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***HENRY JAMES AS A CHARACTER – FICTIONALIZED AND  
LITERARY BIOGRAPHY***

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**Paula-Andreea ONOFREI**

“Alexandru Ioan Cuza” University of Iași

**Abstract**

*The present paper’s aim is to demonstrate that Henry James has himself become a character in the works of Emma Tennant, David Lodge, Paula Marantz Cohen. What is the borderline between fiction and reality regarding Henry James? How is Henry James depicted in each of these novels? How can we explain the appearance of so many books having *The Master* as their focus? These are matters which will be developed in my article.*

**Key-words:** biography, reality, fiction, inspiration source, American literature.

**Emma Tennant – *Felony. A Private History of the Aspern Papers. A Novel***

Known as a Scottish writer that blends post-modernism, fantasy and magic realism in her fiction, Emma Tennant managed to capture some of the elements which define Henry James’s specificity in *Felony*. The book was published in Great Britain in 2002, therefore it comes after Gore Vidal’s *Empire* from 2000, on the other side of the Atlantic. As Gina Wisker remarked in a study of Emma Tennant, “her work is feminist, magical and wicked, and uses the fantastic and the Gothic to interpret and explore everyday women's roles”<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Wisker, Gina. "Emma Tennant". *The Literary Encyclopedia*. 07 July 2001, <http://www.litencyc.com/php/speople.php?rec=true&UID=4345>, accessed on 17 July 2010.

Sometimes, biographical past events find their literary counterpart in writing and we can establish a connection between the remembrance of her father Charles Tennant as alternating between “frightful rages and paternalistic benevolence” and, perhaps as a result of this, the focus on family relationships taken to excess and social, emotional and formal contradictions that are present throughout her work. What is surprising about this book is the fact that it contains *Dramatis Personae*, the Latin term for the list of persons or characters of a drama; in literature, the usage of *dramatis personae* is common in books with very large casts of characters; despite the fact that this novel has not many actants involved, Tennant felt the need to explain relationships among characters, every chapter of her novel being written from the perspective of a specific person.

In the *Author's Note*, Emma Tennant underlines the proportion of reality vs. fiction in her novel, stating that: “Dates and details in this story of what really went on in Claire Clairmont’s household in Florence in the 1870s are as accurate as possible”(p.IX). In order to establish if all the events are true, we intend to continue this research by making a comparison of the literary data of Tennant with the biography of Henry James written by Leon Edel. Tennant admits that “the sole invention is the visit of Edward Trelawny to Claire in Florence: he had written to her frequently there, stating that he would have persuaded her to banish the phantasy that her child Allegra still lived.”

We were at the beginning intrigued by the explanation given in the title: *Felony. A Private History of the Aspern Papers. A Novel*. Therefore, we decided to read *The Aspern Papers* for a better understanding of Tennant’s book. After reading Wymar’s *Six American Stories*, we arrived at the conclusion that the story is written in 1<sup>st</sup> person narrative, the “I” is the narrative voice of a character who is a writer and intends to create a book about Jeffrey Aspern, a famous poet.

The narrator found out about the existence of some papers, the personal correspondence between Jeffrey Aspern and Miss Bordereau, an old woman who was in love with Jeffrey when she was young. Miss Bordereau lived with her niece, Tina, in an old palace in Venice. Because the writer wanted to read those papers, he first wrote to Miss Bordereau, asking her to show him the papers. The niece replied that her aunt did not have them and if she did, she would not show them to anyone. In conclusion, she did not want to be disturbed.

Nevertheless, the writer is persistent and he goes to Venice, to a friend who gives him a clever piece of advice: to become the lodger of Miss Bordereau and to get those papers, being determined to do whatever it takes, joking about the extreme solution of marriage: “I’ll get them somehow. If necessary, I’ll marry the niece!” (Wymer 1990:23).

Changing his name and pretending to be in search for a quiet room with garden, the scoundrel managed to have Miss Bordereau as his tenant for a high rent. The first encounter with the niece is terrifying for him: “She was a tall, thin person. Her face was not young; her hair was not brushed; and she had a wild look. I supposed that she was the niece.” (Wymer 1990:23).

Step by step, by inviting Tina to dinner and having conversations with her, the writer found out that Miss Bordereau was about to die, that she had kept her letters of Aspern from her youth. The writer’s avalanche of questions addressed to Tina made the woman suspicious about his intentions and he confessed that he was a writer. For two weeks, Tina had not spoken to the lodger, she revealed his identity to the aunt and they were both very unhappy for having received him, being suspicious that he was after the papers. The writer finally meets his tenant, “she gave me a hard look”, she showed him a picture of Jeffrey that he pretended not to have recognised him and she ended their meeting with the threat “I’m keeping my eye on you! I’m watching you!” (Wymer 1990:29). After three hours, the aunt felt very bad and they thought she was on the verge of dying. Obviously, the lodger cared for the letters, he was searching for them visually. The aunt got better, but she could not leave her room anymore. One night, the lodger entered the room of Miss Bordereau, having a torch and seeking for the precious papers; the old woman was shocked and died in the arms of Miss Tina. Afterwards, when the writer asked about the letters, she told him that she had kept them, but she would not show them to strangers. Her request comes as transparently as possible: “it would be different if you were my husband. If we were married, the papers would also belong to you. Then, you would have the right to read them” (Wymer 1990:29). His reply “we’re not suited for marriage” made her silently burn the papers in the kitchen fire, for “I had no reason to keep them”, as she said. The writer was bewildered and perplexed about the news. All his efforts had been in vain.

Returning to *Felony*, first of all, we cannot grasp the relationships among characters if we do not know who they are. Therefore, we consider essential the presentation of the characters portrayed based on *Dramatis Personae* and on their performance in the novel:

1. Claire Clairmont (1798-1879) is the one who makes the entire world revolve around her, just because she is the stepsister of Mary Shelley, the British novelist best known for her Gothic novel *Frankenstein*, and she was the owner of the famous Shelley letters which have always attracted the attention of people interested in such a valuable treasure. Claire Clairmont was the daughter of the second wife of William Godwin, she became a member of

the Shelley household when she left England with Mary and Shelley. A painful moment in her life was the death of her child, Allegra, the result of a love affair with Byron. The girl was five when she died in a monastery in Tuscany, this trauma deeply affected Claire Clairmont who afterwards lived for many years with her niece Paula Hanghegyi and her daughter, Georgina whom she adopted and sometimes identified her with the lost child, Allegra.

