TRAUMATIC IDENTITY AND AURA IN DAVID LODGE'S *AUTHOR, AUTHOR*[1]

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Abstract

This paper delves into David Lodge's *Author, Author* (2004) as an example of neo-Victorian celebrity biofiction, more concretely on Henry James. The genre belongs to the wave of Victorian revival in current literature which also affects cultural studies in general. My main contention is that Lodge's novel responds to current cultural anxieties, particularly the crisis of identity and authorship and the end of Walter Benjamin's concept of aura, by sublimating them into late-nineteenth-century traumata. The choice of James is, the article argues, not casual. He represents the redeeming figure of a lost auratic world; the human in crisis, traumatized because he does not fit in the new status quo.

Keywords: Neo-Victorian biofiction, trauma, sublime, aura.

Resumen

Este artículo analiza la novela *Author, Author* (2004) de David Lodge como ejemplo de bioficción neo-victoriana centrada en una celebridad, en este caso concreto, Henry James. El género forma parte del renacimiento victoriano actual que afecta a los estudios culturales en su conjunto. Mi argumento central es que la novela de Lodge constituye una respuesta a las ansiedades culturales actuales, en particular a las que se refieren a la crisis identitaria y autoría literaria, así como a la pérdida del aura artística de Walter Benjamin, sublimándolas a través de los traumas de finales del siglo XIX. La elección de James, como demuestra el artículo, no es casual. Es el último representante de un mundo perdido en el que el aura aún tenía un espacio; el ser humano en crisis y traumatizado porque no encaja en un status quo nuevo.

Palabras clave: bioficción neo-victoriana, trauma, lo sublime, aura.

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1. *AUTHOR, AUTHOR*, A PROBLEMATIC NEO-VICTORIAN BIOFICTIONAL NOVEL

In the final acknowledgements of *Author, Author* (2004), David Lodge argues that Henry James is also the protagonist of two recent novels, namely Emma Tennant's *Felony* (2002) and Colm Tóibín's *The Master* (2004). Lodge leaves it "to students of the Zeitgeist [I guess I am one of them] to ponder the significance of these coincidences" (2004: 389). It is difficult to briefly explain James's current popularity both as author and character; his alleged homosexuality being a main factor. Although much has been written on James's writing and life, he remains ambiguous enough to elicit our interest. Digging in his writings in search of clues still works. If he is/was inscrutable it is because there is/was some hidden "truth" about him to be found out. In the era of mass information and celebrity overexposure, James works as a myth of inarticulacy. Despite (or due to) his style being oblique and metaphorical, his persona takes us back to a primordial alleged authenticity. This is so because, I contend, James embodies Walter Benjamin's "aura," the truth and singularity consubstantial to the artistic process. Thus, in invoking James's most traumatic experiences, *Author, Author* sublimates current anxieties, particularly (post)postmodern lack of transcendence and traumatophilia in late-Victorian art. The clash between Lodge's character and the actual James has a twofold function. Victorianism is as complex as the present. And, at the same time, it remains a privileged cultural referent; a liminal scenario where grand narratives and artistic aura started to wane, giving way to modernity and, eventually, postmodern uncertainty

Lodge's novel is inscribed in the current revival of things Victorian (Kaplan 2007: 1; Kucich and Sadoff 2000: xi). As a matter of fact, a whole new field of studies has emerged on the neo-Victorian phenomenon. Novels dealing with Victoriana from a postmodern stand concur with (often lowbrow) others who merely "pastiche" Victorian conventions. As this paper will show, *Author, Author* is inscribed in the first group. Lodge himself regards (in the preface and the postscript of) the novel a fictional biography, a hybrid genre that puts the bounds between biography and fiction to the limit (Lusin 2010: 269). Like Colm Tóibín's *The Master* (2004), A. S. Byatt's *The Biographer's Tale* (2001), Julian Barnes's *Arthur and George* (2005) and Peter Ackroyd's *Dickens* (2006), to name just a few, *Author, Author* deconstructs the epistemological conventions of pure genres and opts for postmodern hybridity instead:

> Nearly everything that happens in this story is based on factual sources. With one insignificant exception, all the named characters were real people. […] But I have used a novelist's license in representing what they thought, felt and said to each other; and I have imagined some events and personal details which history omitted to record. So this book is a novel, and structured like a novel. (Lodge 2004: preface)

