

Neo-Victorian Biofiction and Trauma Poetics in Colm Tóibín's *The Master*

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Abstract: This essay explores Colm Tóibín's *The Master* as a neo-Victorian fictional biography addressing Henry James's traumatophilic production and persona. The last years have seen a bulk of new novels, biographies and works of critical theory on the writer's production and persona. Delving into the reasons behind James's revival at the turn of the millennium, this essay suggests that the phenomenon responds not only to an increasing interest in things Victorian, but is also due to the current reformulation of biography and its interaction with the fictional. The concept of trauma is also at stake and proves particularly useful to understanding the poetics of Tóibín's novel. The way *The Master* deals with James relies on a complex relation between his writing, his diseased identity and his problematic cathexis with those around him. As the essay shows, he is inescapably haunted by the vacuum he establishes between his role as aesthete and that of brother, son, platonic lover and/or friend. His is, in sum, the trauma of aesthetic excess.

Keywords: aestheticism, biofiction, diseased masculinity, homosexuality, intertextuality, Henry James, neo-Victorianism, queer, Colm Tóibín, trauma.

All published in 2004, David Lodge's *Author, Author*, Alan Hollinghurst's *The Line of Beauty*, and Colm Tóibín's *The Master* prove the unyielding interest that Henry James continues to beget at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Drawing on Peter Kemp, Lodge subsequently pointed out that "[i]f anyone deserve[d] to win" that year's Man Booker Prize, which Hollinghurst won and for which Tóibín's novel was shortlisted, "it's Henry James" (Lodge 2006: 3). According to Ágnes Kovács, critical interest in James already re-surfaced in the late 1930s and early 1940s, when a group of devotees transformed a virtually unread writer into an icon and a canonical presence in English literature (Kovács 2007: 3). Much has been written on James's life more recently, particularly after Leon Edel published his massive five-volume biography (1957-1972). Not only biographies, but also autobiographies and a myriad of letters make up the bulk of subject matter available on James for avid historiographers and

novelists to draw on to produce what Cora Kaplan calls “this *fin de siècle* flowering of Jamesiana” (Kaplan 2007: 40).¹ Why, despite his plotless, surreptitious, and protracted discourse, has James become part of popular culture?

Critics have situated their explanations of the current craze for Jamesiana in varied contexts, not just the re-flourishing of all things Victorian. For Lodge, it responds to the increasing success of the biographical novel as well as to the effect of feminist and queer theory (Lodge 2006: 4). In his view, “probably no other male novelist of the period created so many memorable women characters as James” (Lodge 2006: 6). However, James’s curiosity for femininity also exceeded his writing. He had intimate relationships with women, “notably his cousin Minny Temple, who died young of consumption in 1870, his sister Alice, who died of cancer in 1892 after years of neurasthenic illness, and Constance Fenimore Woolson, who took her life in 1894” (Lodge 2006: 6). Closely related to his ambivalence towards them is “the belief of most of his biographers [...] that he was a repressed homosexual” with queer critics reading his works against the grain, in search of rhetorical traces of (c)overt transgression or deviancy from the norm (Lodge 2006: 7). Although it would be inaccurate and unfair to decode James’s texts solely in terms of his sexual orientation, new findings and/or hypotheses in this respect have had an undeniable influence.

The interest in James also responds to more practical reasons. Jamesian narratives – like those of Jane Austen and Charles Dickens – have also proved to be a marketable product, particularly for the film industry (Kovács 2007: 1). This said, it is my main contention that neo-Victorian (over)use of James primarily responds to the current sense of cultural exhaustion and postmodernist anxieties, particularly the crisis of masculinity. Despite (or because of) his inarticulate homoerotic drives, the hero of *The Master* is ‘redeemed’ from his role of outsider as opposed to his female Others, namely his sister, his cousin Minnie Temple and Constance Fenimore. His more or less direct implication in their deaths triggers a sense of guilt in Tóibín’s hero that determines the overall traumatic discourse of the novel. To what extent is Tóibín’s treatment of James’s female friends a symbolic re-victimisation and re-marginalisation for the sake of the late-Victorian writer? If even James’s problematic masculinity can be de-traumatised, so too can current masculinities. Twenty-first-century male

readers can narcissistically recognise themselves in a traumatised character whose Otherness is redirected to the women around him.

The current craze for story-telling, particularly concerning Victorian writers, responds for some to a renewed interest in authenticity. Is truth-seeking, then, a feature of nineteenth-century realism which neo-Victorianism attempts to reformulate? If so, why is neo-Victorian biofiction (rather than classic biography) used to recast Victorian celebrities? In Cora Kaplan's view, with which I concur, the genre responds to the return of the "subject" after Barthes's 'The Death of the Author':

Barthes himself concedes that 'perhaps the subject returns, not as illusion, but as fiction. A certain pleasure is derived from a way of imagining oneself as individual, of inventing a final rarest fiction: the fictive identity.' If, as in Barthes' proleptic boast, the author as absolute monarch became one of the 'disappeared', then is the perverse wish to find its traces in the text perhaps met, if in vulgar fashion through making him a character in the novel, where his presence satisfies both the epistemological terms of his banishment and the psychological demand for his return? (Kaplan 2007: 71)

The actual James's own interest in psychological characterisation makes his fictional *alter ego* an adequate instrument to explore the limits of identity and its representation in the postmodern era.

Unlike Leon Edel's cradle-to-grave biography on James, *The Master* builds up the writer's fictive identity as resolutely fragmented and incomplete: the novel is an event-based narrative which only focuses on select pivotal moments in the subject's existence. This does not imply lack of rigor; on the contrary, the temporal and narratological limitations of *The Master* enhance it as a biofictional text. The subject is thus rescued as a valid concept to play with and explore the current problematics of masculinity through a nineteenth-century figure. The biographical novel "takes a real person and his real history as the subject matter for imaginative exploration, using the novel's techniques for representing subjectivity rather than the objective, evidence-based discourse of biography" (Lodge 2006: 8). However, apostrophising factual events and characters in fiction is not only

an ontological event. It is also problematic both ethically and aesthetically. Drawing on Jonathan Dee, Mark Llewellyn points out:

The appropriation of genuine historical figures [...] as characters in fiction is an act of imaginative boldness that, through simple attrition, readers of contemporary fiction have come to take entirely for granted. [...] Then historical fiction in many senses ceases to serve one of its primary functions in re-imagining the past, by obscuring or fabricating evidence rather than providing accountable biographical narratives. (Llewellyn 2007: 20)

What can be inferred from Llewellyn's words is that neo-Victorian (biographical) novels currently appropriate, misrepresent and exploit the past rather than aiming at authentic facts. Increasingly, their search for a different kind of subjective 'authenticity' focuses on elided or unacknowledged traumas repressed in the historical record available.

Accordingly, I delve into trauma theory as a notional framework in Tóibín's recreation of James. The first part, 'Jamesiana Biofiction', approaches the writer himself as a transhistorical trope connecting late-Victorian male anxiety with contemporary crises in masculinity. In the second section, the article addresses traumatophilia as a distinguishing feature of Tóibín's James. The next part, 'Queer Sexuality in Relation to Trauma', focuses on how the novel queers James's sexual restraint as opposed to sexuality's self-dramatisation in the case of Oscar Wilde. In 'Masculinity/Disease in Relation to Trauma' I explore the impact of current (gay) male traumas, particularly AIDS, in the articulation of James as a meaningful trope, while the fifth section, 'James and Women' analyses the relation between James and the women in his life. In fact, for most of the novel his female relatives and friends are the hero's addressees, as well as the vehicle whereby he sublimates his traumatic guilt into art.

