotten ones, fleetingly summoned up” (Tóibín 2005: 1). Every trip backwards is fraught with a morbid discovery and self-revelation which, essentially, fuel Jamesian art. For example, according to some biographers, while in Paris, James fell in love with the Russian aristocrat and artist Paul Zhoukovsky. One of the first attachments touched upon in Tóibín’s novel, it is presented in the form of reminiscences of a rainy night James spent on a Paris street watching the window of his friend instead of meeting him for a night *rendez-vous*.

He wrote down the story of that night and thought then of the rest of the story which could never be written, no matter how secret the paper or how quickly it would be burned or destroyed. The rest of the story was imaginary, and it was something he would never allow himself to put into words. In it, he had crossed the road halfway through his vigil. He had alerted Paul to his presence and Paul had come down and they walked up the stairs together *in silence*”. (Tóibín 2005: 10; italics mine – O.A.)

Characteristically, not only personages keep silent, but also the author. Appropriating James’ technique of “central consciousness”, Tóibín deftly hushes the situation, making his hero remark that “he had never allowed himself to imagine beyond that point” (Tóibín 2004: 10).

Other examples of traumatic experiences bound by silence include relations with Henry's sister Alice and his charming cousin Minny Temple (considered to be a prototype of Isabel Archer from *The Portrait of a Lady* and Milly Teal from *The Wings of the Dove*). Both of them died young, and this makes the "remembrance of things past" especially disturbing. Over the years, James comes to understand that Minny Temple's image "would preside in his intellect as a sort of measure and standard of brightness and repose" (Tóibín 2005: 111). Instigated by the words of an old American friend coming to visit him in Rye, James feels guilty for not taking Minny Temple to Italy when she was ill (Tóibín 2005: 119). While suppressing possible words of self-defence, James keeps turning these accusations over and over in his mind, only to come to the poignant understanding that "he had preferred her dead rather than alive, that he had known what to do with her once life was taken from her, but he had denied her when she asked him gently for help" (Tóibín 2005: 122).

Another dramatic episode is the suicide of Constance Fenimore Woolson, James's close friend and colleague (a granddaughter of James Fenimore Cooper, and a popular American author of the time). James perceives her as "the only person he had ever known who was fully skilled at deciphering the unsaid and unspoken" (Tóibín 2005: 256), which makes her a very special figure in the framework of Tóibín's semiotics of silence. This attachment is also depicted as a source of self-vindication "that he [Henry James] had abandoned his friend and left her to her fate in Venice" (Tóibín 2005: 221). Thus, Woolson is another victim of James's predilection for solitude.

The list may be continued. However, it should be emphasized that, for Tóibín, solitude and silence are the main sources and prerequisites of James' creativity. As an American critic rightly observes, "in each chapter, the present-day incidents and the memories they evoke are linked ingeniously to the genesis of Henry's art" (Mendelsohn 2004).

There is a complex concept of *solitude*, a close partner to silence, in the book; on the one hand – it is the thing James had

been craving for from his early years, on the other, solitude is perceived almost tragically, which is expressed by a sonic and oxymoronic metaphor (sound of silence, cry of solitude):

Alice was dead now, Aunt Kate was in her grave, the parents [...] also lay inert under the ground, and William was miles away [...] And there was silence now in Kensington, not a sound in the house, except the sound, like a vague cry in the distance, of his own great solitude, and his memory working like grief, the past coming to him with its arm outstretched looking for comfort. (Tóibín 2005:152)

As it ultimately turns out, writing is the most important and life supporting activity for James, both his cure and consolation. In a striking episode in Tóibín's novel, James looks at the wall of books in his study at Lamb House – his own books, in their various editions. Henrik Anderson, who is staying with him at the time, asks James if this writing career was what he intended for himself: “ ‘Did you always know that you would write all these books? [...] Did you not say this is what I will do with my life?’ [...] Henry had turned away from him and was facing towards the window with no idea why his eyes had filled with tears” (Tóibín 2005: 310). Alluding again to “the realm of the unnamed and unspoken” makes rather an ambiguous impression, very close to the effect James' own art induces. According to Michael Wood's comment on this episode, “his books are what he has done with his life, but they derive their mysterious authority from what he didn't do, and knows he never would have done” (Wood 2004).