2. Edward Trelawny (1792-1881) was a traveller, adventurer and author of *Records of Shelley, Byron and The Author* and was seen by Tennant as “always on the spot at the most dramatic moments: the burning of Shelley’s corpse on the beach at Viareggio; and, after fighting in Greece alongside Byron, present at his death in Missolonghi.” (Tennant 2002: V) We may call the association of Trelawny with Claire Clairmont “a lifetime connection”, for it lasted for more than sixty years.

3. Edward Augustus Silsbee (1826-1900) was a sea captain from Massachusetts who became an expert on the poetry and life of Shelley. For his intention was to acquire the papers of Shelley at Claire Clairmont’s death, he began visiting her in Florence in 1872 and afterwards he became her lodger. The information about Silsbee’s actions in Clairmont’s household was related to James in 1887, who wrote *The Aspern Papers*, the novella about a “publishing scoundrel” and the tricks he used to obtain the spoils of a famous literary love affair. The portrait of Silsbee detached from the novel is the one of an unscrupulous man who would do anything for the manuscript of Shelley, including lying, manipulating people, he even has a love affair with Paula, Georgina’s mother, he plays the role of the housemaster, even if he is solely a lodger.

4. Constance Fenimore Woolson (1840-1894) was the great-niece of James Fenimore Cooper, author of *The Last of the Mohicans*. During James’s failure with *Guy Domville*, she was successful with the novel *Anne* which was sold in thousands of copies at that time. She hoped for a marriage with Henry James who called her “Fenimore”, she spent time with the convinced bachelor in Florence, Switzerland and London and she committed suicide in Venice, aged fifty-four, she made it seem like an accident.

5. Henry James (1843-1916) was a cosmopolitan person, he was born in New York, but lived more than twenty years in London and Italy. While he was in Florence and Venice, during the time of his close friendship with Constance Fenimore Woolson, he wrote one of

the shortest novels, *The Aspern Papers*, being inspired by Silsbee's deeds in order to become the owner of the precious letters. In James's version, the muse of the famous poet is Miss Bordereau who lives in the same household with her niece Tina, in a decaying palazzo in Venice. Strangely resembling the case of Edward Silsbee, a narrator becomes the lodger of the palazzo and is eager to get hold of the niece and the love letters, with disastrous results.

The preface is written by Georgina Hanghegyi, the great-niece of Claire Clairmont. She was only twelve when her mother brought her from Hungary to live in Florence with Claire Clairmont and she recorded her own memories of that time through the eyes of the child she was then, insisting on the aggressive jostling for her aunt's attention of the thieves or memoir-writers interested in the letters.

Secondly, we remarked that the construction of this book is totally special, the chapters having an odd number are narrated by Georgina, while the even ones belong to Henry (sometimes to "Henry and Constance") and Constance. Therefore, the reader feels as if one is part of a zigzag narrative game and we feel it is our duty to separate the odd chapters from the even ones, in order to grasp the meaning. Moreover, another difference among the chapters is represented by the "when and where" part of the action. In this respect, Georgina refers to Florence in the summer of 1876, while Henry – to Venice in the early summer of 1886. Our intention is to analyze the two narrative threads separately, treating firstly the odd chapters, which are chronologically anterior to the facts narrated by Henry.

The novel starts *in medias res*, with the preparations for the visit a certain "Americano" is expected to pay at midday. According to Irene J.F. de Jong, *in medias res* is a device used to begin the story at a crucial point in the middle; the name comes from Latin, meaning "into the middle of things". The origin of this device lies in the traditional nature of early Greek literature: the audience was familiar with the stories and the singers could therefore start at whatever point they considered most effective.

The book represents Tennant's attempt to step on the footprints of Henry James and she even manages to capture in Chapter II the moment when a creative idea comes and torments the writer up to the moment of becoming a real literary work: "The idea is doing her job: quite without knowing how, Henry James is successfully impregnated (...) for the length of a novella, at least."

"The germ of an idea" becomes a recurrent motif throughout this chapter and it is followed until it becomes a sprout in James's mind. We notice that Tennant is extremely skilled at creating suspense in the reader's mind. Let us examine, for example, the trajectory

of this motif: the idea “circles”, afterwards it is surprised “floating lazily in the filtered whiteness of the library, sees the recipient of its viral attack at last and begins to home in” (Tennant 2003:5), “The idea is doing its job: quite without knowing how, Henry James is successfully impregnated” (Tennant 2003:7). The female writers succeeds in keeping the mystery regarding the kind of idea that occurred in Henry James’s mind. It is a technique of creating suspense for the reader, Emma Tennant succeeds in making her “consumers of literature” curious.

The important conditions for the idea to germinate are underlined in the following fragment: “Once an idea has come, there must be no question of disturbance, self-inflicted.(...) For the sperm of the idea has reached the great domed egg that is the master’s head”. (Tennant 2003:7) The idea refers to a new novella, *The Aspern Papers*.

The James that Tennant portrays is full of anxieties: he fears that one day, he may fall on the highly polished parquet, he dreads at the thought that the servant’s entering the room might make all his inspiration disappear, “only a nagging worry remains”. The fact that James fears the moment when he might have his artistic process interrupted by a feminine presence is very well underlined by the verb “dreads”, in the context of the entrance of the servant Tita, “one of those moments Henry James dreads, a moment which reinforces his resolution never to live with a woman, especially Fenimore” (Tennant 2003:7). We consider this resolution rather strange, leaving room for interpretation. Why has James made such a decision? The following may be considered possible answers: Tennant gradually introduces the idea of James’s homosexuality or is it the personal choice of James who is totally committed to art and does not want any “disturbance” in his life, he intends to focus his entire attention on writing. After further reading, we discover that both answers have been correct.

