THE CONCEPTION OF THE AUTHOR IN MODERN LITERARY CRITICISM

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When language is perceived, it is usually associated with the person who originated it in that context. E.D. Hirsch uses this standard of experiential common sense to claim that the most fundamental means of understanding literary language is to find out how its originators intended it. The substrate of factual reality associated with a work of literature is the individual author and his having created

this aesthetic object. The reading experiences produce the motive for learning about the author. Knowledge of an author can help explain these experiences and further motivate reading interests.

"In pedagogical situations the meaning attributed to the work is frequently assumed to be the result of the author's action. The knowledge the reader gets as the result of the rereading a book is a fuller and more complicated conception of the author. This knowledge could be characterized as pertaining to exile as a mental state in himself. It could also be understood as knowledge of a certain taste." [1, p. 32].

One of the scholars who deal with this problem is David Bleich, the representative of the phenomenological approach in American literary studies. In his seminar the readers are asked to write two response statements, between which they acquire a great deal of new information about the author. The important matter is the effect of this new material on them. They can understand some new features of a writer's personality they hadn't perceived before. These feelings can be the result of a revised self-image of a reader. Such biographical readings make possible a definition of the self in psychological items. New knowledge can help the readers to synthesize some new identity elements. This information is relative to their new conception of a writer.

Each reader objectifies something about his experience with the author's work in terms of the author if that conceptualization is more suitable to him. The interest in the author can be directly understood as a subjective function: the way one conceives the author in a critical judgment is subjectively governed and observable in oneself. For people with such interests, the locus of objectification is the author; the greater the familiarity with his work, the easier it is to conceive him as a distinct individual – to objectify him. But such objectification is idle, and even unfair, unless it represents the construction of the author out of the materials of one's experience with his work and other available information. "Knowing an author" means knowing one's own conception of the author.

Biographical documentation is sought to validate one's conception of an author. It is assumed that the documents and other historical artifacts used by a biographer to synthesize a portrait are the most authoritative basis on which to conceptualize the individual under study. But no matter how full such a portrait may seem, there is no final way to decide that a particular biographical formulation of an author's life or personality is objectively true. The formulation can be more or less adapted to the biographer's community and to subsequent readers; it can be appropriated as an influence in that community to the degree that it serves subjective literary interests.

In his article *Readings and Feelings* D. Bleich presented a detailed consideration of why biographical documentation helps him to produce the most satisfactory understanding of *The Turn of the Screw* by Henry James. For the purpose of the reading experience, he identified with his biographer, Leon Edel, and himself

became a biographer. There was an important difference between his biographically documented conception of the author of the book and Edel's overall biographical portrait, but this difference was determined by different motives for knowledge and not by objective historical facts, in the author's opinion.

Edel writes that the major immediate psychological impetus for writing *The Turn of the Screw* was James's decision to move from London into Lamb House in Rye.

In *The Turn of the Screw* James was saying, on the remote levels of his buried life, that Lamb House was a severe threat to his inner peace. It was haunted. It contained all the ghosts of boyhood – pushing, demanding governesses, Aunt Kate, his mother in her moods of severity. He could not be "a fellow, don't you see?" in such an environment. In the house of Family, Henry had always thought of himself as a claimant… To establish his claim, to take possession, carried with it the certitude of punishment – the demanding ghosts would exact their price, and little Mile's … sacrifice has shown what – somewhere beyond rational existence – he believed that price would be.

James wrote "The Turn of the Screw" accordingly on a theory of unexplained extra-human terror, that terror within himself that could not tell him why he had felt a sinking of the heart, at the simple daylight act of providing himself with an anchorage for the rest of his days.

In describing James's state of mind in writing the tale, Edel emphasizes the ineffability of his fears. While Edel names the fear as one of irrational punishment for just trying to be a "fellow", he stresses that James did not name that fear explicitly to himself, and that it instead emerged through intuitive or instinctive forces acting during the process of creating the tale. On the basis of this reasoning, Edel identifies the writer's mind most centrally with the figure of Miles, since Mile's fate would then represent an expression of James's deep fear of punishment.

In this discussion of James's background associated with this tale, Edel characterizes an important feature of James's psychology: "To be male was to risk (in the remote fantasy of childhood) such things as amputation like his father's; females seemed the most serious threat to his sense of himself, as a boy, and later – by disguises of the imagination, by thinking himself a little girl and by being quiet and observant – he could escape "amputations" and punishments. The stratagem succeeded. His mother called him "Angel". He could be above all an observant exploratory young female. The disguise of femininity was necessary mainly when he was confined to "Family" and had to contend with his elder brother; in that relationship he always saw William as strong and active and himself as inhibited and passive." [Edel, p. 210]

These observations are presented, not in explanation of the dramatic action of the tale, but as a contribution to the description of the fearful atmosphere in James's mind as he was about to move into Lamb House. But Edel does not suggest a connection between

the disguise of femininity in childhood and the feminine gender of the tale's narrator.