In his final acknowledgements Lodge justifies once more his incursion into James's private "life". It is natural, even expectable, that writing a biofictional novel implies finding both documentation and inspiration in (more or less) conventional biographies (Lodge 2004: 385). It is also logical that the writing process brings about ethical conflicts. Yet, unlike Tóibín's *The Master*, Lodge's novel often reads like a biography, as some reviewers have argued (Hollinghurst, 2004; Harrison, 2004; Laskin, 2004). If it is a novel, why does Lodge take the trouble to justify himself? (388). It comes as no surprise then that a review in *The Guardian* addresses Lodge's hero as "James" instead of "Henry", as in the original. The change of name throughout the article, Lodge argues, "makes the discourse sound like biography, which was just the effect [he] was trying to avoid" (2010: 82). That is, he does not seem as convincing at serious biofiction as he is at comedy. The novel does not detach from the "real" James and hence does not construct a truly fictional "Henry". Likewise, James's friend Edmund Gosse is introduced as if in a conventional cradle-to-grave biography, a "versatile man of letters, poet, critic, essayist, translator, recently retired Librarian to the House of Lords …" (2004: 31). The voice of Lodge's narrator recalls that of Phineas, the protagonist of A. S. Byatt's *The Biographer's Tale* (2001). However, Lodge's text is serious whereas Byatt's text aims to be ironic (2001: 8-9). Moreover, Lodge's narrator seems more focused on his conception and/or speculation on focalization (230) or the actual James's consciousness than on that of a fictional character (57).

Among the many biographical novels on (mostly) Victorian writers published recently, Cora Kaplan finds *Author, Author* particularly problematic. She agrees with the critics above that the novel reads more like a biography (2007: 68) than like self-conscious biofiction. Too much factuality spoils the balance between so-called reality and fictionality for postmodern biofiction to succeed (79). In Kaplan's view *Author, Author* fails to productively and creatively respond "to the challenge of postmodern cultural forms and the influential constellation of theoretical writing that […] raised a strong argument against the liberal humanist […] subject" (79). Lodge does not find the formula to grant "fictional life" to his real-life-inspired characters. Thus, the leap between real life and fiction results in characters who are "copies of copies" (68). James, in particular, is reduced to "a catalogue of his professional insecurities" (68). All in all, this paper analyses how *Author, Author* fictionalizes the past to better understand the overall sense of crisis today. I will firstly address why the Victorian results particularly appealing in (our) trauma culture, using a neo-Victorian biofictinal text. I will turn next to Lodge's use of James as paradigmatic of the time when artistic aura was traumatically replaced by mass consumption culture. To illustrate this point the paper will focus on the traumatic representation of the premiere of James's *Guy Domville*, akin in the novel to the iconic late-Victorian downfall of Wilde. And, beyond this event, I will deal with the post-traumatic effects of the play's fiasco on Lodge's character. Before the concluding remarks, the paper will briefly address how

James's crisis in *Author, Author* mirrors and helps cope with the current questioning of identity as a given.

1.1. THE APPEAL OF THE VICTORIAN IN TRAUMA CULTURE

For Maciej Sulmicki we return to the Victorian: "To know what changes have happened, know how we became what we are, cope with the present through knowing about the past [and] love of debate about the things which can never be conclusively proved" (2011: 150-51). If, among all past times, Victoria's reign proves to be particularly appealing, it is because of its liminal relation to ours. The distance between "us" and "them" is small and large enough to keep a apart from and identify with each other at the same time (in Sulmicki 2011: 153). The nineteenth century finds, among others, "the origins of contemporary consumerism (Baudrillard), sexual science (Foucault), gay culture (Sedgwick et al.), and gender identity (Gilbert and Gubar, Showalter, Armstrong)" (Sadoff and Kucich 2000: xiii-xiv). Like postmodernism, Victorianism and its neo-Victorian reverberations are much more complex and multifaceted than it may seem at first sight. Neo-Victorianism is not just the recipient of Victorian values. In fact, neo-Victorian fiction emerged, among others, to counterbalance Thatcher's (and Reagan's) sentimentalizing vindication Victorianism and bear witness to the other nineteenth-century England (Louisa Hadley 2010; Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn 2010; Marie-Luise Kohlke and Christian Gutleben 2010; Patricia Pulham and Rosario Arias 2010; Helen Davies, 2012). Parallel to middle-class morality, rationality, and economic and political imperialism, there existed poverty, family dysfunctionality (*Fingersmith*) and prostitution (*The Crimson Petal and the White*), psychic and social repression and squalor (*Alias Grace*), colonial domination (*Hottentot Venus*), and magic and esotericism (*The Illusionist*). Victorianism is not exclusively a site of escapism for the exhausted postmodern traveler. Neither was it a more fulfilling period than today's because Grand Narratives still held and life was simpler. What is true and makes it alluring to us is that "the postmodern fetishizes notions of cultural emergence" (Sadoff and Kucich, xv). The Victorians' impending commodification of culture is a sort of myth of origins for the secularized West. It was then when religion and transcendence gave way to economic liberalism and its de-sacralized immanence as well as to our concepts of success and traumatic failure. In this light, celebrity biofiction, as Marie-Luise Kohlke puts it, "rarely engag[es] in hagiography" (2013: 7) as classic biography does. The uneven reception of James's *Guy Domville* foreshadows the low/middle/highbrow taxonomy of art to be later established. Simultaneously, the formidable success of Du Maurier's *Trilby* addresses the birth of

the best-seller and the fandom phenomenon. Finally, Wilde's public downfall has a twofold effect. It marks the traumatic birth of homosexuality as (in Foucault's terms) "a new species" and confirms the cultural influence of the sensationalist press.