Although, as Marie-Luise Kohlke and Christian Gutleben argue, nineteenth-century artists already dealt with traumatic episodes, it was only in the final decades of the twentieth century that a group of academics formulated a comprehensive "trauma theory" (Kohlke and Gutleben 2010: 1-2). Seminal works by major trauma theorists emphasise how the traumatic event cannot be acknowledged as it happens (Cathy Caruth 1995: 7; Anne

Whitehead 2004: 3, 6; Dominick LaCapra 2001: 21-22). It is an elusive phenomenon which, only after a period of latency or “belatedness” – from Freud’s *Nachträglichkeit* – comes out in the form of dreams, hallucinations and other symptoms:

The returning traumatic dream startles Freud because it cannot be understood in terms of any wish or unconscious meaning, but is, purely and inexplicably, the literal return of the event against the will of the one it inhabits. [...] Its very overwhelming immediacy [...] produces its belated uncertainty. (Caruth 1995: 4-5)

This double temporality of trauma fits the neo-Victorian project particularly well. Looking back to the Victorians from a postmodern standpoint, the neo-Victorian subject “occupies [...] both the interminable present of the catastrophe [...] and the post-traumatic present that seems to come after but is paradoxically coterminous” (Kohlke and Gutleben 2010: 2). That is how the neo-Victorian trauma novel constitutes a privileged territory to address and inter-relate traumas past and present. In this light, Kohlke and Gutleben address the healing potential of the neo-Victorian text, arguing that it “may function as a belated abreaction or ‘working-through’ of nineteenth-century traumas, as well as those of our own times, albeit more obliquely” (Kohlke and Gutleben 2010: 3). *The Master* responds to the late-twentieth-century crisis of masculinity as gendered trauma. Males are more vulnerable after Vietnam, the female and gay liberation movements, the outburst of AIDS and the queering of genders. Tóibín’s James pre-emptively addresses these phenomena, which are – deliberately anachronistically – projected back into the re-created late nineteenth century. Being ill of restraint, guilt and undecidability for his alleged homosexuality and his intense (albeit inarticulate) bonds with cultivated women, the hero also bears witness to the mental distress that affects his brother Wilky after the American Civil War, which distinctly resembles Posttraumatic Stress Disorder.

From the very beginning we witness James’s traumatic emasculation. In free indirect speech, the narrator enters the writer’s mind and the aporia central to his persona, his discourse, and that of the novel as a whole: “The thing that he most needed to write would never be seen or published, would never be known or understood by anyone” (Tóibín 2004:

9). This is James's unfathomable paradox: the trauma of a closeted writer, always on the verge between representation and the irrepresentable, the known and the unknown, reality and fiction. *The Master* may be read as a neo-Victorian text which apostrophises James from the standpoint of postmodern poetics. As my analysis will prove, the novel sheds new light not only on James, but especially on the impact of Jamesiana on postmodernist readers and vice versa. The interaction between past and present as sites of representation is therefore bidirectional.

In sum, the fictional biography of James and his "poetics of inaction" and "postponement", "closetedness" and "failure" (Moseley 304-305), constitute a valid formula to renegotiate our own sense of crisis. It is a postmodernist attempt at healing from trauma by sublimation inscribed in the act of re-surfacing and intertextual appropriation.

1. Jamesiana Biofiction

The current success of biography is self-evident from publishers' catalogues, book sales, and cinematic biopics. For some critics this process primarily constitutes "the crude revenge of nineteenth-century realism on the cool ironies, unfixed identities and skewed temporalities of the postmodern" (Kaplan 2007: 37). However, the genre does not return unaffected, as if postmodernism had never existed. Barthes's 1967 theory explicated in 'The Death of the Author' has made readers into 'orphans' who still yearn for an authorial figure. This anxiety has triggered off the revision of Victorian masters from a new perspective.² Likewise, the feminists' project of the rehabilitation of nineteenth-century women's lives and life writing, particularly since the 1990s, has rendered biography its "bright new image" (Kaplan 2007: 39). Once feminists have given Victorianism "a new feel" from a female perspective, its main male figures and their works likewise become ripe for revisionary treatments. As Kaplan points out: "[a]mong literary biographies since 1990, there have been two of Robert Browning, two of Thackeray, and two new treatments of Trollope, as well as reprints of earlier key biographies by C. P. Snow and John Pope Hennessy" (Kaplan 2007: 39). This trend has been accompanied by another: the conversion of Victorian writers into fictional characters (Kaplan 2007: 39), especially Charles Dickens, Oscar Wilde and Henry James, as well as poets such as Alfred, Lord Tennyson and John Clare. Their fictional biographies help turn-of-the-millennium readers 'meet' and engage with the

authorial figure that early poststructuralism previously withdrew, though not always in a reassuring or expected fashion.

In her review of *The Master* for *The New York Times*, Janet Maslin labels it “a compelling hybrid of biography, fiction and ventriloquism” (2004: n.p.). Like other neo-Victorian biofictional novels, Tóibín’s novel ventriloquises and updates the voices of those silenced in the nineteenth-century, such as the women in James’s life, as well as self-silenced/self-censored voices of public figures such as James. Helen Davis argues that “ventriloquism can actually be a talking back and speaking trough of subjects as opposed to objects, offering multiple possibilities for voice, agency and intention that cannot be simply reduced to a finite dichotomy of power” (Davis 2012: 7). In other words, the dichotomies of male ventriloquist and female dummy, of postmodern revision and Victorian original, do not adequately encompass the complex interaction between the Victorian and neo-Victorian. Whether the neo-Victorian text (or historical figure) is “condemned to be spoken by the past”, as Catherine Bernard argues (qtd. in Davies 2012: 5), or the Victorian text (or subject) is just a puppet to the postmodern ventriloquist is a candent topic. In my view, *The Master* mostly approximates the second option, making James ‘speak’ for us, our concerns and anxieties even as the re-imagined James resists the drive for full transparency. This return to (the Other within) James as a fictional character responds to contradictory narrative aims, both nostalgic and transgressive, and (as will be shown later) to the logic of trauma. Postmodern fictional biographies of eminent Victorians play with nineteenth-century realisms, even as they question classic conceptions of truthfulness and identity, coherence and character. In this climate, some reviewers have denounced the historical and biographical inaccuracy of Tóibín’s novel. Its strength, though, relies on its subtle re-articulation of former biographies about Henry James following new political, ethical, and aesthetic demands. The outcome is rather convincing; not because it is ‘true’ to James’s personal life, but ‘true’ to an artistic conscience and persona that he conceived and Tóibín recalls and reinterprets. This relates to the opposition between the “truth of fiction” and the “truth of fact” which, according to Caroline Lusin, “has always figured prominently in discussions about the faults and merits of worldmaking in fictional (auto)-biography” (Lusin 2010: 269). Against the factual character and alleged truthfulness and reliability of classic biographies, biofictions like *The Master* make up a

new ontological, epistemological, and representational framework where the boundaries between fiction and ‘reality’ are blurred.

Hence fictional biography comes to complement the possibilities of factual biography. *The Master* is obviously inspired by James’s persona, but it rejects the constraining factuality of classic biographies. It puts forward the character’s complex personality, how it relates to the actual writer and his writing process. The novel does not constitute a conclusive life narration. Unlike classic cradle-to-grave biographies, the novel does not end in the hero’s death. Instead, the text focuses on a number of pivotal events in the writer’s life leaving it ‘open’ and fragmented, indeed, repeatedly keeping the reader and/or spectator waiting for the spectacle to start. Moreover, the pivotal events in *The Master* are mostly traumatic, focusing on the protagonist’s inarticulate relation with women, his father and older brother, as well as his frustrated homosexual encounters and professional failures. By doing so, the novel calls up a new face of James akin to and relevant to current anxieties about queer representation. Biofiction grants an unprecedented degree of freedom on life-story writing. It is particularly worth noting how the novel makes James’s life generate his fictional world. Fiction does not exclude facts, but complements and reworks them, and gives well-trained postmodern readers a brand new look at the unknown corners of James’s being. In this light, Stephen Matterson argues that “Tóibín’s imaginative freedom from the constraints under which [classic] biographers operate results in a fresh and revealing exploration of James’s interiority” (Matterson 2008: 134).