It should be added, though (and this was not heeded by any reviewer), that the peculiar attitude of James towards life is brilliantly expressed in the recurring metaphor of a window through which the writer observes life (definitely deriving from James' preface to *The Portrait of a Lady*): “Already he missed the glow of pleasure which Hammond's calm face had given him. Soon, it would be lost to him, and this made him feel that he was a great stranger, with nothing to match his own long-

ings, a man away from his own country, observing the world as a mere watcher from a window” (Tóibín 2005: 47). Again, silence and window go together in the final phrase of the novel. After the guests left, “Lamb House was his again. He moved around it relishing the silence and emptiness. [...] He walked up and down the stairs, going into the rooms [...] from whose windows he had observed the world, so that they could be remembered and captured and held” (Tóibín 2005: 359).

### **3.2. Aesthetical premises of silence in *The Master***

In the analyzed biofiction, the rhetoric of silence strongly relates to the style of the portrayed author, to the renowned verbosity and opaqueness of his idiolect. Jamesian prolixity is definitely akin to silence in the sense that in his texts the meaning is hidden, deferred in endless syntactical periods just as it might be deferred by silencing.

Here it is pertinent to recall a famous evaluation of Henry James’ style by his brother William, the great philosopher known, among other things, for his precise and transparent manner of speech. In May 1907, William James wrote in his letter to his brother about *The American Scene*, one of the latest nonfictional works of Henry James:

You know how opposed your whole “third manner” of execution is to the literary ideals which animate my crude and Orson-like breast, mine being to say a thing in one sentence as straight and explicit as it can be made, and then to drop it forever; yours being to avoid naming it straight, but by dint of breathing and sighing all round and round it, to arouse in the reader who may have had a similar perception already (Heaven help him if he hasn’t!) the illusion of a solid object, made (like the “ghost” at the Polytechnic) wholly out of impalpable materials, air, and the prismatic interferences of light, ingeniously focused by mirrors *upon empty space*. But you do it, that’s the queerness! And the complication of innuendo and associative reference on the enormous scale to which you give way to it does so build out the matter for the reader that the result is to solidify, by the mere bulk of the process, the like

perception from which he has to start. As air, by dint of its volume, will weigh like a corporeal body; so his own poor little initial perception, swathed in this gigantic envelopment of suggestive atmosphere, grows like a germ into something vastly bigger and more substantial. But it's the rummest method for one to employ systematically as you do nowadays; and you employ it at your peril. In this crowded and hurried reading age, pages that require such close attention remain unread and neglected. You can't skip a word if you are to get the effect, and 19 out of 20 worthy readers grow intolerant. The method seems perverse: "Say it out, for God's sake," they cry, "and have done with it." [...] For gleams and innuendoes and felicitous verbal insinuations you are unapproachable, but the core of literature is solid. Give it to us once again! (James 1920: 277–278; italics mine – O.A.)

In the context of our discussion, this quotation is remarkable for at least two things. First, the brilliant metaphor of mirrors focused upon empty space as an apt rendition of Henry James' "late (or third) manner". Actually, William James' metaphoric emptiness (or "lack of solid subject") is a visual analogue to silence (lack of material sound). Secondly, the philosopher acutely foreshadows the reception of his brother's prose in the years to come: considered "a perverse method" by many, Henry James' art still fills his readers with wonder just as it did his brother, who exclaimed: "But you do it, that's the queerness!" Being read "against the grain" paradoxically contributes to James' *postmodern* fame and commercialization. Viewing the author's writing from a sociological perspective, one of the British reviewers makes the point:

I think what attracts high bourgeois writers of a certain age to James, in our hyper-democratic era of confession and candour, is the supreme reticence of his fiction. To read James properly is often to read his books against themselves, as it were, to seek meaning in the aporias, the absences, and the suspensions of the text, in emphatically what is not said. (Cowley 2005)

Thus, the problem of Jamesian reception brings us again to the issue of "what is not said" in his texts.

#### 4. Conclusions

Contrary to the expectations created by the sexual identity of the author and his previous declarations, silence in Tóibín's novel about James functions not to uncover the sites of oppression and suppression of a presumably gay protagonist. The deployment of the semiotics of silence is multifarious and relates both to the tenor of the book and to its structural and narrative strategies. Thus, silence acquires a universal, philosophical, and ontological meaning. It stands for the fatal solitude of an artist doomed to sacrifice what other people call life for the sake of his art. And this is very close to what was the main tenet of James' own writing. As such, it makes Tóibín's novel very congenial to its subject. Along with the aptly incorporated narrative technique of Henry James and a deft adaptation of his style to the tastes of the modern reader, it can be considered as a main factor for its best-selling status and favourable reviews.

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