As early as 2001 Christian Gutleben addressed the novels "entirely made up of Victorian pastiche and [those] comprising a modern narrative perspective" (218). In both retro-Victorian and postmodern neo-Victorian texts, he regrets, there are "undeniable nostalgic forces at work" (218). Is it that postmodernism has run out of (experimentalist) steam, or that neo-Victorianism is not as nostalgic as Gutleben defends? Be it as it may, in my view, current culture undergoes a process of "neo-nostalgic" trauma and narcissism that ambiguously relates to the Victorian past. For those who have a patronizing view of the past, there has been an evolution from a time when epistemologies did not falter and ontological bounds were clear. Why then does Victorianism remain a myth we long for? The genuine infatuation with the novelty and historicity of (late)Victorians and (increasingly) Edwardians is firstly recovered for the pleasure of starting anew, bearing witness to our own historicity. Whereas politicians and governments commemorate World War I day in and day out, the late-Victorian and pre-War climate in James's writing and world gains cultural significance under neo-nostalgia. Neo-Victorian/Edwardian fiction reveals underrepresented aspects of those times which grant a new nostalgic, albeit demystifying and ironic, panorama. As consumers of these texts we re-engage with the past with mixed feelings and, though knowingly, with the delusion of experiencing the (fake) naïveté and aura of Victorianism and their traumatic demise.

2. JAMES'S TRAUMATIC LOSS OF AURA

Kohlke points out that neo-Victorian celebrity biofictions "assume an overtly critical stance towards their canonical subject" (2013: 7). It comes as no surprise then that both Colm Tóibín's *The Master* and Lodge's *Author, Author* focus on James's traumatic middle years. Lodge's novel makes the catastrophic premiere of *Guy Domville* its climax. Everything turns around this episode, structurally and thematically. Being the novel split into four sections, the first and fourth ones are narrated when James is about to die. The second and third, by contrast, "flashback" to his most traumatic episodes. Although the deadly James is a poorly-read author, he has become a cult figure. Despite his prestige, Lodge's text mainly focuses on James's obsession with (his lack of) popularity, and the preparation and performance of his downfall as a playwright. The clash between high and low art (and of failure and success) turns thus a leitmotif of the novel with the tandems James/Wilde, James/Du Maurier and James/Constance as its triple axis.

Like the protagonists of Colm Tóibín's *The Master* and Alan Hollinghurst's *The Line of Beauty*, Lodge's James still relies on Walter Benjamin's conception of aura. A work of art, Benjamin argues, "has always been reproducible… . [Its m]echanical reproduction, however, represents something new … . Around 1900 technical reproduction had reached a standard … to cause the most profound change in their impact upon the public" (218-19). When addressing the concepts of originality and authenticity Benjamin foreshadows the logic of Baudrillardian simulacra. In his view, to ask for the 'authentic' makes no sense because that which withers in the age of mechanical reproduction is the aura (224). The Jameses of Lodge and Tóibín mourn the loss of authorship aura. Hence, like Benjamin (223), both characters grant art a ritual function and cult status, though to no avail. Conscious of how the cult/ritual value of art has transmuted into an exhibitory one in mass consumption economy, Lodge's James witnesses how his best friend Du Maurier achieves the success he longs for. The extraordinary success of *Trilby* stands for the post-auratic phenomenon of the best-seller. Being a primordial case of a widespread phenomenon nowadays, best-selling Trilby makes us experience anew the naïveté of beginnings: "Trilby boots and shoes were advertised in the press […] and a Broadway caterer had moulded ice-cream in the same shape" (Tóibín 2004: 267). Like Walter Benjamin, Lodge's character regrets the end of cultural heritage, the uniqueness of the artist and the artistic event: "The aura of the Great Writer […] has simply evaporated" (17). Thus, although Lodge's James despises Wilde's disposable literature (302) and distrusts booms like Trilby (306) because they confuse "quality with quantity in a single word" (326), he surrenders to their best-selling effect and wants part of the cake. The novel is the story of a double failure: firstly James resigns his cult-oriented aureatic writing in favor of the new mass-oriented star status Benjamin feared and despised. Moreover, when Lodge's character tries, he fails. This twofold failure is eventually offset when he experiences a Joycean epiphany and comes back to himself as a highbrow minority author:

> He was now resigned to never being a really popular author, or producing a 'best seller.' Something had happened in the culture of the English-speaking world in the last few decades – the spread and thinning of literacy, the leveling effect of democracy, the rampant energy of capitalism, the distortion of values by journalism and advertising – which made it impossible for a practitioner of the art of fiction to achieve both excellence and popularity. The best one could hope for was sufficient support from discriminating readers to carry on with the endless quest for aesthetic perfection. (348)