Returning to the words “worries” and “anxiety”, we consider that an essential term for referring to the life of a writer is “search”. James is most of the time preoccupied with making his ideas materialize into literary creations, by improving his work, by actively involving himself not only in the writing of drama, but in the actor’s adequate play in order to transmit as much as possible to the spectator. It is obvious that James is in permanent state of anxiety caused, in this specific situation, by the creation of the novella *The Aspern Papers*. As a narrative device meant to put in light the writer’s worries, Tennant appeals to a chain of rhetoric questions, she creates a network of interrogations perfectly creating the radiography of James’s mind. If Lodge did not succeed in entering the conscience of “the master of consciousness”, Tennant passed the test with flying colours:

Conscience strikes him here; (...) by writing his tale of privacy molested; of money exchanged for secrets and futures bargained for with wedding rings, has he not exposed himself too brutally? Will everyone, in short, recognise the author in the scoundrel who takes advantage of poor and feeble women? –when he had intended, as had seemed so simple to convey, to identify the tale-teller with the famous poet Aspern? Could –more horrible than any of the dreams which now descend from the ceiling of the white library at the Palazzo, to linger in the Master’s half-waking brain before lodging in the ancient damask panels on the walls –could readers, friends and worshippers of James, actually compare him to Silsbee, rapist of Miss Clairmont’s treasure, destroyer of her niece’s happiness? (Tennant 2003:23)

We consider that, among the works having Henry James as a character, *Felony* is by far the best from the point of view of structure, great power of empathy. We appreciate Emma Tennant’s ability of putting herself in the shoes of “the master of consciousness”, using elements which are specific to James’s style.

#### **David Lodge – *Author, author***

The novels of David Lodge that we had read before *Author, author – A Novel* (2004) made us consider this writer and literary critic as one of the pillars in the artistic world. We must confess, with all the respect, that the novel *Author, author – A Novel* represented for us a failed ship launched on the ocean of biographical literature.

In *România Literară*, Codrin Liviu Cuțitaru wisely remarked that the novel of Lodge which is so different in theme and style from the rest of his literary work up to now is seen as “o radiografie a gestului de creație și, ca atare, a faptului de a fi autor. O radiografie “în clar” a angoasei, incertitudinii și labilității din umbra fiecărui destin estetic”.<sup>2</sup>

As far as the title *Author, author* is concerned, Cornelia Bucur was inspired when translating it by *Autorul, la rampă!*. The same critic Codrin Liviu Cuțitaru brings supplementary pieces of information, stating that this is what the audience shouts in London theatres, at the end of the play, they ask for the author’s presence on the scene in order to cheer him. This habit has its origin in Elisabethan times and has been perpetuated from generation to generation, reaching our time.

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<sup>2</sup> “a radiography of the gesture of creation and of the fact that one is an author. A “clear” radiography of anxiety, uncertainty and lability which are in the backstage of every aesthetic destiny.” (Cuțitaru, Codrin Liviu, 2006: np, translation mine)

What are the **themes** and **motifs** of *Author, author* and what is the connection of this book with Henry James?

First of all, the major theme is **the condition of the author**, Lodge considered Henry James representative for the entire class of writers and took him as a model to be minutely studied and, to a certain extent, understood. Therefore, we could not agree more with C. L. Cuțitaru who argued that this book has a meta-textual quality, having other themes which derive from the main one, “David Lodge urmărește angoasa creației până în amănuntele conținutului ei masochist, de ‘damnare’ și ‘disperare’ “. <sup>3</sup>

Secondly, the **topic of friendship** between George Du Maurier, the famous illustrator of the magazine “Punch” and Henry James is very much exploited. For the bachelor James, interested in the world of books exclusively, the normality of Du Maurier’s family life is seen by him as a refuge.

Related to the book’s major event, the failure of James as a dramatist with the work *Guy Domville*, Du Maurier tried to offer James the core of a possible successful novel: he told James about a Scottish fifteen year old young woman, Trilby O’Ferrall who becomes an orphan of badly-reputed parents who were irresponsible alcoholics – and, having no other financial means, she is forced by fate to take care of her brother by posing for a French painter and receiving a very small amount of money.

Thirdly, the **motif of the search for book narrative threads** is recurrent, being connected with the **theme “anxiety of creation”**, as C. L. Cuțitaru stated. The structure of the book is very well articulated, for James’s lack of inspiration and consequently, major frustration leads to the recurrent motif of envy. Immediately after having heard from Du Maurier about the writing topic called “Trilby”, James refused the offer, being “either opaque at the dynamism of the action or much too indifferent to the superficial epic taste of the era” (Cuțitaru 2006:np); after years, he saw that George Du Maurier, the unexperienced writer was surprisingly successful with the novel *Trilby*. This event simply shocked James who will never get over the “professional envy” which is so minutely and subtly analyzed by Lodge. When James finds out that *Trilby* could be the best sold novel of all times, he exclaims: “Good God! (...) I need some air” (Lodge 2005:368). Even on his death bed, being partially aphasic, Henry James still articulates “*Trilby* is the problem!”, making the people around him feel puzzled. Moreover, when Du Maurier receives favourable critique, Lodge’s words

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<sup>3</sup> “David Lodge watches the anxiety of creation to its minutest masochistic details of its content, of ‘damnation’ and ‘despair’ ”. (Cuțitaru, Codrin Liviu, 2006: np, translation mine)

encapsulating James's reaction are: "Henry felt just the tiniest prick of jealousy –no publisher's reader had ever greeted his own work so effusively – but immediately dismissed it as ignoble and indeed absurd"(Lodge 2004:166). To make matters worse, his best friend, Constance Fenimore Woolson sold thousands of copies of *Anne*. Therefore, James is simply astonished, amazed and these emotional stages reach high levels when the author of *Guy Domville* discovers that he – an experienced writer who sacrificed all his life on the altar of creation – does not receive the expected and proper attention. A more down-to-earth and even ordinary novel like Wilde's *An Ideal Husband* was warmly received by the public, in comparison to James's highly spiritual failed dramatic play.

The theme of "anxiety of creation" is also linked to the *conflict between art and marriage*, as James sees this matter, in a conversation with Fenimore:

'But I think you will admit that there may be a conflict of interests between –not women and art –but *marriage* and art.'

Fenimore flushed slightly, and chewed her cutlet in silence for a few moments. 'Do you advocate free love, then, as a *modus vivendi* for the artist?' she enquired ironically.