For Lusin, fictional biography is primarily a narrative phenomenon (Lusin 2010: 282). This is particularly the case of neo-Victorian texts which, as Kohlke and Gutleben argue, use the narrating process as a trope for trauma as well as a healing mechanism. From the very beginning the narrator of *The Master* regrets the irrepresentability of so-called reality and, more specifically, the hero’s narrative powerlessness mentioned above. Trauma is thus an aporia which can only be ‘solved’ in literary form. Tóibín sees “in James’s larger story the triumph of literature as a saving grace, and the redemptive power of art to express what cannot otherwise be said” (Maslin 2004).

In his last years, James produced two autobiographical works, *A Small Boy and Others* (1913) and *Notes of a Son and Brother* (1914), which inspire the discourse of Tóibín’s novel.³ For Matterson:

They are highly revealing and oddly evasive. They are at once interior autobiographies which concentrate on James's intellectual and emotional development, and in some respects they are also deflections of that interiority, since James himself takes control and directs the reader away from certain aspects of the self. (Matterson 2008: 134)

The real James decided to give his own account of himself pre-emptively and thus counteract prospective versions of his life by others. This obsession with (self-)control explains the exactness of his discourse and his mastery of silences. Yet, his secrecy compels fiction-biographers like Tóibín to revise the concept of authenticity, fostering speculation instead (Matterson 2008: 135). Against Daniel Mendelsohn's view, Matterson regards *The Master* as ethically respectful in its treatment of James. Rather than using the freedom of fiction to re-create his persona, Tóibín uses the ambiguous status of neo-biographies to represent the writer's traumatic ambiguity. In other words, Tóibín's novel swings between the limitless freedom of literature and a self-imposed compromise with the truth of fiction, between James's actual style and its fashionable re-appropriation by contemporary media. All in all, he constitutes "a particularly fitting subject, for he allows his biographers to thematise several crucial issues concerning authorship and literary worldmaking, authorship and ethics, [...] authorship and memory" (Lusin 2010: 269), as well as the trauma poetics of homoeroticism.

2. James's Traumatophilia

The novel addresses its Victorian setting from an elegiac viewpoint, focusing on trauma and loss, but also from an ironic perspective that helps console and transcend their effects. This paradox informs the painful process of literary healing. In May 1896, the narrator recalls how James's "HAND HURT HIM", how when writing steadily, "he did not feel even a mild discomfort" but how any slight simple movement when not writing, such as opening a door or picking up a piece of paper, could precipitate "an excruciating pain in his wrist and the bones" bordering on "mild torture"; he is left wondering whether such agonies "were a message from the gods to

keep writing, to wield his pen at all times” (Tóibín 2004: 83). Despite his physical, psychical and metaphorical torment from writing, the fictional James feels inevitably compelled to put himself and his world into words in search of (self)healing. He does so even if he feels dismembered and estranged from himself, holding his hand “as though it were a foreign object placed in his care, unpleasant and unwelcome and, at times, venomous” (Tóibín 2004: 125). James’s problematic cathexis with the pen has epistemological implications which allegedly respond to his personal/sexual story of powerlessness and Otherness. In Moseley’s rather restrictive view, Tóibín’s main contribution is “to explore further the homosexual side of Henry” (Moseley 2005: 306). However, it is not so much that James was a sexual outcast. It is the way the novel reformulates this fact to revise gender stereotypes and relations that really matters. The hero holds a complex status as a homosexual American expatriate in England. At the limit of masculinity, normative (i.e. British) Victorianism, and success, the figure of the writer is appropriated to problematise not so much the novel’s Victorian setting, but explore the ontological and epistemological crises of (masculine) identity in postmodernism from the standpoint of trauma.

When the protagonist’s brother Wilky is seriously wounded, empathy, the corporeality and belatedness of trauma, as well as its (im)possible representation, follow his return home. Wilky’s physical and psychic collapse bears after-witness to the increasingly vulnerable turn-of-the-millennium man, especially after twentieth-century armed conflicts. “As Wilky’s wounds began to heal, his nightmares started”, transporting him back on the battlefield in the midst of mass slaughter; even his days bring little relief as traumatic memories intrude incessantly, causing him to break down and “cry uncontrollably, but *he could shape no more words*” (Tóibín 2004: 189-191, added emphasis). Mrs James encourages her family to “share Wilky’s pain, take some of it from him and live with it themselves” (Tóibín 2004: 188). She thus disregards LaCapra’s warning that

being responsive to the traumatic experience of others, notably of victims, implies not the appropriation of their experience, but [...] empathic unsettlement, which should have stylistic effects or, more broadly, effects in writing which cannot be reduced to formulas or rules of method. (LaCapra 2001: 41)

Mrs James (over)identifies the pain of the victim with that of the witness. In other words, instead of maintaining a critical distance as witness of a traumatic episode, she fosters the whole family's (and vicariously the readers') identification and thence appropriation of the Other's (i.e. Wilky's) trauma. In the end, however, she fails, admitting her inability to become/identify with her son and his first-hand experiences. This way, following LaCapra's approach, the novel proves that trauma is not a transferable phenomenon and hence victim and witness cannot be equated.

Like shell-shocked soldiers in the First World War or the veterans of Vietnam and the Gulf War, Wilky suffers from what is today referred to as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (or PTSD). He is possessed by the traumatic event, which he relives uncontrollably. Dispossessed of his psychic integrity, he feels compelled to re-enact the symptoms of his collapse of understanding after "a period of latency", as Freud first argued and later theorists demonstrated more thoroughly (Cathy Caruth 1995: 4-5, 7; Felman and Laub 1992: 16, 102). His failure to immediately integrate and represent his experience and its psychic consequences allows the literary text to belatedly mourn the unutterability of (Wilky's) trauma. In fact, James starts writing a story that uncannily grows from his brother's war episode (see Tóibín 2004: 194). What confers Tóibín's James advantage over his family regarding Wilky's suffering is his status of writer, his "feeling of power" when writing biographically-inflected texts and articulating traumatic memory (Tóibín 2004: 195). All in all, and despite the healing potential of his creativity, his whole experience can be regarded as traumatophilic, namely dominated by a desire for suffering – only sublimated in the artistic process.

James's traumatophilia in *The Master* is linked to his alleged homosexuality. James's traumatophilia in *The Master* is linked to his alleged homosexuality. "[C]oined by Walter Benjamin to describe Baudelaire's genius at parrying shocks", Ellman notes, 'traumatophilia' serves as James's defensive strategy against "the irreducible other [... or] the intimate difference" (Ellmann 2010: 56, 57). Discussing *The Ambassadors* (2003), for instance, Ross Posnock contends that the novel's protagonist Strether "shares James's own 'traumatophilia'" which "involves the subject deliberately seeking out encounters of difference rather than sameness" (qtd. in Ellmann 2010: 56). In this light, *The Master* ruminates

on James's problematic relationship of difference with his father and his older brother,⁴ and more especially with male bodies and female souls.

Unlike the celebratory subversive discourse ascribed to Wilde, James has become the masochist homosexual, the silent transgressor. As a traumatophile, he interprets experience *per se* as painful and passively revels in suffering. In this sense, the concept of 'insidious trauma' proves useful to show how gender and trauma interact in Tóibín's hero, more specifically on how the hero is compelled to re-experience the deaths of his female 'victims' and how he awkwardly rearticulates queer masculinity at their expense.

Coined by Maria Root and further developed by Laura S. Brown, the concept of insidious trauma refers to "the traumatogenic effects of oppression that are not necessarily overtly violent or threatening to bodily well-being at the given moment but that do violence to the soul and spirit" (Brown 1996: 107). Despite Gutleben's claim that (sexual) Otherness has become just a fashionable feature in neo-Victorian fiction (Gutleben 2001: 11), actual gay and lesbians today continue to suffer from insidious trauma. *The Master* is, among other things, a response to the secret private experiences which, beyond events like war or major disasters (i.e., more general or wholesale traumas), threaten specific sexual minorities. Tóibín's James's traumatophilia and a latent homophobia, both society's and his own, constitute his insidious trauma, "a mask behind which everyday oppression operates" (Brown 1996: 105). Unlike the effect of war, James's insidious trauma is much more subtly represented. However, the protagonist's traumatophilia may paradoxically comprise its potential healing, since his writing, no matter its obliquity and indirection, gives voice to trauma, especially at the turn of the millennium. Tóibín's belated recreation of a male in crisis is not a mere prosopopeia. He is not resuscitating James. His is a fictional "historical non-subject" whom he accords "a future restoring [his] traumatic past to cultural memory" (Gutleben and Kohlke 2010: 31).