These lines address the belated aftermath of James's traumatic othering in the novel: he bears witness to his own cultural otherness and to its traumatic effects. In this paper I will resort to trauma theory −developed from the nineteen nineties by a group of critics at Yale University who have updated Freud's notion of trauma− in order to approach the climax of *Author, Author*. For trauma theorists the victim of a traumatic episode not only experiences it, but s/he is rather possessed because s/he

cannot bear witness to and cope with it (Cathy Caruth 1995: 7; Anne Whitehead 2004: 3, 6; Dominick LaCapra 2001: 21-22). The episode transcends itself and its unutterability has a psychic, individual and collective impact. As a matter of fact, only after a period of latency −Freud's *Nachträglichkeit*− does the episode reverberate belatedly (Caruth, 4-5). Lodge's novel is an exercise of this belatedness that ventriloquizes the discourse of trauma. The first and second parts of the novel hint at and prepare us for James's traumatic downfall whereas the third part constitutes its acting-out. In the fourth Lodge "enters" the text (marked in italics) and helps a posthumous Jamesian (un)consciousness work through its/these traumatic episodes.

The premiere of *Guy Domville* is rendered in a technically elaborate fashion. The first chapter of part three delays the catastrophe by alternating James's anxiety over his guilt-ridden relationship with his friends Fenimore Woolson and Du Maurier. Postponement runs parallel with psychic uncertainty: "One more year, at the end of 1893, but in the event he had been obliged to wait slightly longer –till the fifth day of 1895− to discover whether or not he would succeed as a playwright" (203). Time becomes an obsession in the protagonist's artistic consciousness: "Now, at last, the waiting was a matter of hours. … One … two … three … four. … Sixteen till the curtain rose on *Guy Domville*" (212). Anxious waiting overlaps with James's recollection of his uneven bond with Contance Fenimore. Also an expatriate American in Europe, Constance was a successful writer (216). Yet, her fictional *alter ego* is just a shadow of the actual writer that triggers James's self-rebuke in *Author, Author*. For Bonnie J. Robinson some neo-Victorian texts reinscribe Constance Wilde's "marginality in order to recover Oscar Wilde from the victimisation he endured in his era" (2011: 22). Likewise, Constance Fenimore helps retrieve James from marginality. In other words, to rehabilitate Other Victorian masculinities for the catalogue of acceptable oddities, there must be a scapegoat to have their Otherness transferred. Fenimore's death, presumably a suicide, reverberates James's guilt-ridden traumatophilia, displaced into art, as well as his fear to be exposed (208). Yet, James is in control as far as his artistic consciousness can enter into Constance's last moments. He nevertheless rejects any ethical engagement: "Must he go over it all again in his mind, tread once more this *via dolorosa* of memories?" (208). James's role is rather ambiguous: as an artist, he is both detached and over-empathic with his friend's demise. As a traumatophilic character, he is also a passive perpetrator whose poetics of postponement elicit Constance's depression and subsequent death (211). As mentioned above, although James is a tutelary spirit for the anxious postmodern era, *Author, Author* is not hagiographic. James is mean, narcissistic and envious, even though his family and (homo)sexual traumas and repression help understand his passive violence. When he searches for among dead Fenimore's belongings he feels particularly disturbed to find "a passage in her notebook: … 'Imagine a man born without a heart'" (211). James cannot help concluding that that man is himself. And he immediately links her words to those Mme Flaubert addressed to her famous son: "Your mania for sentences has dried up your heart" (211). Lodge's character thus

questions himself, as well as the liminality between life and art, in the same way in which Nick Guest does in Alan Hollinghurst's *The Line of Beauty*.

Like *The Master*, *Author, Author* recalls the episode where James disposes of Fenimore's clothes in the lagoon of Venice after her alleged suicide. The scene is aesthetically challenging as the dresses "buoyed up by the air trapped inside the voluminous folds, … floated on the surface, surrounding the gondola like swollen corpses, like so many drowned Fenimores" (210). Besides beauty, the episode has a symbolic ritual value linked to artistic aura. Yet, the uniqueness and originality of aura is both confirmed and problematized. James witnesses his own "crime" as a passive perpetrator: "What he had conceived as a tender and poetic farewell … had turned into a grotesque masque suggestive of a guilty conscience striving to hide the traces of a crime" (210). Art and crime are thus equated granting singularity to their practitioners. However, the auratic character of art/crime is almost immediately cancelled out as Fenimore is fragmented into a myriad of simulacra of herself spread on the water. Not even such an episode can bypass the postmodern culture of simulation and replica and the traumatic (dis)integration of the subject.