'Of course not, Fenimore, you know how I hate all such, such – bohemian sordidness', said Henry, growing a little excited in spite of himself. (Lodge 2004:155)

Fourthly, it is very difficult to put oneself in a writer's shoes, especially if that author is the complex Henry James, for there is the risk of offering a subjective distorted perception, even though the biographical facts are perfectly true and integrated in the newly woven literary biographical web. As a passionate reader of literature, we consider that the following affirmation is partially true, for, in comparison to more skilled writers like Emma Tennant or Gore Vidal, what Lodge succeeds in creating is an exterior image of Henry James, he did not dig deeper into the psychological chambers of the writer, some of the fragments are really trivial, they depict with too much details what Henry James did, not felt. Therefore, we consider the following statement taken, again, from *România Literară*, debatable: "Lodge, în analiza lui artistică a două decenii din viața lui Henry James, intră mai degrabă în resorturile intime, obscure, subliminale, ale condiției de autor."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> "Lodge manages to make the artistic analysis of two decades from Henry James's life, entering inside the private, obscure, subliminal rooms of the condition of author." (Cuțitaru, Codrin Liviu, 2006: np, translation mine)

Fifthly, we have mentioned that this is a biographical work, for it refers to the 20 year period of creation crisis in the life of Henry James, this moment of lack of inspiration is deepened by the failure with the play *Guy Domville*, in London, in January 1885. Henry James was called on the stage just to be booed and heard the whistling spectators. Thus, that moment represented the starting point of "the most awful four weeks of my life" (the period when *Guy Domville* was played on the stage).

In order for a work to be successful, there is a mixture of conditions which need to be fulfilled. It was a strange case the context of appearance of *Author, author* and in the same article, "*Ce este un autor?*", C. L. Cuțitaru creates an analysis of the context of that time when Lodge's work was published:

1. Six months before the book of Lodge was published, Colm Tóibín came with *The Master*, having the same narrative topic: Henry James's failure with the play *Guy Domville* and the depressive state that accompanied lack of success.

2. Henry James's repressed sexuality: Tóibín insists on homoeroticism, while Lodge delicately and vaguely refers to this matter. In this respect, the beginning is eloquent:

"He (James) has had deeply rewarding friendships with both men and women. If he has never experienced sexual intercourse, that was by his own choice, unlike the many young men in Flanders who died virgins either for lack of opportunity or because they hoped to marry and were keeping themselves chaste on principle." (Lodge 2004: 3)

3. The friendship relationship that exists between Henry James and Constance Fenimore Woolson (in kinship with James Fenimore Cooper, also a writer) who commits suicide in Venice, apparently everything seems an accident, thus making Henry James feel guilty, for he knew the context). As far as the relationship between the two is concerned, the following fragment from David Lodge, a discussion between Alice James and her brother, Henry, perfectly illustrates James's intentions:

"Are you interested in this woman, Henry?"

"She interests me, yes. Her views of literature are remarkably perceptive."

"You know what I mean, Henry. Do you have intentions towards her?"

"Do you mean matrimonial ones? Certainly not."

"I think she has them towards you."

“Fenimore understands perfectly the nature of our friendship. It is based on common interest in books and writing”(Lodge 2004:75).

There is another fragment which also states the purely intellectual connection between the two: “Nothing amorous or improper happened on this and similar occasions. Their relationship was one of platonic companionship and informed conversation about subjects of common interest”(Lodge 2004:73).

4. The approach strategy: while D. Lodge uses the moment *Guy Domville* as a climax of his narrative structure, making it come back to life through the use of flashbacks of the protagonist on his death bed, in 1915, Colm Tóibín starts his work with the failed drama, emphasizing the problem of creative anxiety.

5. The year 2002 is the moment when Emma Tennant launched her novel, *Felony*, having as a main topic the pure and ambiguous relationship between James and Constance Fenimore Woolson.

Regarding the similarities among the works of Tenant, Tóibín and Lodge, they are based on the fact that they have used the same bibliographical source: Lyndall Gordon’s *A Private Life of Henry James* (1998).

How does David Lodge explain the coincidence of appearance of so many works having Henry James as a character?

He is surprised by this event and considers everything justified by the presence of *Zeitgeist*, the modern term for “saeculum”, “the general cultural, intellectual, ethical, spiritual and/or political climate within a nation or even specific groups, along with the general ambience, morals, socio-cultural direction and mood associated with an era” (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zeitgeist>, Last seen on 24.12.2010).

We could not agree more with Sophie Harrison who stated in *New York Times* on October 10, 2004 that “It takes a lot of audacity to reanimate a dead author – or so the evidence of David Lodge’s new novel about Henry James would suggest.”<sup>5</sup>

To begin with, the period that is depicted in Lodge’s novel about Henry James is one of the most difficult times for the American writer, taking place between late 1880’s and middle 1890’s; it was the time when James’s muse seemed to hide, the writer was trying to re-find his inspiration by having an active social life, especially in the winter of 1878, when he

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<sup>5</sup> Sophie Harrison, *The Portrait of a Layabout*, Published on October 10, 2004 on *New York Times*. Last viewed on September 25, 2006 at <http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9C04E1D61538F933A25753C1A9629C8B63>

dined out 107 times. In search for his lost fulfillment and tranquility through writing, James had a period of shadow. It is particularly this time which offered Lodge the occasion to create a novel about the narrator whose life cannot be defined as fascinating, but rather dull and characterized by the monotony of permanent writing. Therefore, Lodge considered failure with James's *Guy Domville* the perfect starting point for bringing back to life the image of a writer who truly means something for the American literature.

Lodge tried to cast light on the human side of James, by exploiting his jealousy: in the mentioned period, James launched the play *Guy Domville* in January 1895, exactly in the same night with Oscar Wilde's new play, *An Ideal Husband*. Unfortunately for James, it proved to be a complete flop and he had to contend with the success of his friend, Guy du Maurier – his novel being *Trilby*, afterwards his female friend Constance Fenimore Woolson sold thousands of copies of *Anne*: "But it was even more mortifying when one's literary friends had an undeserved success"(Lodge 2004:97).

Despite Lodge's belief that his novel would have a major success based on the fact that he "exploited" a difficult time in the life of a gifted and prolific writer, it proved to be a disappointing book compared to the wonderful *Art of Fiction* due to the following, according to Sophie Harrison:

1. There is a mixture of biography and fiction which is not very well coagulated. Even if the events in this book are accurately and faithfully recorded, we cannot accept the label of "novel" attached to *Author, author*, because this is simply "an assembly of facts" (Sophie Harrison 2009:np). Furthermore, we cannot say that Lodge's work is a trust-worthy biography, for it lacks security of information and even the writer cannot refrain himself from expressing his doubts about his own failed product:

'Nearly everything that happens in this story is based on factual resources...But I have used a novelist's license in representing what characters thoughts, felt and said to each other', he explains in a prefatory note(Harrison 2009:np).