3. Queer Sexuality in Relation to Trauma

On reading *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881), Tóibín felt deeply absorbed by James's command of style and its relation with morality. Yet, when he finally realised how subtle James was in threatening (hetero)normativity, he felt pleasure (Tóibín 2010: 24-25). Unlike Wilde's

effeminate flamboyancy, the transgressiveness of Tóibín's hero is more difficult to decode. As happens in James's own writings, Tóibín's main character's 'true' identity is hard to work out. Is he really attracted to the young men he comes across? His encounters are homoerotic, but never overtly (homo)sexual. For instance, his interaction with Hammond, the servant Lady Wolsely provides him with during his visit to Ireland, is ambiguous but promising, an interchange of long 'speaking' glances rather than spoken words, sufficient to make the encounter feel "momentous" to him (see Tóibín 2004: 36). The same ambiguity, subtlety and (homo)sexual almostness recur in his other encounters with young men, particularly in his bed-sharing scene with his friend Holmes. Sexual opacity (like James's) is another of the novel's unexpected neo-Victorian assets rather than a target of Tóibín's critique. With his much earlier neo-Victorian novel *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969), John Fowles highlighted how much we have lost to sexual liberation. His claim is primarily aesthetic, since a return to pre-sexual-liberation Victorianism can only be desirable from a literary viewpoint. This is also Eibhear Walshe's claim about *The Master* which, in his view, "results from Tóibín's interest in the vanishing homoerotic body [...], a metaphorical expression for his sense that an 'out' gay life is, intrinsically, a less interesting life" (Walshe 2008: 125-126). James's late-Victorian self-repression thus constitutes an engaging and inspiring aesthetic issue for post-liberation gay writers and readers. Censorship has always encouraged literature to find new transgressive formulas for representing the illicit. When the battle against censorship seems over, some critics and writers conversely long for the countercultural climate and literary possibilities facilitated by censorship. James's subliminal discourse proves curiously attractive for some neo-Victorian practitioners, who choose not to resort to sexual explicitness. His style and persona, as shown in *The Master*, mix up the nostalgic return to the past with postmodern transgression. Exploring why some contemporary gay and lesbian fiction, e.g. by Sarah Waters and Will Self, is set in a historical context, Shani Rousso identifies several possible motivations, namely:

To provide a historical voice to claim a place in the past [...];
to see how the acceptance of this voice indicates a change in
social mores and attitudes to other sexualities; [...] to recreate
shock value and a sense of the forbidden; [...] to reiterate

difference and to promote the prominence rather than the invisibility of marginal sexual identities, thereby retaining their transgressive status. (Rousso 2008: 304)

Arguably, a number of these same motivations can be discerned in Tóibín's writing.

When socio-political circumstances have made non-normative sexuality more acceptable and visible, though not immune to discrimination, neo-Victorian novels by Waters or Tóibín vindicate the right and responsibility of literature to transgress with aesthetic and political purposes. As Rousso points out, gay and lesbian neo-Victorian fiction does not advocate "a return to the contravention of expression of marginal sexualities" (Rousso 2008: 306). Rather, it is the shocking effect of breaking taboos and limits anew that still proves appealing and constitutes a weapon to avoid 'invisibilising' gayness into normativity. In other words, when being transgressive proves almost impossible and the 'Other' is subsumed into the logic of the same, neo-Victorianism can yet be revolutionary by blurring familiarisation and estrangement. Countering what Gutleben regards with concern as the overrepresentation (and hence banalisation) of gayness and lesbianism (Gutleben 2001: 23), *The Master* returns, longs for, continues, questions and exploits the obliquities and repressions of Victorian gender and sexual discourses. Tóibín's James's sexuality is hidden behind layers of social pretence and self-censorship. This way, as in Waters's novels, the lesbian, gay and queer remain marginal, which conversely "facilitates a visible prominence" (Rousso 2008: 307). This, for Rousso, constitutes the main contradiction of neo-Victorian gay and lesbian novels, namely "the dichotomy between the desire to be accepted and pass unnoticed, and the desire to be visibly different, even shocking and taboo", rejecting assimilation: "If myriad sexualities exist, then the strength of the individual voice is dissipated: if everyone is different, everyone is the same" (Rousso 2008: 307). In this light, James's (sexual) Otherness is a distinctive feature but also a trait he shares with those around him. He queers his friends and family in his writing whereas their own queerness 'normalises' him. His sister Alice, his cousin Minnie Temple and his best friend Constance Fenimore are unable to convey their desire and identity outside the hero's literary world. Like many of James's characters, Tóibín's are confronted with malaise and eventual death: the three women die in painful

and pitiful circumstances. His father and older brother – being paradigms of Victorian (healthy) masculinity in James’s world – experience episodes of mental disorder and are physically handicapped. Likewise, his enthusiastic younger brother suffers from post-traumatic stress disorder after fighting in the American Civil War.

As Bonnie J. Robinson points out, when it comes to recalling eminent neo-Victorian gay (closeted or not) writers, there seems to be a gendered hierarchy whereby women’s Otherness serves to normalise these writers’ own marginality. For Robinson, current texts on Wilde, for instance, re-inscribe Contance Wilde’s marginality to “recover Oscar Wilde from the victimisation he endured in his era” (Robinson 2011: 22). In my view, James’s case in *The Master* is not much different. Not only women but also allegedly heterosexual men are (re-)inscribed as potential Others in James’s rehabilitation process. He is the silent transgressor, the Other’s (Wilde’s) Other. Thus James is the key to this neo-Victorian trip to the past and, more specifically, to a redefinition of the homosexual writer (here a character) as a cultural referent. That is why James (like Wilde) has been exonerated from his ‘crimes’ as his artistic excellence relies on his sexual dissidence. His Otherness has been progressively ‘normalised’ – legitimised by his art – whereas (hetero)normativity is called into question.

Despite the novel’s queer poetics, James feels constantly threatened for his sexual orientation. He regards Wilde’s overt homosexuality as a major threat, a mirror of his own queerness, which he never came to terms with. The premiere of James’s play *Guy Domville* (1895) is particularly significant in this sense. Instead of attending his own play, James makes his way to the theatre where Wilde’s *An Ideal Husband* (1895) is being performed. It is as if Tóibín’s hero had decided to supplant his *alter ego*, of whom he “instantly [...] becomes jealous” (Tóibín 2004: 16). Jealousy soon turns into fear and internal homophobia. He cannot stand the gay Other embodied by Wilde, because he cannot accept his own self/identity on account of what he regards as a (self)imposed insidious trauma. Once in the theatre, he confesses relief at finding “no sign” of the Irish playwright himself (Tóibín 2004: 16). James is also queer and of Irish descent, a (neo)-Victorian Other at the core of English Victorian society. Unlike Wilde though, he insists on hiding his complicit Otherness. Thus it is only the contrast between their two plays that eventually explains that both artists in fact embody two sides of late-Victorian homosexuality. Wilde’s plays were

overtly camp and responded to their author's excessive personality. For some time, his witty comedies of manners attracted an upper-class audience in love with the writer's ex-centricity. Wilde's camp style allowed his spectators a pleasurable exercise of narcissism. Meanwhile James's plays did not meet the success he expected: they mirrored those same spectators but they were too elaborate, abstract and detached. In short, James's high camp – characterised by “seriousness”, “pathos” and “excruciation” (Sontag 1964: n.p.) – did not match the late-Victorian taste for sensationalism the way Wilde's low camp did. This disparity can be applied to their lives and what they represented as well. Whereas James became an elitist Victorian author, Wilde's overexposed life filled late-nineteenth-century tabloids. The former became a rarity, the latter a martyr. Such stereotypes have only been recycled by postmodernist neo-Victorian literature, readjusting the historical figures' sexualities to the post-gay-liberation discourse. James and Wilde never meet in Tóibín's novel. But the phantom of Wilde's overexposure always reminds James of his own exceptionality by proxy.