2.1. *GUY DOMVILLE*: THE KERNEL OF JAMES'S TRAUMA

The first chapter of part 3 closes with James's anxiety *in crescendo* (227). Moreover, his emotional rivalry with Fenimore and professional with Du Maurier turns more intricate when it comes to Wilde. James's declining star coincides with Wilde's new hit. The climactic second chapter of part 3 alternates the dissimilar fortune of James and Wilde for dramatic purposes. Omens of failure are immediate; particularly an anonymous telegram which triggers uncertainty and uneasiness in the cast and the reader: "WITH HEARTY WISHES FOR A COMPLETE FAILURE TONIGHT" (231). The capital letters aim at increasing the dramatic effect the message itself purports. Likewise, James's own imagery foreshadows disaster. He even regards his play as a martyr (232) using the sacrificial iconography that so much attracts current (albeit Victorian-born) sensationalism. Wilde's downfall still fascinates current audiences. Lodge knows that, and, therefore, makes James's visit to the Haymarket −where Wilde's *The Ideal Husband* is performed− a poetic counterpart to *Guy Domville*'s catastrophic debut. The novel uses a quasi-filmic discourse splitting the chapter into scene-like paragraphs "alternat[ing] … between James's thoughts and actions and those of various third parties" (2004). With James making his way to attend Wilde's play, what happens in the theater where *Guy Domville* is performed is rendered from outside the protagonist's free indirect speech and standpoint. Actors, audience, critics and James's friends make up a quilt of

opinions and reactions instead. It seems his play was not the unanimous flop *Author, Author* (and *The Master*) suggests (Peters 2004). That is, Lodge's novel boosts the angst of the premiere to increase the sense of trauma and sensationalism. The scenes centered on James's introspection (234, 235, 237, 239, 241) alternate with those on the performance itself. Likewise, the actions and thoughts of various groups at *Guy Domville*'s first night are interspersed with references to the simultaneous performance of *An Ideal Husband*. Sometimes the confusion is total because the scenes at both theaters mix up at random. The uneducated mob waiting in long lines already foreshadow the disaster when they joke about Domville (235). This is soon confirmed by some spectators "yawning with boredom" during the overture (241). Although the first act turns moderately successful, actress Elizabeth Robins bears witness to traumatic signs, casting a shadow on the play (243). Echoes of Fenimore blaming James for having no heart and his obsession with beauty recur once again as omens of the coming flop. James's friends cannot help fearing the "good deal of coughing" (244). The discord between the two types of public, apart in the theater, intensifies: the gallery and the pit being "less enthusiastic than those in the stalls and lower boxes" (246). The occasional signs announcing the debacle in the first act increase in the second. Previous yawning turns into "an epidemic of coughing … impatience and inattention" (248), which, like trauma symptoms, reveal the traumatic episode after a period of latency. Robins's presentiments are soon confirmed. Florence Alexander, also a friend of James, feels "angry and mortified" at people's philistinism (249). The trauma is thus enhanced by the clash between sectors of the audience, "toughs and the toffs" (257), which only increases during the third act. The laughter from the upper levels make up a grotesque scenario while James's friends exchange "alarmed glances" (253). When the play is "creeping towards its conclusion," James arrives. Initially, a storm of applause and cries of 'Author! Author! make him believe the performance has been a success. This, together with his naïveté and hubris, prevents James from recognizing the traumatic truth in the frightened face of his friends (256).

The episode reaches its climax when Alexander, the producer of the play, draws James to the stage. The sacrifice and renunciation in the plot of *Guy Domville* is projected on James himself, who becomes the unwilling actor of his own tragedy. The scene is poly-intertextual, recalling classic heroes' hubris, the bathetic plunges of eighteenth-century theater, Christ's martyrdom among the Philistines, and Wilde's downfall. All in all, it is fundamentally a performance of trauma itself; the trauma of high art on the verge of death:

> As Henry James turned to face the audience and prepared graciously to bow, a barrage of booing fell from 'the gods' on his defenceless head. *'Boo! Boo! Boo!'* James looked stunned, bewildered, totally unable to understand what was happening, or how to react. He seemed paralysed, canted forward in the act of bowing. (256)"

Like all trauma victims, James is unable to immediately come to terms with the event. He is possessed by the episode because it escapes his understanding. In fact, it is narrated and/or focalized by third parties because it is incommensurable for a sole (engaged) consciousness. It can only be recalled, if at all, in fragments from different angles and voices. This is the closest one can get to the "truth" of trauma itself. The abjection and deferral of trauma is not diminished, but enhanced, by this polarization of viewpoints. The sense of confusion increases as an uneducated mob hisses its fury against James. Their violence is unfounded, a threat Jamesians (bearing witness to an impending traumatic episode) cannot comprehend: "'Why are they making that noise, Kiki?' Emma said, clutching Du Maurier's arm in fright" (257). Like Christians in pagan Rome, James is thrown to the beasts and torn to pieces, though redeemed by the cultivated sector. Despite the play's weaknesses, Bernard Shaw argues: "It's written by an artist" (261). James's flop puts forward the clash of mass-produced and highbrow art, particularly the victory of the former and the demise of aura that Benjamin mourned. Lodge's protagonist becomes the last representative of classic aura, a sort of *fins de race*. His already traumatophilic persona is enhanced by his artistic downfall. Only after a period of belatedness does his sacrificial (public) shame work out his redemption in his final masterworks. Adam Mars-Jones recalls James being "the supreme example in Anglo-American culture of the artist as priest, sacrificing participation in life to transform it for others" (2004). In keeping with Benjamin's aura, the artist holds a fundamental role, one of transformation through ritualistic intervention. This redemptive working-through of James's traumata unfolds in the last section of the novel. This process does not run smooth though, for the artist's decline and re-emergence overlaps with jealousy of his friends' success and his subsequent ethical dilemmas and disempowerment.