2. There are some trivial moments which should have been left out. Although James is depicted while splashing in the tub or posting off urine samples labeled "a.m." and "p.m.", he does not succeed in entering the consciousness of the grand master of consciousness (Harrison 2009). Another example is:

He deplored the frigid Anglo-Saxon prejudice against such demonstrations of affection-of love, why not call it love? – between men. But something fastidious in

him recoiled from any thought of intimate sexual contact involving nakedness, the groping and interlocking of private parts, and the spending of seed(Lodge 2004:172).

3. What this book lacks is a representation of inner life. Henry James is seen moving, writing, meeting his friends, doing everything that a writer does, but Lodge did not mix one ingredient in the narrative cocktail: interior movements. Therefore, my impression is that of a sterile product which cannot be truly called a novel.

4. In order to offer the reader further information, Lodge too often makes use of biography, which constitutes the main part of his work and gives the impression of gratuity and morbidity.

5. When a writer doubts the quality of his work and even states it, this attitude represents the doom of that specific product.

6. *Author, author* has the major fault of not challenging its readers, David Lodge unfortunately put all his cards upwards on the table and the reading of this book does not represent a pleasure, an attraction. Everything is served and...too much visible and available, there is nothing to decode, no mystery left.

Reading *Author, author*, we realized that there is a bitter irony which prevails in this work, intensified by the tensions, the trials and...the unavoidable failures of one's life. What is painful is the fact that everything that James wanted to achieve in that "dark period" of his existence became crystallized in somebody else's life. Moreover, there are twists of tragic and comic which create a certain vivid atmosphere. According to *The Literary review*, this is "a multilayered book that gets under the skin of this vulnerable and venerable writer and evokes all the nuances of this period", being "hugely enjoyable".

The portrait of James seen through Lodge's eyes is the one of a tormented creature, touched by the devil of despair, torn between different thoughts, in search for the lost inspiration, very eager to find his tranquility through writing something which will be appreciated by the readers:

He would be fifty in April. He had, even by the most wildly optimistic estimates, fewer years left than he had lived, and he was oppressed by the consciousness of unfulfilled ambitions, declining vitality and diminishing reserves of time. He felt he was in danger of losing his identity as a writer, falling into a void between a fading reputation as a novelist and a still elusive one as a dramatist. If he could only attain the latter, he felt sure he would have the strength and the confidence to revive the former.

Meanwhile, he was tormented by the spectacle of other writers –Kipling, Wilde, Thomas Hardy, for instance, not to mention Mrs. Humphry Ward –getting the kind of attention and praise that he felt was *his* due; felt, but could not openly admit even to his closest friends without appearing pathetically weak and envious. Instead, he put these complicated misgivings and yearnings into a short story that he called *The Middle Years*. (Lodge 2004:167)

The fragment above is representative also for the condition of the writer, tormented between the inner drive to express one's negative thoughts and the social rules which practically make one swallow one's natural instinctual feelings in less fortunate times. Furthermore, Lodge underlines the fact that the proper medium of expression for any artist is one's creation, there is a process of purification of one's feelings, conscience in writing, in this case.

**Paula Marantz Cohen – *What Alice Knew. A Most Curious Tale of Henry James & Jack the Ripper***

This is one of the few times a title of the book has arisen so many mixed questions and emotions. We must admit, it is intriguing!

First of all, this fictional book appeared to us as a creation that was meant to underline the personalities of the three James: Alice, William and Henry. This book contains the unusual juxtaposition of the name of Henry James and Jack the Ripper. The association seemed to us strange and having no connection at first sight, but...taking into account the fact that this novel was not meant to be a historical conventional novel, but ...something totally different, we decided to solve this mystery by reading it.

As we usually ask ourselves “Why did this author write this book?”, we found some answers to this questions exactly in the “Author’s Note”, where Cohen said:

“I wrote this book **in order to bring to life historical characters and events** that I have **come to know through my reading**. But, as this is a work of fiction, imaginative material has necessarily been added and factual material altered to accommodate the plot” (p.iv).

Secondly, it is not enough to bring to life characters or authors discovered through reading, but to make them passionately vibrant heroes, if one intends one's work to be successful. We all know who Henry James is, but...who is Jack the Ripper? According to [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jack\\_the\\_Ripper](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jack_the_Ripper) (last viewed on 29.04.2011):

**"Jack the Ripper"** is the best-known name given to an unidentified serial killer who was active in the largely impoverished areas in and around the Whitechapel district of London in 1888. The name originated in a letter, written by someone claiming to be the murderer, that was disseminated in the media. The letter is widely believed to have been a hoax, and may have been written by a journalist in a deliberate attempt to heighten interest in the story. Other nicknames used for the killer at the time were "The Whitechapel Murderer" and "Leather Apron". Attacks ascribed to the Ripper typically involved female prostitutes from the slums whose throats were cut prior to abdominal mutilations.

Secondly, being intrigued by the title, we immediately wanted to "dig deeper", therefore the paperback offered us the following pieces of information:

"Under certain circumstances, no one is more suited to solving a crime than a woman confined to her bed.

An invalid for most her life, Alice James is quite used to people underestimating her. And she generally doesn't mind. But this time, she is not about to let things alone. Yes, her brother Henry may be a famous author, and her other brother William a rising star in the new field of psychology. But when they all find themselves quite unusually involved in the chase for a most vile new murderer –one who goes by the chilling name of Jack the Ripper –Alice is certain of two things:

No one could be more suited to gather evidence about the nature of the killer than her brothers. But if anyone is going to correctly examine the evidence and solve the case, it will have to be up to her."

To our knowledge, Alice James has been an intelligent, sensitive person, unfortunately bearing the fingerprint of illness and forced not to leave her bed, dependent on servants and on her brothers' company. The fact that Cohen saw in her the key for solving the mystery of

Jack the Ripper is original, Alice having been casted a role which puts her in light and creates a different aura for her, a character mostly doomed to stay in the shadow of invalidity.