Wilde is at the kernel of James's traumatic wound and literary world-making. Tóibín's hero recalls his childhood through *The Turn of the Screw* (1898), used in turn to render the miserable life of Wilde's sons. The whole process starts in *The Master* when the archbishop of Canterbury tells James a ghost story about orphans left to be cared for by corrupt servants on an old country estate, with the children contaminated to the point of becoming evil themselves, haunted by those who depraved them following the servants' deaths (see Tóibín 2004: 50). This is the raw material from which James makes up a new fiction, more concrete and truthful, because it is uncannily related to his own autobiographical story. He fantasises with the literary process, wondering “how an idea could so easily change shape and appear fresh in a new guise” (Tóibín 2004: 49). *The Turn of the Screw* constitutes a powerful pre-text which transcends its fictionality by mixing with actual episodes in James's and Oscar Wilde's lives. The fictional James uses the archbishop's tale to re-construct his own childhood memories. After reading it, he confesses, “he found himself thinking about his sister's puzzling presence in the world” (Tóibín 2004: 52). Alice James is a weak but fascinating character that bewilders the hero's emotional and literary imagination. This is how fiction and James's memories blur. Henry and his sister Alice develop into fictional characters in the former's imagination as an adult. They inspire and are inspired by Miles and Flora,

the protagonists of *The Turn of the Screw*, whereas their aunt echoes the governess in the ghost story (see Tóibín 2004: 58).

It is, however, in the chapter on April 1895 – significantly coinciding with Wilde’s downfall – that we witness how James’s fiction comes out of life and returns to it. Tóibín’s hero fantasises about self-withdrawal as the characters in his story, as well as himself and his sister, fuse in “one sensibility, one imagination, vibrating with the same nerves, the same suffering” (Tóibín 2004: 67). The narrator describes James’s literary worldmaking as a traumatic phenomenon, his memories awakening belatedly like flashbacks in fictional form:

Often ideas came like this, casually, without warning [...]. It stayed fresh and clear in his imagination. Slowly and mysteriously, it began to fuse with the ghost story [...], and slowly he began to see something fixed and exact as though the processes of imagination themselves were as a ghost, becoming more and more corporeal. [...] Once it became more solid, the emerging story and all its ramifications and possibilities lifted him out of the gloom of the failure. (Tóibín 2004: 67-68, original ellipses)

The archbishop’s story transmutes into James’s childhood memories as re-created in the adult writer’s imagination, which swings between the authorial frame and the autonomy of the writing process (see Tóibín 2004: 148-153).

Yet, the story also metamorphoses into a sentimental account of the psychic effect of Wilde’s traumatic downfall on his sons. After having James debate with his friend Edmund Gosse on the ethical implications of using factual material and real people in story writing, the narrator masterly recalls Tóibín’s hero’s mental processes. When he is told a story about Wilde and his wife meeting in Switzerland for their children’s sake, he cannot help drawing on his own childhood. This time, however, instead of himself and his sister, “[h]e pictured himself and William at the window of the Hôtel de L’Ecu in Geneva”, only for them to transmute into Wilde’s young sons watching their mother’s departure, “half knowing why their mother had left them in the care of servants and haunted by unnamed fears

and barely grasped knowledge and the memory of their evil father who had been shut away” (Tóibín 2004: 81-82).

Shortly thereafter, the traumatic premiere of *Guy Domville* confronts James with his gay Other within himself. Wilde is just a mirror, a cultural polymorphous icon that the novel uses to normalise James’s exceptionality. Wilde’s traumatic downfall rendered him an immortal symbol which James rejected and was afraid of. *The Master*, however, digs into the very origins of James’s phobias in his (bio)fictional texts. Tóibín’s James uses a piece of fiction to render how *The Turn of the Screw* was conceived to shed light on traumatic events, otherwise unmentionable. In other words, only the interplay between James’s ghost story and its alleged hypotext – the archbishop’s tale – can bear witness to and represent James’s childhood and its referent, namely the fictionalised existence of Wilde’s sons as a symptom of his shameful sexuality. Some recent biofictional texts on Wilde and James (like *The Master*) release their writer-protagonists from marginality, even if their works have been part of the canon for a long time already, bringing them anew to the postmodernist mainstream.⁵ Thus, it is the way these historical figures are re-presented as new models of masculinity that explains and justifies their revival.

4. Masculinity and Disease in Relation to Trauma

In his autobiographies, James himself recalls that, as a teenager, he suffered “the obscure hurt” (Graham 1999: 17), a mysterious episode which would determine his (sexual) identity from then onwards. In *The Master* this and other signs constitute symptoms of the main strand about James in the novel, namely his closeted (homo)sexuality (Moseley 2005: 304), implicitly figured as an impairment of masculinity. Despite its political implications, the representation of closetedness serves mainly aesthetic purposes in postmodern neo-Victorianism. For Gutleben “the emphasis on the ill-treatment of women, homosexuals or the lower classes is not shocking or seditious today; on the contrary, it is what people want to read” (Gutleben 2001: 11). Marginal identities (over)populate postmodern literature, with neo-Victorian texts reclaiming gays, lesbians and women as ‘helpmeets’ of “such famous literary figures as Alfred, Lord Tennyson, Charles Dickens, Robert Browning, and Oscar Wilde” (Robinson 2011: 22). There is an increasing interest in both re-appropriating marginalised voices and queering canonical writers like those mentioned above, seemingly often for

the sake of ex-centricity or the valorisation of suffering itself rather than any specific agenda to effect social change.

It is increasingly difficult to be transgressive. In fact, Wilde's sexual transgressions are "radical only *within the Victorian context*" (Robinson 2011: 23, original emphasis). That is why many novels return to the nineteenth century, when it was still possible to be blatantly transgressive by writing about certain issues, particularly sex. Wilde's downfall has become the icon of gay trauma; that is, the recurrent exposure of the sexuality that did not dare speak its name. The spectacularity of his trauma and masculinity contrasts with that of James. The latter was not sent to prison for gross indecency but suffered a different kind of insidious trauma. He suffered from the restraint and inarticulacy of the closet, which he transferred to his art. The repression of James's sexuality and the traumatic (in)articulation of his masculinity is at the core of *The Master*. His case gains new meaning in the current crisis of masculinity, with his story of physical and psychological emasculation and the way it is re-told reflecting contemporary men's problematic relation to women, sexuality and themselves. That is, James's trauma of (self)representation in British late-Victorian society gives new meaning to current male anxieties. Crises today bear after-witness to those of the past. In Victorian England normative masculinity was taken for granted whereas the new homosexual represented the unmentionable Other. A century later, neo-Victorian texts re-inscribe non-normative authors like Wilde and James to render new conflicted and insecure masculinities. No longer is the current male a healthy and immune monolith, but instead he proves as vulnerable and at risk as were nineteenth-century gays.

As mentioned above, *The Master* overtly exposes the corporeal effects of trauma on male bodies as a consequence of war, but also as a consequence of individual and family conflicts. The way James approaches his desire for males is always restrained, even frightening. As a (Victorian) queer he only feels at ease with women. He was in the company of men, he explains: "because their wives wanted him to be" (Tóibín 2004: 22). Even his bonds with his brother William and his father rely on his traumatic emasculation and his problematic self-fashioning. Henry firstly idealises William as a referent of "gruff masculinity" (Tóibín 2004: 317). As the novel advances though, William's imperviousness proves to be false, the effect of the novel's postmodern irony. He eludes joining the army in the

Civil War by claiming health (particularly back) problems. Meanwhile, Henry senior too is not the healthy Victorian that James had made up, being the victim of neurasthemic attacks and nightmares and having one leg amputated (see Tóibín 2004: 142-143, 156). It is as if masculinity in the Jameses' was always under suspicion.