Anticipating James's posthumous success in part four, part three closes with an epiphany where his self vanishes in oceanic nothingness: "The future seemed to stretch before him bright with hope and possibility, like a great calm ocean under the coming sun" (348). The consciousness of Lodge's James turns metaphysical, his act of sublimation recalling other fantasies of self-extinction and homoerotic sentimentalism, such as Thomas Mann's (and Visconti's film version of) *Death in Venice*. Like James in *Author, Author*, Mann's protagonist witnesses his own (oceanic) dissolution, committed to Apollonian beauty against the Dionysian. However, James does not look at Tadzio on the beach, but at himself.

Part four features a dying James, a prestigious author, very different from the best-selling writer he longs to be along the novel. Although known as "The Master" and decorated by the British government, popular literary and biographical interest in James only re-surfaced in the late 1930s. It was then when a group of devotees transformed a virtually unread writer into an icon of literature in English (Kovács 2007: 3). James's obsession with privacy −he burnt numerous letters (362-63)− proved futile because his autobiographical and fictional writing has been reproduced

and analyzed *ad nauseam*. That is the price of popularity which had eluded him in his lifetime. Biographers and literary critics have delved into the man and the artist in a process of archeological unburying. This has been especially the case of queer criticism (Eve Sedgwick, 1991; Hugh Stevens, 1998; Wendy Graham, 1999). Lodge himself enters the novel as a literary critic in the first person, as marked in italics (373), making reference to the uneven reception of James. The trauma of James's life and career only recedes at the very end of *Author, Author*. In fact, the working-through of James's quasi-structural trauma is only feasible posthumously. Lodge's voice addresses James's change of status after death, when he became a literary classic. His enigmatic life has paradoxically granted the writer ubiquity in novels, biographies and films; and hence, albeit obliquely, the possibility of success and after-life post-traumatic healing. The fictive author-critic even indulges, he confesses, in James "knowing everything I wished he would know before he died … totting up the sales figures, reading the critiques, watching the films […]" (382).

2.2. JAMES'S CONFRONTING (HIS) POST-TRAUMATIC SUBLIME

The Jamesian post-mortem fantasy that Lodge's implied author works out links with James's essay 'Is There a Life After Death'. This takes us to the concept of traumatic sublime. By traumatic sublime I make reference to the updated account of Lyotard's postmodern sublime "in which we would feel not only the irremediable gap between an Idea and what presents itself to 'realize' that Idea" (1987: 178). I mostly rely on Philip Shaw's analysis of the traumatic sublime, which, in his view, mixes the deferring character of both its components: the traumatic event −i.e. the "real" damage− and its artistic representation in the form of the sublime. The merge of both adds to Lyotard's conception a temporal duplicity which problematizes the gap the critic addresses. Like Derrida, Lyotard claims the sublime to be limited by and to the Symbolic (Shaw, 2006: 128). When language is unable to render traumatic events "in terms of the sublime, the[ir …] pain is such that it exceeds our ability to supply a concept" (128). The traumatic, as theorized by Cathy Caruth, is tantamount to the sublime, the latter being "the ability … to present our very inability to comprehend" (118). In other words, for Shaw, the traumatic wound is recast in the traumatic sublime, which is yet a new wound, the one art makes up to come to terms with the original. It is a mimetic process whereby art imitates the "real" traumatic event to voice it. The process is double-staged, arguably providing the reader/spectator with an aesthetic gratifying re-presentation of what otherwise could not be rendered. However, the sublime is "capable only of negative representation, so [the traumatic event] is known only by what it leaves in abeyance" (128). It is trauma's irrepresentability that is (mis)represented through the spectacular poetics of the

sublime. Although the sublime is normally identified with historic massive traumas like the World Wars or the Holocaust (Gene Ray, 2009), it can be extrapolated to the insidious trauma that surreptitiously affects minorities, as is James in *Author, Author*. James's trauma is private, and has to do with his sexual orientation, his success and failure, the role of (his) art and its transcendence beyond death. Failure is here the symptom of the character's traumata. It can be known, felt and represented as a concrete episode, *Guy Donville*, which stands for the encrypted (probably sexual) trauma he wants to protect from public exposure. In other words, the actual James and Lodge's textual re-appropriation of his traumata work as trauma itself does. The traumatic event takes place and only belatedly does it come out as a narrative.