Thridly, we have been preoccupied with deciphering the mysteries of the title; what strikes the reader is the paraphrase of one of James's well-known novels, *What Maisie Knew*. It is not enough that the author used the adjective "curious" to stir our imagination and interest, but this denominator appears in superlative: "most curious", without having the definite article "the", but the indefinite one "a". Being published in September 2010, this book is the last of the series of eight books that, to our knowledge, have been written about Henry James as a character.

What are the strong points of the book? Well, the first would be the "exploitation of family relationship", this is a recurrent motif in the book which has not received much attention in the creations of other writers. The second is Paula Marantz Cohen's style: not only does she succeed in tricking the reader absorb pages after pages, in search for the murderer, her technique of creating suspense is absolutely fantastic, but she also manages to provide useful and discreet narrative hints for the reader, she succeeds where David Lodge failed, putting all his cards upwards on the table. Therefore, we appreciate her technique of creating and preserving mystery, therefore we consider that the explanation "a most curious tale" could not have found a more proper place. Furthermore, her style is characterized by delicacy, irony, even sarcasm sometimes, illustrated by the following line: "they were interrupted by Wilde, engaged in one of his familiar critiques of someone who wasn't there" (Cohen 2010:6).

The third is the portrayal of characters, every one of them, especially the most important ones, are painted in a skillful manner; in this respect, a favourable opinion in *San Francisco Chronicle*, on the paperback, stated that: "Cohen's wit is sharp, smart and satirical, and her characterizations are vividly on target." We believe that the first chapter is delightfully juicy in ideas as far as James's character is concerned, for there are references to the following:

- James's work: "Henry did not disagree. His work was a means of keeping the more unseemingly aspects of life at bay"( Cohen 2010:7).

- James's family: "Each member of his family had found a way to do this: his older brother through theoretical constructions, his younger brothers through the anesthetic of alcohol and gambling, his sister by taking to her bed. Overall, he preferred his own method: the evasion of art" (Cohen 2010:8).

- James's opinion about marriage: "Marriages, as he observed them, were brutal arrangements; he was glad he had no truck with them"(Cohen 2010:8).

Moreover, a social aspect also related to gender characteristics is evoked with subtlety in just a line: "One never saw the men, only their wives, who were everywhere, elbowing their way into the best houses"(Cohen 2010:3).

We cannot but appreciate smooth transitions in this novel: during the imagined talk at the table, Oscar Wilde starts the discussion about one's madness as a writer: "...all of us literary fellows are mad, aren't we, Henry?", "True, you are subtle, but there is lunacy in subtlety" (Cohen 2010:5), the chapter ending with James's opinion: "Yes, much as he hated to agree with Wilde, he knew that lunacy was a matter of context, and the line separating the novelist and the murderer was not as great as one might think"(Cohen 2010:8). Therefore, a simple talk about the supposed degree of subtlety and lunacy in a writer is connected to the pathological lunacy of Jack the Ripper, the topic of interest which is debated during that party. What struck us was the fact that the vocabulary Cohen uses is not at all difficult, it is formal up to a degree, but the term "perpetrator" connected to Jack the Ripper is formal and recurrent, meant to underline the official character of the investigation of murders.

Another delicate hint is provided by the author in the night when James was robbed: he could hear "the manner of locution" of his savior: "a gentleman's voice, refined, but forceful", whose handkerchief was "of very good cambric and wafted a faint scent of lavender"(Cohen 2010:12-3). This would lead the reader to mysterious ideas on the paths of discovering the true murderer, paths which will prove simple hypothesis, for Cohen proves to be a wizard of words, with twists of narrative.

Another strong point would be the high level of imagination, William James, the psychologist brother of Henry, is brought from America to Great Britain to help the authorities in charge solve the difficult case of Jack the Ripper. In this respect, Sir Charles Warren, a Metropolitan Commissioner of Police, sent an official invitation letter to Professor James, taking into account "your scientific acumen, your training as a physician, and most significantly, your unique understanding of the human mind in its deviant manifestations"(Cohen 2010:16), hoping to solve "this profoundly troubling and intractable case" (Cohen 2010:17). Regarding the style of this formal letter, it is impeccable. We enjoyed the invitation conceived as coming from the highest authorities in Great Britain: "please rest assured that the moral debt incurred by Her Majesty, by the prime minister, and by myself will, if you should be so gracious as to respond to our appeal, be great indeed" (Cohen 2010:17).

It is known the fact that the victims of Jack the Ripper were usually prostitutes or women of lower social class, their universe is introduced to the reader, giving a certain colour of authenticity while Henry James was drunk and approached by a prostitute:

“Don’t run away, Mister.” A woman’s face, bloated with drink and garishly painted, appeared in front of him. Despite the cold, she was wearing practically nothing, her breasts pushed up like mottled melons from a tattered corset. He tried to shove her aside, but she held tight to both his arms, and her face and body, rancid with the odor of sex and sweat, pressed up against him (Cohen 2010:11).

What are the weak points? We would dare to say that the beginning and the end of the book caricaturize a James floating in the steam of alcohol and we consider it was not the case to de-mystify such an author by such a trivial way of beginning: The action of the book takes place in London, in 1888 and it starts with “Henry James was drunk.” (And, for rounding the circle of writing, the end of the book is “But first, he would have another glass of wine.”) And he could hardly see (“he was too bleary-eyed to look”), he was sitting at a well-appointed table at which he vaguely recognized some of the guests”, Oscar Wilde among them (Cohen 2010:1). James was so drunk that:

There were others he was certain he knew, except he could not summon up their names. Not that it mattered. Real places and people were the germs that fertilized his novels, but a certain level of distractedness (helped by a certain quantity of wine) left an opening for the imagination.(Cohen 2010:2)

Now, referring to the portrait of the main characters in this novel, we believe that an element of originality that we did not find in previous books about Henry James is the attention paid to apparently less important individuals, such as Alice James. In fact, she is the one who contributes substantially to the solving of the mystery, she is portrayed both physically and spiritually, in the following lines:

“Alice was not a pretty woman, but her face exuded intelligence and a good deal of unsentimental kindness. It was a round face, with the high forehead and deep-set eyes of all the James children. But her eyes were brighter and more alert than those of her brothers, which tended to a vaguer, more distracted gaze. (...) She read three

newspapers a day, received a steady stream of visitors, and wrote frequent letters to Parliament and regular entries in her diary” (Cohen 2010:19).