Insidious trauma especially affects Henry's homo-erotic/sexual encounters. It is then that he particularly internalises homophobia. In the course of the novel he feels erotically attracted towards three men: Hammond, his servant during his visit to Ireland; Holmes, an American friend whom he recalls in one of his flashbacks; and Andersen, a mediocre artist. As Daniel Hannah argues, such relationships are informed by a contradictory sense of promise and denial (Hannah 2007: 78). This aporetic character is nowhere better represented than in the poetics of impossibility and trauma. James's contact with Hammond is semiotic, an interchange of uncanny glances that expose and restrain desire, as in the earlier mentioned scene:

Hammond was studying him again, examining him with an intensity which was almost unmannerly. Henry returned his gaze as calmly as he could. There was silence between them. [...] Henry appreciated that if anyone could see them now, if others were to stand in the doorway [...], they would presume that something momentous had occurred between them, that their silence had merely arisen because so much had been said. (Tóibín 2004: 36)

Their moment together remains an ambiguous, unspeakable enigma. Similarly, James's homoerotic urge is most intensely hinted at and repressed during his encounter with Holmes. Once more Tóibín recalls the Jamesian sense of restraint. Both youths share a bed, furtive gazes, visual pleasure and, above all, erotic fantasising and denial. Focalised by the hero, the narrator's gaze lingeringly studies Holmes's "strong legs and buttocks, the line of his spine, his delicate bronzed neck" (Tóibín 2004: 97). Despite the obvious homoerotic undertones, the narrator always maintains the balance between desire as lack and its fulfilment. Insidious trauma prevents Henry from admitting his erotic drives, forcing himself into silence and internal homophobia instead. Accordingly, a lot is suggested about the night with

Holmes, but practically nothing is confirmed, as the men lie close together never speaking, though physically touching, with James wondering “if he would ever again be so intensely alive” (Tóibín 2004: 98). He speculates longingly about the extent of Holmes’ reciprocal awareness and waits in agonised suspense, “knowing it was inevitable that [...] something would occur to break this silent, slow, deadlocked game they were playing” (Tóibín 2004: 100). The next morning, he confines the unspeakable traumatic non-event “to the secret night, the privacy that darkness brought. He knew that this would never be mentioned between them” (Tóibín 2004: 100).

In contrast to the sexual explicitness of most gay literature today, *The Master* exploits the poetics of restraint in scenes of (neo)Victorian same-sex desire. The male body is newly made into the object of James’s homoerotic desire and denial as he gets older. This time it is Andersen, a young sculptor and *arriviste*, whom James admires as he watches the youth “chang[ing] his bathing costume” (Tóibín 2004: 308). James’s infatuation with the artist is also part of his homoerotic code, of his victim-blame feeling. Gay desire stirs hatred and violence, and Tóibín’s hero knows it only too well. The actual James (and his fictional persona alike) bears witness to Wilde’s trial and the insidious trauma the process revealed in English society, a process that has continued throughout the last century and the present one. Hence, James feels compelled to sublimate homoerotic pleasure into unfulfilled fantasies until the last pages of the novel. He remains a self-punishing voyeur who imagines Andersen naked admiring his own body in the mirror or lying in the dark (see Tóibín 2004: 311). The act of looking at another who is in his turn looking at himself thus becomes a metaphor of James’s unspeakable desire.

For Daniel Hannah, Tóibín’s novel is rather biased, focusing exclusively on a ‘gay’ reading of James’s life. He accuses *The Master* of

bringing the tortured silences of his engagements with men into conversation with the queer [...] dimensions of James’s wider private exchanges with others and with the difficult balancing act of the fictional biographer, whose project floats in the novel as, itself, a complicated form of desire. (Hannah 2007: 79)

Like most neo-Victorian fictions, *The Master* finally tells us more about ourselves and our anxieties than about James's. Tóibín's emphasis on the trauma of gayness responds to current identity and queer crises. AIDS has further troubled the implicitly problematic nature of same-sex desire. The effect of mass devastation can hardly escape any gay-concerned text of the last decades. Thus, the novel puts forward how traumatic the (sexual) Other was and still is, but also sublimates the abject face attributed to gayness when intentionally identified with disease by recalling James's de/over-sexualised persona:

Within the age of AIDS there is a place too for the virgin artist, and it may not be surprising that Tóibín has followed *The Blackwater Lightship* [1999], which is about a painful death from AIDS, with a story that celebrates both the pain, and the poignantly wistful sweetness, of a single life – of chastity. (Harvey 2007: 81)

Like Tóibín, his readers may thus find pleasure in inarticulacy and sublimation, as well as the writer's sensitive reformulation of new traumas like AIDS. This is how the novel grants aesthetic possibilities unachievable in the era of overexposure. There is no single reference to AIDS as such; yet its traumatic effect is transferred to James and his diseased family.

Alan Hollinghurst's *The Line of Beauty* (2004) also redirects the trauma of gay mass death in the eighties to James, though with some crucial differences. James is not a character – as happens in *The Master* – but a tutelary spirit that helps the protagonist Nick Guest bear witness to the end of a whole gay generation. Nick is far too normal; in fact, his only distinguishing feature is sexual orientation. Belonging to a middle-class family, he dreams with the flamboyance of the upper-class. After studying at Oxford with Toby Fedden, he lives with Toby's conservative family in fashionable Notting Hill while writing his thesis on James and late-nineteenth-century aestheticism. Thus, Nick becomes the Feddens' resident aesthete and sycophant. He pretends to be one with his hosts as if his gayness was not a problem and, for a while, does pass for 'normal'. However, everything changes with the outburst of AIDS in the early eighties. Nick must bear witness to the traumatic death of friends and lovers; moreover, he is traumatically expelled by the Feddens from their

home and lives when his sexuality is made public and related to the Feddens in the tabloids. In other words, when the abject side of disease is exposed, Nick's Jamesian aestheticism proves ineffectual. In contrast, *The Master* bio-fictionalises James to come to terms with the current crisis of masculinity by normalising the queer and queering the (hetero)normal.

In *The Line of Beauty*, the writer is used as both an antidote and a symptom of AIDS as gay trauma. Despite their differences in tone and/or purpose, both novels expose same-sex desire as traumatic and metaphorically 'diseased' in the sense of being subject/subjected to harm and tragedy. No matter the strategies used by their protagonists – a fictional James or Nick respectively – the abject strikes back, reminding them of their vulnerability in their (hetero)normative worlds. The violent face of homophobia after the outburst of AIDS devastates Nick's worship of Apollonian beauty and his role of gay aesthete – James's accommodation with closetedness makes no sense in this context.⁶ In *The Master*, Tóibín's James exploits and celebrates Henry James by foregrounding masculinity in crisis. Like Nick Guest, he is unable to come to terms with desire but, unlike Hollinghurst's hero, he still relies on and reaffirms the power of (his) art. Despite the obvious differences, the protagonist of *The Master* likewise stands for the postmodern male, gay or not, who also finds it difficult to come to terms with the new status quo. Nevertheless, Tóibín's James's supreme act of withdrawal and aesthetic renunciation not only concerns his problematic cathexis with men and masculinity, but also his fraught bonds with women.