In Bleich's conception of James there is a vital explanatory connection. He understands James to have identified himself with the governess, who – by imagining a demonic sexual figure, Quint – "kills off" Miles, the masculine boy in James. The psychological premium of this disguise for James is *survival as an author*: and it is a successful one at that in respect to the listening audience within the tale and to Jame's reading audience as well, whom, at the time of writing, James was trying to win back after a slack period of his work. Even as Edel describes them, James's fears were not vague. At that period of his life, homosexual feelings played a greater role in his personality than they had in the past: identification with women had a new meaning, even if, as Edel documents, this impulse is traceable back to his childhood. At this point in his career, James is appropriating the literary and psychological "disguise" for the local purpose of reestablishing himself in maturity.

It is true that Miles is "sacrificed" and Quint is exorcised from him by the governess-narrator. But the governess's survival is more important biographically. In the late, her story is actually being read by an unnamed third narrator (Douglas being the second) who was given the manuscript written by the governess and passed on to Douglas (now dead). At the end of the tale, this third narrator does not reappear: only the governess survives, in terms of D. Bleich's reading experience. At the outset of the tale, this third narrator claimed to have a title for the story, but he does not tell what it is. Therefore, the critic's solution to the namelessness both of the story and the narrators is to understand them to be named on the title page of the published work – "The Turn of the Screw" by Henry James. For him, the biographical meaning of the story is that the author is overcoming both long-standing psychological fears of sexuality conflicts of domestic power as well as then-current professional doubts partially precipitated by the catastrophic failure of his play *Guy Domville,* and by the diminished popularity of his fiction. This meaning entails a different conception of the author than that proposed by the more authoritative reader, Leon Edel. But the documentation of both critics is the same.

Discussing different conceptions of authors is an ongoing critical concern. What is or is not claimed about the author, however, is determined by either the biographer's community or the reader's demands for biographical explanation. For example, it is not an objective good in biography to aim for psychological portraiture over historical chronology; but strong public interest at this time may demand an analytical presentation of character, and many current biographers respond after the pattern of Lytton Strachey and Leon Edel. It is equally arguable that a chronological history gives each reader a better opportunity to formulate his own conception of the author. This subjective motive underlies the many attempts at at biographies of the same author. This subjective motive underlies the many attempts at biographies of the same author. Any biographical effort is necessarily interpretive – the biographer's motivated resymbol-

ization of "the author". Leon Edel has already articulated this principle in his own reflections on what biographical effort entails: "The biographer must try to know himself before he seeks to know the life of another: and this leads us to a very pretty impasse, since there seems to be considerable evidence that he is seeking to know the life of another in order to better understand himself. The biographer's dilemma thus becomes double: he must appraise the life of another by becoming that other person; and the must be scrupulously careful that in the process the other person is not refashioned in his own image. This, in reality, is the subtle process involved…" [2, p. 201].

"… [The biographer] has taken into his consciousness a great many documents about another's life. And the book that will emerge will be *his* vision, *his* arrangement, *his* picture" [3, p. 11].

The value of a biographical study lies in the kind of subjective interest the biographer has applied to his task. Some studies are important because the biographer hates his subject; others awake interest because the biographer's point of view is unique. But to imagine that any single biography has actually set forth the objective life of the subject can only serve to inhibit further interest. Every reader's conception of an author is his own construction; even when a new conception is assimilated, it remains his own construction. The process of recursive reconstruction produces new knowledge. If often seems that scholarly documentation such as personal letters and testimonials are new facts about an author, and sometimes they do disclose new information. Yet regardless of whether such disclosure takes place, each new document is a *new point of view*, and each time another is read, the perspective is complicated and changed. Whether a reader reads biographies or original documents or both or neither depends on what kind of knowledge he seeks. The search is most productive when it is the consequence of knowledge of oneself.

The linguistic nature of a reading experience establishes the subjective dialectic, which negotiates the experience into knowledge. This means that when the knowledge sought concerns the real, but permanently unavailable, historical author, awareness of one's motivated conception of the author is a necessity for such knowledge.

The response statement greatly facilitates this awareness. The search for and use of documentation of the author often grows from the belief that biographical knowledge is necessary for our reading experience. Any biographical interest, as Edel observed, is "deeply intimate and highly subjective"[3, p. 81]. Knowledge of the language and literature of another mind rests on knowledge of the language of one's own.

Literature

1. **Bleich, D.** Subjective criticism / D. Bleich. – Baltimore : Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978. – 321 p.
2. **Edel, L.** Henry James: The Treacherous Years, 1895–1901/ L. Edel. – Philadelphia : Bloomington, 1973. – 412 p.
3. **Edel, L.** Literary Biography / L. Edel. – Philadelphia: Bloomington, 1985. – 223 p.