Moreover, the author of *What Alice Knew* underlined some background elements from the James family:

As children, they were separated by an unbreachable wall of differing family loyalties. Alice had been assigned to her father and her oldest brother, William, and Henry had belonged to his mother and his aunt Kate. The division meant that they had viewed the world from different angles. As Henry observed, ‘It’s as though, as children, we saw things lit only from one side, and that now, being together, we can see them completely illuminated. It’s a special kind of binocular vision’ (Cohen 2010:20).

Trying to capture some of the specificity of Henry James, Cohen integrated the allusion to James’s novel *The Golden Bowl* in the following lines, started by Alice:

‘I never feel entirely myself when I’m not with you both (her brothers).The three of us are like an old plate that was broken and glued back together. You see the cracks and know you can’t use the plate, but when you see it on the shelf, it’s a joy to behold.’

‘I like that.’ Henry nodded.

William considered the metaphor. ‘I admit we’re all damaged –cracked, if you insist on putting it that way’(Cohen 2010:22).

Of course, the topic of marriage and family is not forgotten, therefore Cohen approaches it by Alice’s reproach to William: ‘As for you, William, you ceased to need me when you married your Alice.’ There was a momentary silence as the brothers exchanged glances. William had married an appropriate woman. Their mother had practically picked her out –she even had the same name as his sister’ (Cohen 2010:23).

Cohen has creatively interwoven narrative threads in her plot which also refer to historical figures involved in the case and the James milieu. In this novel, William develops a friendly working relationship with the real investigator in charge of the case, Inspector Abberline. Henry dines with Oscar Wilde and his rival in book sales, Samuel Clemens (Mark Twain). What is surprising and, in the same time, an element of suspense is the fact that Alice James has her portrait painted by Walter Sickert, a main suspect at that moment because of the dark style and subject matter of his work, which included such topics as Jack the Ripper's room. The mystery become deeper, for no one was ever able to prove him guilty. In this respect, the author Patricia Cornwall spent a fortune trying to demonstrate the fact that Sickert was responsible for the abominable crimes, she tore apart a Sickert painting for DNA samples to compare to those in existing bits of evidence. What Cornwall obtained was only the fury of the art world for her trouble, while the identity of Jack the Ripper remained unknown.

We noticed that there are a lot of details regarding Jack the Ripper, therefore we deduced that Cohen's research into the Jack the Ripper story is exhaustive. In this respect, the most valuable proof is Chapter 8 which contains a detailed presentation of the murders and of the victims in the attempt to catch that "more ineffable", the "psychological aspect", as William James and Inspector Abberline try to subtly detect (Cohen 2010:47). Later, in Chapter 11, William is the one that offers the theoretical background for solving this delicate and extremely mysterious case: "Half of problem solving has to do with posing the right questions. The other half with listening to the answers. It's what I learned teaching undergraduates, which qualifies as a form of detective work, the goal being to figure out how to make mostly uninterested students learn"(Cohen 2010:67).

It is also easy to imagine that Cohen also did research regarding the lives and characters of the members of James's family. Henry is tormented by the fact that his books sell so poorly, never imagining in his lifetime that he would be considered a genius by posterity.

As far as finding a solution to the case is concerned, the one who proves to be an essential key for solving the case is Alice: she is the one who carefully analyses clues in Chapter 22:

'We await illumination,'said William.

'We are all ears,'said Henry.

Alice ignored their facetious tone and continued excitedly, 'It began with certain observations that I made while studying the letters. I examined them closely after the

horrible Lancaster woman left and was struck, first, by the handwriting. We've already discussed the misspellings as exhibiting what William called 'disingenuous illiteracy.' The handwriting appears to show a similar tendency; it is artificially awkward."(...)  
'He was painting her body with a knife', concluded William softly.(...)  
'This is no time for jokes,' Alice intervened sternly. 'This is an important discovery, and we must act on it, quickly, each of us according to our abilities.' She spoke with the authority of a commander laying out a plan of battle. 'I will continue to study the evidence and consider how it may bring us closer to the murderer. William, you are to learn what you can from Scotland yard and trace the source of Polly Nichols's photograph. Henry, you must inventory the art world and consider who has the motive and opportunity to commit these crimes' (Cohen 2010:154-7).

The fragment above underlines Alice's sharp intelligence and her organization skills for solving such a difficult case. In fact, she seems to be in charge of the entire mental process of decoding the case, she is the one that exclaims, at the end of Chapter 22, "We are dealing with an artist of murder", she murmured. 'We must use our much vaunted intelligence and creative skill to catch him" (Cohen 2010:158).

A moment of tension was the one when Sickert, the supposed criminal, decides to paint the portrait of Alice, she was aware of the degree of risk involved; however, her intention is to find out more pieces of information connected to the murderer. Of course, the topic of the writer's endeavors for giving the world the best association of words is also captured in Chapter 39: "Henry had been working on his novel, practically without pause, all week. It was like that with him. Everything else was embroidery and diversion; writing was the centre and foundation of his life"(Cohen 2010:279).

Moreover, Cohen tries to behave in writing as if she has empathized with James, but...we are not very convinced that this process really took place. However, there is a fragment which refers to James's artistic credo: "In the novel Henry was working on, the hero would be like that – a man drawn to the artistic life who felt obligated to pursue a political career. With William, of course, the loyalties were different – more tangled and confused – but that was as it should be. One did not want art to imitate life. As deep as his characters were, they were never as deep as real people. To go that deep, one would drown" (Cohen 2010:280).

In a nutshell, trying to create a portrait of James seen through Cohen's eyes, we would say that this author did not fully succeed in her attempt to sketch James as a "detective" or as a writer, for...we consider that the emphasis is, in this case, on family relationships and their wonderful union for a common purpose: solving the difficult case of Jack the Ripper. Furthermore, we noticed that there were very few pages dedicated entirely to Henry James as a character, our belief is that the focus is on Alice, just like the title announced. Henry is left in the background, the unusual association of his name and the murders of the Ripper is meant to trigger astonishment in the first phase of reading the title, bewilderment in the second phase of becoming familiarized with the text and ...a little disappointment in the end, after realizing that this novel is not exclusively dedicated to *The Master*, but it represents a skillfully constructed work that keeps the consumers of literature in suspense and casts light on the less known, intuited personality of Alice James.