5. James and Women

According to Brown, insidious traumas, which mainly affect girls and women, "occur in secret" and "are more often than not those in which the dominant culture and its forms and institutions are expressed and perpetuated" (Brown 1995: 101, 102). This also applies to relations between females and gays. In *The Master*, it is not the narrator but the homosexual hero who builds up a wall around himself through intimate rituals to 'exploit' his sister Alice, his cousin Minny Temple, and his intimate friend Constance Fenimore. All his female confidantes die and, sooner or later, he is blamed for their deaths, accused of (ab)using them to achieve his aesthetic purposes. In fact, his whole life and the lives of those he allegedly loves are sacrificed to his omnivorous artistic zeal. Holmes suggests that

Henry indirectly caused Minny Temple's death by neglecting her (see Tóibín 2004: 119). Holmes's voice and conscience haunt the hero, whispering "to him 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 2004: 122). After Richard Holmes's visit, Henry feels compelled to explore his vampiric feeding on Minny Temple, and thus finds himself belatedly overcome by his traumatic past. He searches for his cousin's letters asking him for help just to affirm his moral responsibility (see Tóibín 2004: 121). He shows no empathy for his victim though; moreover, he even takes "her eyes away from her" (Tóibín 2004: 122) to see through them himself to create his characters Daisy Miller and Isabel Archer. Whether the real James yearned for his cousin's death for his advantage as an artist is impossible to tell. As a matter of fact, neo-Victorian appropriation of Victorians' lives for aesthetic purposes constitutes a pressing ethical issue (Heilmann and Llewellyn 2010: 19), which also applies to the protagonist in *The Master*. Not only do Minny Temple's letters bear witness to James's aesthetic cannibalism, but he also fears he could have behaved unethically towards some of his heroines (see Tóibín 2004: 123). This is particularly poignant when he recalls or, rather, is haunted by the ghosts of his three female victims (see Tóibín 2004: 124).

Everything surrounding Tóibín's James – whether fictional or real – turns out to be, in some sense, morally perverse or distorted by his egocentric conflicted masculinity. However, what he comes to regard as his deliberate 'murder' of American girls through absence and neglect responds to aesthetic reasons, enabling him to redirect reality into the realm of literary possibility. The hero transforms what is into what might be or might have been, and so does the novel as a whole. Moreover, the narrator's words convey the traumatic origin of James's pathological aestheticism, which must be read at least in part as a denial and sublimation of his (homo)sexuality. Unable to work through the latter, he is constantly forced to traumatically re-live his own victimhood and the deaths of his victims in his art.

James's relationship with Constance Fenimore, an American expatriate in Italy and, crucially, herself a successful writer, best embodies the hero's inarticulate attitude towards women, life, and art. In her 1998 biography *A Private Life of Henry James: Two Women and His Art*, Lyndall Gordon focalises the story of the Master through the eyes of Minny Temple

and Constance Fenimore. Tóibín's novel also focuses on them to make up James's neo-Victorian *Künstlerroman*. Women constitute the essence of his writing since, he confesses, they "always interested him, no matter what they said" (Tóibín 2004: 22). However, like the male objects of his desire, women – especially Temple and Fenimore – are ultimately replaceable; a formulation of females' marginality in language that curiously mirrors the self-silencing of his unspeakable same-sex desires. Whether alive or dead, they work as the inspiring source of the poetic process which James controls. Hence, as Tóibín argues, the writer takes centre stage, not only as a character, but also as a reflector (Tóibín 2010: 32). Everything is filtered through his aesthetic conscience, his relation with Constance Fenimore being portrayed as aesthetically challenging and psychologically exhausting. This is doubly so once she dies: "Her death, like that of his sister Alice, lived with Henry day after day. Images of her came and went, sometimes of her inert body lying broken on the street below her window, and sometimes a detail" (Tóibín 2004: 198). Unable to cope with Constance Fenimore's presumed suicide and haunted by the overwhelming presence of her absence, the writer feels compelled to revise their traumatic (because inarticulate) relation.

As earlier mentioned, some neo-Victorian texts on Wilde, such as the murder mystery series by Gyles Brandreth, manipulate his wife's 'true' persona to 'normalise' the Victorian writer's queerness (Robinson 2011: 22). Wilde's valorised Otherness negates or overwrites the marginalised female Other as the ultimate victim of insidious trauma. The writer's transgressive potential is thus inscribed in the mainstream discourse as a conversely *re-masculinised* queer (Robinson 2011: 31). As Robinson argues, Brandreth's novels suppress Constance Wilde's literary abilities and political activism, to make her appear instead "as the archetypal Angel in the House" (Robinson 2011: 27). At first glance *The Master* treats Constance Fenimore similarly. A writer in her own right – indeed for much of their relationship apparently earning more than James – Fenimore is reduced to a mere friend and source of inspiration for James. Yet unlike Brandreth, Tóibín does not have James appropriate the status of the Other for himself; instead, the protagonist denies his own Otherness by displacing it onto his female friend. While Constance Wilde's process of re-marginalisation contrasts and serves her husband's new glory as a postmodern neo-Victorian hero,⁷ Tóibín's hero's re-normalisation process

proves more problematic and emasculating. Constance Fenimore is James's devotee, but also a presence that problematises the hero's role and conscience, purportedly "manag[ing] to keep hidden from the wider world [...], a condition of chronic and absorbing melancholy which was sharpened by loneliness" (Tóibín 2004: 213). However, it is James himself, rather than his female friend, who suffers from an acute sense of pain both in his body and soul, threatening to be 'unmanned' thereby.

Many critics have read James's *The Beast in the Jungle* (1903) as his literary post-traumatic response to this friendship. As one study notes, "Leon Edel reads [it] as though it was James's working over a supposed non-relationship with Constance Fenimore Woolson. Fred Kaplan also refers to Woolson, but connects the narrative to James's putative homosexuality" (Tambling 2000: 165). All this may be said to correspond to Eve Sedgwick's concept of "homosexual panic", a syndrome that also affected the writer (see Tambling 2000: 166). For these critics, John Marcher, the hero of *The Beast in the Jungle*, hides his homosexuality (and probably that of the author) behind layers of silence and secrecy. Marcher sublimates his unmentionable secret through a relation, which is also a denial, with May Bertram. In Sedgwick's view, he is "passive, victim of a totalizing, basilisk fascination with and terror of homosexual possibility" (Sedgwick 1991: 206). Tóibín extrapolates Marcher's aggressive passivity, his sense of tragedy, and his impotence (out of physical and psychic absence) to James's relation with Constance Fenimore. Again, the neo-Victorian biography proves to be a masterful intersection of ontological boundaries: the real James and his texts, as well as biographies and literary studies of the writer, make up a whole together with Tóibín's character.

Henry and Constance meet in Florence in 1880 (see Tóibín 2004: 228), and their bond responds to a poetics of unspeakability and trauma. As in *The Beast in the Jungle*, nothing apparently happens and, if it does, "it is outside representation" (Tambling 2000: 175). Recalling Forster's gay heroes in *Maurice* (1914), Henry and Constance live in the realm of the unspoken, "where he and she normally wandered freely as treasured citizens", developing a "strange, unstructured and contented way of remaining close" (Tóibín 2004: 235, 246). In other words, even a male-female relationship is troubled in the trauma-inflected discourse of self-denial of *The Master's* narrator. James's re-normalisation causes side-effects and victims, himself included. He is accused of abandoning his

friend Constance Fenimore when he cannot use her for artistic purposes (see Tóibín 2004: 258), which makes the hero confront an ethical aporia. Out of guilt and a belated trauma, he feels obliged to re-turn to and imaginatively re-experience his acts in memory and writing: “He had let her down [...]. He had abandoned her. He was the person who could have rescued her, had he sent a sign” (Tóibín 2004: 256-57). His affirmation process as a late-Victorian male and artist brings about trauma in the form of female spectres, a trait more commonly associated with neo-Victorian feminist fiction. Recalling Hamlet’s encounter with his father’s spectre, Tóibín’s hero witnesses Constance Fenimore’s ghostly presence repeatedly (see Tóibín 2004: 224); this way, “a woman of possibilities” is replaced by “a phantom he dreamed about” (Tóibín 2004: 257).

