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*Henry James and the Art of Auto/biography* by Mirosława  
Buchholtz (review)

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(Review)



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Mirosława Buchholtz. *Henry James and the Art of Auto/biography*. Frankfurt am Main; New York: Peter Lang Edition, 2014. 222 pp. \$64.95 (hardcover).

By Anthony Louis Marasco, *Domus Academy*

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Scholarship has long found connections between the birth of the bourgeois sense of identity and the rise of the novel as a literary genre. Curiously, one of these connections was provided by the invention of photography in 1839. The camera helped stage the new sense of identity, while offering a universally valid template for all forms of representation, a template that also seemed to validate the very spirit of the machine age: Everything could be mechanized and automated, even the production and reproduction of likenesses. And yet, in less than half a century, photography could be listed as one of the practices contributing to the ushering in of the very nemesis of bourgeois individualism, the age of the masses. Once the marketing of the Kodak No. 1 in 1888 placed the camera in the hands of millions (“You press the button, we do the rest”), what was taken to be an unmediated representation of reality became a disposable commodity without much weight or substance—exactly the kind of document the Surrealists could later use to subvert any claim to veracity the bourgeois had ever made. Posed portraits gave way to casual snapshots, and the sense of studied gravitas that had pervaded the Daguerreotype Age vanished with the vanishing of the early bourgeois sense of historical mission.

The writings of Henry James are uniquely placed to illustrate some of the paradoxes produced by the rise and fall of the volitional self. What is freedom? Is it entirely in our hands, or do we owe it to others? And if we do owe it to others, as Isabel Archer had to learn, is it still freedom? And on the perceptual level, can we know on our own? Do we not need what Charles Sanders Peirce called a “community of knowers”? But if we do need the corroboration of our peers to know anything at all, as Maggie Verver had to discover questioning Mrs. Assingham, what do we really know on our own? Is it all the product of lies and deceptions what we figure on our own?

It should not surprise that the visual played so large a role in the fiction of the period. The sense of sight is closely linked to freedom, for it suffers no barriers. To see anything we must have free access to the visual field. We no longer notice the importance of this, but in the nineteenth century people were still bound by rank, race, and gender to the social conventions limiting the freedom of sight. At the same time, while being one of the most immediate channels in the human sensorium, it is also one of the most unreliable. Sometimes we see what is not there. Or we remember seeing what we wished had been there. Visual experience is vivid but deceptive. In short, we cannot really trust our eyes—if not through intersubjective validation. This is why photography came to play such a role in the age of realism. What the camera captures is immediately real and objective. Its invention seemed to prove by inference

that any author, in any field, could be true to life by just standing unobstructed on a line of sight.

Mirosława Buchholtz's *Henry James and the Art of Auto/biography* is an excellent point of entry to those interested in using the writings of Henry James to explore the realm of shadows inhabited by the early bourgeois sense of self. This is particularly true for those interested in understanding how, in time, everything started to turn on its head.

In the first chapter the reader is quickly brought up to speed on the state of the art in biographical studies. This field has been thoroughly deconstructed in recent theory. If the goal of biography and autobiography has been traditionally to aggrandize its chosen subject, today we approach auto/biography "as a special case of historical writing" (30). We approach it, that is, with a full understanding of the fissured, porous nature of the self, always more the product of a context than of sheer volition. In the second chapter we are educated on the state of Jamesian auto/biographical studies, moving from the monumentalization performed by Leon Edel to the more recent acts of creative defacement performed by a number of scholars and authors of fiction. Buchholtz believes that these more recent entries in the literature exemplify what Paul de Man meant when he stressed "the impossibility of closure and of totalization (that is the imposing of coming into being) of all textual systems made up of tropological substitutions" (qtd. in Buchholtz 32). Once this is on the table, in the third chapter Buchholtz takes into account James's own autobiography "as a special case of historical writing" (32). James's goal in writing his autobiographical works might have been "to achieve or consolidate his own . . . subjectivity." But seen from the right angle, what he put together was less a monument than it was a self-effacing diagram of the contextual forces dirempting subjectivity at the time. It is in the fourth and final chapter that the question of photography is brought forth. In this chapter, Buchholtz brings to the fore the profoundly unsettling effect being photographed had on James, from the earliest Daguerreotype we own to the last journalistic portraits he allowed to be taken of Henry James the author of fiction. At this point the reader is ready to delve into the primary sources to catch the paradoxes generated by the epistemics of the early bourgeois sense of identity. Self, vision, and literary form mix in James in a way that is paradigmatic of the whole trajectory of realism, from its early triumphant birth to its later self-questioning phase. A real treasure trove of riddles and puzzles for those who take literature to be indeed "a special case of historical writing."