Reading *What Alice Knew* was an absolute pleasure, but we admit the fact that, beyond the taste of "a great imagined story", we did not receive the accurate portrait of Henry James that we expected in the first case. To sum up, Cohen satisfies the tastes for criminal history, humor and mystery in one well-crafted book, but it did not convince us that *The Master* has an individualized, meaningful and coherent personality characterized by a high degree of consciousness.

### Conclusions

After 2000, a totally strange phenomenon happened and David Lodge associated it with the *Zeitgeist*: different novels having Henry James as a character appeared all of a sudden. Up to the present moment, these are the authors that were inspired and preoccupied with portraying Henry James or encapsulating his "essence":

1. David Lodge, *Author, author*
2. Emma Tennant, *Felony. The private story of The Aspern Papers*
3. Colm Tóibín, *The Master*
4. Alan Hollinghurst, *The Line of Beauty*
5. Michiel Heyns, *The Typewriter's Tale*
6. Gore Vidal, *Empire. A Novel*
7. Paula Marantz Cohen, *What Alice Knew. A Most Curious Tale of Henry James & Jack the Ripper*

Inevitably, our curiosity increased, materializing itself into the following questions, which found their answer to a certain extent:

1. Why has Henry James, a prolific writer, with a rather dull personal life, become the character, the inspiration landmark for so many contemporary writers?

Henry James is not an ordinary writer. His work is much more than simple modernist literature, it has a specific structure and a variety of narrative techniques involved, he is the one who dedicated his entire life to writing and he reached perfection, for he invested too much passion and determination to succeed! Moreover, he is also a critic of his own works and he expressed his thoughts in *The New Edition*. He had followers and he still has today for his work is inspiring, it has a certain degree of mystery, the reader is challenged to see beyond words, to understand the psychology of characters and their acts, it is a perpetual bliss and a mind game to understand James. He is far beyond being easily understood or imitated! Therefore, the authors mentioned above perceived him as a major challenge, hoping to bring the light of James's success over their own work.

2. Can we explain the coincidence of appearance of so many books about Henry James after 2000?

No. Henry James has always been and will be an important pillar of modernism and of writing in general, therefore ... he becomes atemporal, his work simply....makes people build more in their own minds and the writers mentioned above felt the impulse to put themselves in Henry James's shoes and ....simply portray him in words.

Regarding the two questions mentioned above, David Lodge tried to solve this mystery and wrote:

“Why this sudden burgeoning of fiction that is in various ways parasitical upon the life and work of Henry James? There are several reasons. Postmodern literary novelists enjoy reworking classic texts, or revisiting famous lives, sometimes in a playful, irreverent style. This may be a sign of decadence in our literary culture, but it is a fact. The biographical novel as a genre, especially the bio-novel about an author, has grown steadily in popularity over the past 20 years or so, and it was only a matter of time before a number of writers would think of James as a possible subject; that several of us did so simultaneously was a coincidence waiting to happen. James has always been a writer's writer, provoking fascination, admiration, and what Harold Bloom called “the anxiety of influence” – no wonder we want to write about him.

But he is by no means as popular with readers. Some of the novels mentioned above have been highly praised, but none has been a bestseller, except (thanks to the Booker Prize) *The Line of Beauty*. I have heard plenty of anecdotal evidence that the very name of Henry James is a turnoff for many readers of fiction. His work has the reputation of being hard going and remote from the concerns of ordinary people. One pleasant consequence of writing *Author*, *Author* has been to receive letters from readers saying it made him seem interesting and sympathetic as a human being, encouraging them to explore his work for the first time, or to give it another try. James, who was notoriously protective of his privacy and dignity, would, if he were alive, certainly deplore the publication of every one of the novels I have mentioned, but I hope he might look leniently on mine for that reason.”<sup>6</sup>

### 3. What is the borderline between fiction and biography?

This is a difficult question. If we analyze the mentioned authors, we discover that in Paula Marantz Cohen’s work, the portrayed James assumes the role of a detective, helping his sister Alice and his brother William in the difficult task of solving the case of Jack the Ripper. We did not compare Leon Edel’s biography to the realist elements in the fictionalized biography about Henry James, but we can surely say that Hollighurst’s *Line of Beauty* does not contain too much of the biographical James or too much of James, in general, while David Lodge’s *Author*, *author* and Colm Tóibín’s *The Master* have a larger percent of biographical prose.

4. To what extent can we speak about “biographical prose”, referring to the studied works? Are they fictive or factual writings?

We cannot judge literature by applying the laws of daily human life, therefore fictive or factual elements of writing in the works having James as a character is a matter which concerns the narrative structure envisaged by each of the mentioned writers. In a nutshell, the works about James contain biographical elements, but they remain, after all, fictional literature.

### 5. What are the characteristics of the Henry James emphasized by each writer?

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<sup>6</sup> David Lodge, Essay “*Why 21st-century novelists love Henry James*”, Globe and Mail Update, Published Thursday, Jan. 13, 2011 12:55PM EST  
Last updated Thursday, Jan. 13, 2011 1:00PM EST. Last viewed on 14.05.2011 at <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/arts/books/why-21st-century-novelists-love-henry-james/article1868746/print/>

Emma Tennant creates the most authentic Henry James, dominated by worries, by the anxiety of creation, specific to a writer. The one sketched by Hollinghurst is just a name referring to Nick Guest's PhD thesis, he does not appear as a "flesh and blood" character, but only as a writer's name inside somebody else's writing. James is portrayed, in this case, only by his reflection on Nick's character, attitude, mentality. James of David Lodge is dominated by the terrible frustration of failing with *Guy Domville*.

All in all, we consider that this is only the beginning of an extended research on Henry James, for we believe that there are many more dimensions to be investigated.

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**Paula-Andreea Onofrei** is a PhD assistant at “Alexandru Ioan Cuza” University of Iași, teaching English at FEAA. She is also an assistant at “George Enescu” University of Fine Arts and a collaborator at The Centre of Foreign Languages and Lifelong Learning (UAIC). She graduated the Faculty of Letters, specialization English-French in 2006, at UAIC Iași.