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Henry James has appeared as a fictional character or abiding spiritual presence in more than a
dozen novels and short stories since the millennium, including Colm Tóibín’s *The Master* and
David Lodge’s *Author, Author*, which competed for critical and popular attention in 2004, which
Lodge later called “The Year of Henry James.” Both novels imagine James’s consciousness in
his final years. In Cynthia Ozick’s “Dictation” (2008), meanwhile, James plays second fiddle to
his feisty typist, Theodora Bosanquet. In Joyce Carol Oates’s “The Master at St. Bartholomew
Hospital, 1914-1916” (2008), James surprises even himself by serving as a wartime hospital
volunteer. Even more recent, John Banville’s *Mrs. Osmond* (2017) jams James’s Isabel Archer,
the “vivid individual” on which James built *The Portrait of a Lady*, back into “the house of
fiction” (James, “Preface” 47, 46). But I am concerned here with the character of James
himself, not Isabel. Given James’s many valences in so many recent works of fiction, it feels
appropriate to repurpose the question that Captain Yule asks the butler, Chivers, in James’s
1907 play *The High Bid*—

*I mean to whom do you beautifully belong?* (567)

—a phrase is so distinctively Jamesian that Max Beerbohm incorporated it into his caricature of
James’s late style “The Guerdon” (1916), written on the occasion of James’s Order of Merit.
Beerbohm is a perfect mimic of what I think of as James’s *soft peaks*, the way he whips a flat
puddle of almost-nothing into a substantial point, something you can almost hold onto. In “The
Guerdon,” Beerbohm’s Lord Chamberlain, while bringing to the King a list of people to be
commended, realizes there is a name missing. Beerbohm writes,

This omission so loomed for him that he was to be conscious, as he came to the end of the
great moist avenue, of a felt doubt as to whether he could, in his bemusement, now “place”
anybody at all; to which condition of his may have been due the impulse that, at the reached
gates of the palace, caused him to pause and all vaguely, all peeringly inquire of one of the
sentries: “To whom do you beautifully belong?” (qtd. in Felstiner 466)

Beerbohm’s parody is so spot-on because he knows that what is greatest about James stems
from what can feel absurd about him. To a mind as obsessive as the Master’s, following a
character’s consciousness to—and sometimes past—the edge of what language has the
capacity to accomplish, it probably seemed perfectly reasonable to modify the word belong. In
a line of dialogue. In a play. Anything but deprive his audience of the precision—with its sliver
of hope for human connection—that he had the power to provide. Language was utterly
insufficient, but it was what he had to work with, so James worked and sweated inside it—and
changed it.
Who can know such a mind? Not Ótbín or Lodge or Ozick or Oates, though none of those writers are unacquainted with literary greatness on their own terms. Not T.S. Eliot, who spent a lot of time trying, and came up with what sounds like a withering dis, although it was intended as highest praise: “He had a mind so fine that no idea could violate it.” Even Gore Vidal, whose ear is usually so well-tuned to the most esoteric of writerly communications, misread Eliot’s intentions and had to apologize in the *New York Review of Books*. If I didn’t know better, I might think Eliot’s phrasing was *intentionally* ambiguous. I don’t doubt Eliot’s belief in James’s greatness, but maybe he was unwilling to offer what could sound, to any ear, like a last word on the Master. Poke an enduring statement on James, it seems, and it suddenly it is a question. I mean, to whom do you beautifully belong?

Nick Guest, the protagonist of Alan Hollinghurst Booker Prize-winning *The Line of Beauty* (2004, another Year of Henry James alum), has a more sympathetic ear than does Beerbohm for that bit of James’s late phrasing. Holding forth to his friends about James, on whom he is abstractedly writing a graduate thesis, Nick says, “There’s a marvelous bit in his play *The High Bid*, when a man says to the butler in a country house, ‘I mean, to whom do you beautifully belong?’” (183). Nick’s pretentious admiration for James at his most rococo hints at the mismatch between the glamour of Nick’s life as he imagines it and Nick’s life as it is, reckless and boring at the same time.

But where does one place one’s feet, standing before the Master? Lodge and Tóibín cannily begin their novels at the lowest part of James’s life, after the reception of one of his terrible plays, when he seems least masterly. When *The Master* was published, critics celebrated its elaborate linkages between specific scenes that Tóibín’s James encounters in life, and the images, plots, and characters of James’s late novels. But such a neat “solution” to the mystery of James’s deep genius does not square with my James—the hazy but ever-present character I have inadvertently invented as I read and reread him, who speaks not only through but from behind his works. My Henry James was after the unknowable, the indiscernible, or the barely discernible.

In his masterliness, his resistance. He beautifully belongs to no one.

**WORKS CITED**


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