The Jameses of both Tóibín and Lodge point out the character's breakage when confronted with the conflict between the sublime and the rational/beautiful, the Dionysian and the Apollonian, astonishment and knowledge. Lodge's protagonist only solves the confrontation with the traumatic sublime through the sublime arising from the unfathomable infinity of death and art: "Death was absolute. What lived beyond life was what the creative consciousness had found and made" (Lodge 2004: 380). The postmodern sublime is an indeterminate liminal event that escapes the Symbolic order, though it is restricted to the limits of the (artistic) text. Hence, postmodern art (like Barnett B. Newman's) exists to prevent the sublime from being domesticated (Shaw 122). In this light, the comments of Lodge's (*alter ego*) literary critic in James's essay on death and the aporia of artistic representation are illuminating. Like other trauma literature, James's defies literal referentiality: "His prose is in fact designed to defeat paraphrase (380). His writing has a twofold sublimating impact on the reader: "The effect of making us desire death …; or the effect of making us desire it as renewal of the interest, the appreciation, the passion, the large and consecrated consciousness" (380-81). In *Author, Author* James's commitment to art cancels out self-annihilation fantasies (381) and finally overcomes trauma; hence the post-traumatic sublime. Thus, although he apparently demystifies the sublime in favor of postmodern poetics whereby "transcendence is conditioned and facilitated by the limits of the conceptual system in which it is expressed" (Shaw, 116), he eventually resumes its possibilities. Albeit limited by language, the sublime still aims at an infinity which stands between art and death. In fact, the conceptual framework Lodge's James purports is "so rewarding that he cannot accept that the sense of self thus produced is just a cruel trick played by Nature which will be rudely exposed to death" (381-82). Despite the novel's over-emphasis on James's traumatic existence and its conception of death as absolute (380), he advocates for a beyondness into the sublime, transcendental as long as consciousness can be. Thus, the sublime in art can help to overcome and (mis)represent the trauma of failure or of death. This is what the actual James did with his writing; and also what belatedly Lodge's text does with the former's fictive *alter ego*. Drawing on the words of the actual James recalled in the novel, death is "seen as the portal to an extension, not to an extinction, of consciousness" (381). As far as the actual writer and the character-focalizer work out

this sublime conception of death the wound of death itself is displaced into transcendence.

2.3. THE CRISIS OF IDENTITY: NOW AND THEN

The trauma of failure (related in *Author, Author* to the end of the uniqueness of the artistic event, to James's closeted homosexuality and, eventually, to his death) goes hand in hand with the contemporary crisis of identity and the representation of otherness. Lodge's James constitutes a belated resonance of the actual James and his traumata. Both are enmeshed in their own historicity, which links and sets them apart. Thus, the double temporal axis of trauma fits the twofold nature of James as late-Victorian historical figure and neo-Victorian character. That is how the temporal and ontological split helps to work out the trauma of James's otherness under the effect of Wilde's downfall and that of Lodge's character under the effect of neo-Victorian bearing witness to the past and present texts. Lodge's postmodern re-appropriation of the problematic identity of the actual James is cathartic for contemporary discourse and audiences. New anxieties thus find the formula for re-articulation in old ones. Drawing on Daniel S. Brown, Philip Davis argues that whereas Victorianism explored its own historicity, "neo-Victorian writers imaginatively recreate a past through art and scholarship to understand something of their own situation" (2009: 151). That is, being conscious of its textuality, Victorianism turns a fruitful hypotext for postmodern metafictionality. This way the Victorian hypotext and the postmodern hypertext can no longer be read independently because they "refract" (to use Onega's and Gutleben's term, 2004: 7-15) one another. After reading James as a postmodern character we inevitably regard the late-Victorian writer differently. Likewise, when the actual James embodies (together with his nemesis Oscar Wilde) the traumatic origins of male (homo)sexuality, he sheds new light on how current identities and helps them assume their precariousness by proxy.

Although some voices claim that neo-Victorian literature constitutes a transient retreat to simpler times, *Author, Author* is much more complex, for it addresses the current ontological crisis drawing on a paradigmatic Victorian writer. In this sense, using James as a tutelary spirit is ambivalent in the text. He works as a referent of an era where art could still be authentic and the artist a creator of "truth", but not for much longer. This sense of urgency and liminality results particularly attractive. The current reader fantasizes with a coherent late-Victorian identity which eventually turns out to be a mere fictional elusion. It is a curious process of mystification and demystification that makes us renegotiate our historicity and link with our Victorian background.

Apart from being known as "the Master", Loge's protagonist stands for identity conflicts, particularly the one derived from the birth of homosexuality (and hence heterosexuality) at the *fin de siècle*. The clash between his sexual desire and his self-constraining literary style recurs in Lodge's novel. The more he commits to literature the less he does to love. To justify his remaining single, he argues: "There may be a conflict of interests between … marriage and art" (155). Thus he sublimates his allegedly repressed drives through writing. Drawing on Kant's sublime (which privileges mind over matter) he transforms the naked body of his cousin Gus into "the abstract, ideal beauty … concealed within it" (66). Yet, his sublimation of sexuality into art is not always effective because bursts of homo-social/erotic fantasy eventually come out rather painfully. This is the case of his friendship with attractive young Americans, all friends of Wilde (169), following the pattern of the "Platonic model of mentor and ephebe" (172). Unlike Wilde's explicit same-sex desire, James in the novels of both Tóibín and Lodge suffers from internal homophobia. He is always afraid of trespassing the liminal territory between the homosexual and the homosocial (Girard, 1976; Sedgwick, 1985, 1991). Homosociality and homosexuality are too close to each other and hence any over-affective sign between males must be automatically cancelled out. That is why Lodge's protagonist cannot cope with Wilde and Zhukovski, two eminent Uranists (or proto-gays), whereas he enjoys homoerotic encounters with young men: "Admittedly … he found it easier to picture himself thus engaged with a beautiful youth than with a beautiful maiden, but that only strengthened his resistance to any possible temptation to act out such disturbing fantasies" (172).