Both Wilde in Brandreth’s texts and James in *The Master* are “‘fallen’ but transcendent men” (Robinson 2011: 38). The former novels come to terms with the traumatic downfall the real Wilde suffered; the latter text focuses on the (troubled) authority of the actual James over those around him, particularly females. The two characters are granted the prerogative of ‘true’ suffering which their women are denied. Females become mere side-effects and reflective mirrors of masculinity. The burial of Fenimore’s clothes and memorabilia represents her re-marginalisation, but also the hero’s acting out of mourning and loss. Only when she dies does she become a destabilising presence, a post-traumatic symptom of James’s problematic re-normalisation process. Together with her gondolier and servant Tito, James ventures to the unfathomable waters of the lagoon in Venice where, under the spell of Constance Fenimore’s “absolute presence” (Tóibín 2004: 269), both men sink her personal belongings. Disturbingly, however, shortly thereafter they discover that “[s]ome of the dresses had floated” (Tóibín 2004: 270) – like a stubbornly resurfacing trauma. The funerary rite is thus primarily symbolic, a physical and metaphysical event, necessary for Henry’s own re-surfacing. Yet at the same time it stages the (failed) attempt to finally bury and disavow his own traumatic Otherness.

As happens with victims of trauma, Henry is belatedly haunted (even attacked) by the repeated horror of being exposed. When the ghostly clothes re-surface, they compel the hero to re-experience the simultaneous compulsion and impossibility to narrativise his subliminal secret and bear witness to the ‘crimes’ he has committed for its sake. The aesthetisation of

(homo)sexual repression in James's works as in *The Master* addresses and sublimates the traumas affecting gays at the turn of two centuries. Simultaneously it helps re-marginalise women as the Other's Other and thus inscribe same-sex desire as a normalised option in neo-Victorian biofictions.

6. Conclusion

Under the current anxiety of influence and the overall sense of crisis, the return to nineteenth-century texts and realities seems both strategic and mandatory. The blend of the fictional and the factual in this revival of postmodernist Victorianism enacts the limits of representation, particularly when dealing with trauma poetics. Indeed, James's traumatophilia fits the current politics surrounding the crisis of truth and 'true' representation. *The Master* focuses on the pivotal traumatic events in the writer's life, from the premiere of his play *Guy Domville* and Wilde's downfall, to the deaths and/or psychic and physical injuries of those attached to him. However, it is the uncanny sense of deferral and of painful unspeakability and indirection of James's writing that haunts the novel and its potential working-through of current traumas, particularly those related to gender roles. "Bearing after-witness to nineteenth-century suffering" (Kohlke and Gutleben 2010: 7), readers are allowed a roundabout way to revisit their own and others' present-day suffering. Thus, although the kernel of trauma remains inaccessible by definition, its trace can be glimpsed through the reading process.

Just as trauma eludes being recalled, identified, and represented, the real James elides Tóibín's James, remaining an enigma behind his works. The re-imagined James constitutes the symptom (a sort of belated version) of the real man. This replication of copy and original recalls the sense of deferral and postponement characteristic of James's own writing. Likewise, this specular effect triggers off a sense of absence and loss. The mirroring of (frustrated) experiences of the real and fictional Jameses and their works – as well as the way they resurface in today's gay experience – reproduce the logic of trauma, repeating itself *ad nauseam*. Similarly, the tension between what is and what might have been haunts Tóibín's hero until the very end.

The Master constitutes a characteristic turn-of-the-millennium biographical novel. Fiction and authenticity, trauma and irony, gay marginality and its re-normalisation are its basic traits. The novel puts forward the possibilities of the literary discourse as well as the ethical

implications of fictionalising actual historical figures. The liberty granted by literature – and more specifically by the biofiction genre – allows the writer to tackle important issues of cultural memory and memorialisation. *The Master* re-arranges and de-familiarises James's persona with a purpose. The emphasis is placed firmly on the poetics of inaction, the slippage between (self-)fiction and reality, the gap between secrecy and language, within which James lives his aesthetic rebirth and his trauma, and projects the latter onto those around him. The writer's liminal discourse on the limits of representation is thus problematised from the viewpoint of contemporary trauma poetics. Language and literature provide both a mask and a revelation for James and Tóibín. However, whereas the late-Victorian writer was obliged to disavow the 'truth' so as to escape Wilde's fate, Tóibín simply plays with the aesthetic possibilities of Victorianism to disconcert a contemporary readership.

As a character James has become a lively and real presence in our late-postmodernist consciousness. Both traumatophilic and (self-)evasive, he embodies the current sense of loss and crisis to the letter. He has proved to be both a mirror of current anxieties about masculinity, gayness and AIDS as well as a response to them. All in all, he is simultaneously a reflection and postmodernist re-enactment of uncertainty and masculine re-affirmation, complicating neo-Victorianism's eagerness to "liberate lost voices and repressed histories and minorities" (Kohlke 2008: 9). The novel is not only the effect of this sense of crisis, but also of an increasing movement of literary rehabilitation. Like other big names, James has become a fashionable product to be hyper-consumed by new literary and film trends and audiences. Yet, he transcends this cultural practice of nostalgic as well as critical reappraisal. *The Master* does not litera(ri)lly heal trauma, but Tóibín's rewriting of James helps us understand the relevance of postmodern Victorianism to reflect/deflect ourselves. The Victorians are both close and far enough for us to feel identified and detached from (Hadley 2010: 6-7), and they may be used to represent both our society's weak points and cultural assets. This ambiguity, which Tóibín's hero embodies, agrees neatly with the poetics of uncertainty of most (post)AIDS fiction. Likewise, the late-Victorian writer affords an excuse to re-define and legitimise the 'mainstream' queer, re-Othering women as the primary victims of insidious trauma. The fictional James may be a traumatophilic

symbol of crisis and of the past of queerness, but he also stands for the neo-Victorian re-centering of (male) cultural icons.

Acknowledgment

This is a developed version of the paper ‘Ritualizing Restraint and Loss: The Poetics of Procrastination in Colm Tóibín’s *The Master*’ delivered at the Conference ‘Beyond Trauma: Narratives of (Im)possibility in Contemporary Literature in English’, held at the University of Zaragoza between 30 March-1 April 2011. The research carried out for the writing of this article is part of a project financed by the Spanish Ministry of Economy and Competitiveness (MINECO) (code FFI2012-32719). The author is also grateful for the support of the Government of Aragón and the European Social Fund (ESF) (code H05).

Notes

1. Besides the innumerable films and novels on and around James published in the last decades (see Kovács 2007: 1), there has been an upsurge of literary criticism on the writer (see Sedgwick: 1985, 1990; Stevens: 1998; Graham: 1999; Pippin: 2000; Tambling: 2000).
2. On the influence of texts on their predecessors, see Onega and Gutleben, 2004: 7-15. Thus, although apparently illogical, and contrary to Harold Bloom’s Oedipal “anxiety of influence” (Bloom 1973: 5-16, 30), *The Master* not only results from a tradition of (auto)biographical writing – particularly centred on Henry James – but also compels its readers to change their view on that tradition. In this light, after revising some of the recent biographies of James, Tóibín concludes that “the years between 1992 and 2001 changed how we saw him” (Tóibín 2010: 83).
3. In his final acknowledgements, Tóibín includes a long list of biographical writings on Henry James as the inspiring source for his novel, from the five-volume biography of Leon Edel to different collections of letters addressed to his family and friends (see Tóibín 2004: 360).
4. On James’s awkward relationship with his brother and its literary effects, see M^a Antonia Álvarez 1989: 7-19.
5. Biofictional texts that re-inscribe Oscar Wilde and Henry James into the postmodern canon include, among others, Stefan Rudnicki’s *Wilde* (1998), Gyles Brandreth’s Oscar Wilde mystery series (2008-ongoing), Emma Tennant’s *Felony* (2002), and Michael Gorra’s part-imagined biography,

Portrait of a Novel: Henry James and the Making of an American Masterpiece (2012).

6. For a fuller exploration of the traumatic devastations of AIDS in the gay community in Hollinghurst's novel, see Yebra 2011: 175-208.
7. On Wilde's postmodern appropriation as queer hero (and anti-hero) in a dystopian England, see Ellen Crowell 2008-2009: 43-44.

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