Lodge's James's art being a crypt of his self-repression and obsession, professional jealousy constitutes a logical consequence. Sophie Harrison already addressed the morbidity of a jealous James (2004). In my view, however, James feels envy rather than jealousy since he is not afraid of losing something to someone else, but longing for what he does not have. He spends the novel tormented by the success his friends achieve and he does not. The late-capitalist tendency to reify success and sensationalize failure is rooted in Victorianism, as neo-Victorian *Author, Author* recalls. Although jealous of Fenimore's best-seller *Anne* (71), it is men like Wilde and Du Maurier whom James particularly envies. And his envy has a lot to do with the homosocial-homosexual dichotomy mentioned above. Wilde's camp plays and persona are both appealing and abject for James because he exhibits what James most desires, lacks, fears and self-represses. Wilde, the protagonist admits, is clever (148), successful and, though excessive, his discourse is "quite sincere and largely true" (149). With Wilde as his queer nemesis reflecting and exposing his internal homophobia and sexual inarticulacy, James can only feel a morbid envy. Yet, as happens with the porous bounds between homo-sexuality/sociality/phobia, envy is a rather ambiguous affect in James's complex personality. He envies what he loves and vice versa. His schizophrenic rapport to Wilde's success, sexual explicitness and eventual downfall constitutes a displaced reflection of his own ambiguity. Although

Lodge's James does not reach the dramatic morbidity of Tóibín's character concerning Wilde, the latter's downfall, the narrator points out, is "cathartic, purging pity and fear" (285). Bearing witness to Wilde's sensationalist downfall and its reverberations (particularly as a sublime spectacle for a detached James) helps current readers face up new identity crises. James's envy also targets Du Maurier, though in a completely different fashion. Unlike Wilde, the author of *Trilby* does not put a threat on James. Probably unconscious of James's sexual conflicts, Du Maurier does not destabilize his fragile balance between repressed homosexuality and internal homophobia. Du Maurier, whom the protagonist patronizingly considers a good cartoonist but a poor brain, is simply lucky to score a hit with a novel whose story James provided him with. However, on his deathbed James rattles his friend's name and tellingly repeats "*Trilby* was the matter" (34). *Guy Domville*'s débâcle is as terrible as Wilde's collapse and *Trilby*'s success. The traumas triggered by these events reveal deeper traumas that James has encrypted. They make him still a fascinating figure for current audiences, mixing sexual ambiguity and restraint and professional envy and failure, which, all together, make up present anxieties.

3. CONCLUSION

As mentioned above, Kohlke considers fictional life-writing on celebrities a subgenre that addresses memory and trauma culture, as well as new formulas of sensationalism (2013: 4). *Author, Author* definitely fits the pattern. It makes readers conscious of their historicity because, despite the alleged ahistoricity of (early) postmodernism, they bear witness to their Victorian makeup. The novel accentuates the traumatic obsessions of Henry James, particularly those concerning "irregular" sexuality and writing as emotional subterfuge. Relatedly, an ironic renewed nostalgia for Victorian (apparently naïve) sensationalism explains the novel's appeal for the salacious as spectacle in the post-aura era (be it Wilde's or James's downfalls). As early-twentieth-century readers or spectators we long to be shocked and moved once and again. In this sense, after aura has been devoid of its essence, concepts like trauma, the sublime, identity, crisis and sexuality are merged and spectacularized, raising ethical debates and dilemmas.

It is increasingly difficult to simply reject Grand Narratives. Early postmodernism played narcissistically with the end of identity, history, truth etc. At the turn of the millennium the discourse that certified the death of logocentrism is also in crisis. Neo-Victorianism in general, and celebrity biofictions in particular, bear witness to our need to believe in old concepts and tutelary spirits, no matter how delusive, fictional and/or transient they may be. James's status was problematic and,

therefore, it makes a good hypotext for Lodge's character to help us approach the anxieties and uncertainty of identity today. Yet, new identities are not plainly akin to pre-modern ones. Likewise, we do not engage with nineteenth-century realism the way contemporary readers did or the way we do with a current text. Hence, what otherwise could merely look the failure of a writer to succeed in the West End, as his nemesis and friends did, is culturally significant. The trauma of failure transcends James's failure itself. It is a symptom of an organic crisis that engages Victorianism and neo-Victorianism and paradoxically finds its way of (mis)representation in a sublime characterized by trauma. This aesthetics of impossibility proves how problematic is the disambiguation of Lodge's James's (and his actual referent's) discourse, art granting and denying him the aura of transcendence.

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