

## **Biography and the Personal Name: *William Wetmore Story and His Friends***

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I start with the proposal that we may usefully speak of a biography, as well as a novel or story, as having in Jamesian terms its *donnée*; but we shall have to think a little about what we would mean by this. What does the word itself signify? James's borrowing from the French is a past participle working as a substantive: 'the given'. The *donnée* of a literary work is what the reader accepts 'as a given', its set-up or proposition; but it is also what the author found or was given, an origin in fact or anecdote. This second aspect appears more plainly in non-fictional writing, where what is given persists more or less visibly and inimitably in the completed text. The fictional *donnée*, as we meet it in James's notebooks and in his Prefaces to the New York Edition, is most often the brief record of a human situation suggesting possible actions and developments. Works of non-fiction begin like this too, with situations and assumptions; but whereas James's fictional *données* come to him essentially as ideas, their non-fictional counterparts come also as words and forms of words. We might ask, what is the biographer given that he cannot get rid of or get away from? One answer – especially for the writer of a Life-and-Letters biography – would be, documents. We may think here of the distinction James draws in the Preface to *The Aspern Papers* between the 'historian' and the 'dramatist' (or, the non-fictional and fictional temperaments); the first wanting 'more documents than he can really use', and the second 'only [...] more liberties than he can really take' (*LCFW* 1175). But another, more compact answer to my question would be, names, above all personal names. The name of the subject is the unavoidable 'given' of biography; it is the word that most dominates the biographical text, conventionally supplying at least a part of its title and appearing on many, even on most of its pages. Although it is thus constantly before the reader's eyes, still in the usual course of things it is hardly noticed *as a word*, only as the index of a person. What I want to begin to consider here is the opportunity that arises for a writer when the name of the biographical subject *is* a word – as in the case of the American lawyer-turned-sculptor William Wetmore Story, whose biography James published in 1903.

If I state that *William Wetmore Story and His Friends* is organised structurally and rhetorically about a deliberate play with the word *story*, it may seem that it is I who am taking a liberty. James's ways with

*story* have not been noted by any critic I have read, though a few have made free with the word themselves, and entitled their articles on this work ‘A Story of Reading’, or ‘Telling His Own Story’, or ‘Keeping Story Out of History’<sup>1</sup>. Better, perhaps, to hypothesise that the pertinent liberty is James’s own (one of the liberties the Jamesian dramatist only wants to take), and to show something of how it inflects his writing of biography.

Several coincidences put this word unavoidably in James’s path in writing the life of William Story. There is, to start with, the too-manifest appropriateness of the name Story to this person whose name it was: a narrative sculptor and author in verse and prose, an expatriate American in Rome residing in what James calls ‘a painted and storied palace’ (*WWS* i 348), in Story’s case the Palazzo Barberini. (*Storied* in this instance remarks both the architectural form of the *palazzo*, which James adopts as a structural model for one of his chapters, and its historical associations.) Conversely, there is the problem that James considered William Story a mediocre artist who had enjoyed an uneventful life, and for these reasons felt him to be a poor subject for biography. The paradox of a person with this name having had in James’s estimation *no story*<sup>2</sup> cannot be voiced in the published Life for reasons of ordinary politeness, but it flickers through James’s repeated complaints to friendly correspondents both whilst he is at work and after publication – as for instance in his letter of 19 November 1903 to Henry Adams, a measured, amused response to Adams’s prickly report of the discomfort he experienced in reading *William Wetmore Story*. ‘The truth is’, James writes here, ‘that *any* retraced story of bourgeois lives (lives other than great lives of “action” – *et encore!*) throws a chill upon the scene, the time, the subject, the small mapped-out facts’. The wit of James’s emphasis at ‘*any* retraced story’ is in its implied nod to the particular retraced story Adams has just read and complained of, and thus in its taking the opportunity offered by the pun on Story’s name to extrapolate from a particular biography to ‘the art of the biographer’ in general (*CHJHA* 62).

Just this fact of a relation between the particular and the general provides James with a way around the problems of his biographical subject. James first uses the word *story* in *William Wetmore Story* not as a name but as a common noun; he does this early in his first chapter, in reference to ‘The Precursors’ – those early American travellers and sojourners in Europe ‘without whose initiation we settled partakers of the greater extension should still be waiting for our own’: ‘We must not of course overdo it,’ James writes, ‘but

as they got theirs [their initiation], often, in ways that were hard, I like to miss, in order to do them justice, not a step in the general story' (*WWS* i 7-8). It has been remarked – albeit not quite in these terms – that James attends more happily to this general story of transatlantic relations than to the life of the particular and eponymous William Wetmore Story. When this individual is named for the first time four pages later, it is as a representative of his pre-Civil War, New England generation, and its relation to Europe: in beginning to write Story's life, James is moved to consider 'the rather markedly typical case associated with his name' (*WWS* i 12). The phrasing here invites the observation that, more than most other names, Story is general as well as particular, denotes a case as well as an individual; since it is not only the name of all other people called Story but also the noun *story*. The personal name thus becomes for James, by a turn of the hand if not by sleight of hand, a means of effecting a shift from biography proper to biographically inflected cultural history.

It continues to offer him ways of addressing other subjects than the biographical one. The word *story* was established in James's critical vocabulary long before the question of the biography arose, and at least as early as 'The Art of Fiction' (1884), but it receives a new access of thought from the enforced self-consciousness of this exercise. In the first of two important passages in *William Wetmore Story*, catching on to a name in a memorandum written by Story's wife, James recalls his own dissatisfaction with the table-talk of Abraham Hayward, heard in London 'considerably more than twenty years ago' (*WWS* ii 203). Hayward embodies for James the English notion that the best talk consists of 'the delivery and establishment of the greatest possible number of *facts*, or in other words the unwinding, with or without comment or qualification, of the longest possible chain of "stories"' (*WWS* ii 204). James's projection of an alternative 'school of talk' that should allow for 'some play of paradox, irony, thought, imagination, some wandering wind of fancy, some draught [...] of the *idea*' (*WWS* ii 205) anticipates the distinction drawn in the New York Edition Prefaces between the anecdotal 'germ' of a fiction and its subsequent developments – both of which may be spoken of as *stories*.

The 'story,' in fine, in this other order – and surely so more worthy of the name – would have been the intellectual reaction from the circumstance presented, an exhibition interesting, amusing, vivid, dramatic, in proportion to the agility, or to the sincerity, of the intellect engaged.

(WWS ii 205)

There is a splendid audacity in that ‘more worthy of the name’, for the ‘name’ in this case is also the name of the biographical subject. James has already isolated ““stories”” and ““story”” within inverted commas; and he will sound the word *as* a name, with deliberated casualness, in the sentence immediately following this passage, the first of a new paragraph: ‘Aids of the causal [*sic*]<sup>3</sup> sort I have just gathered from Mrs Story project, at all events, but faint shadows over the field of the pleasant Roman years’ (ii 205). We should note by the way that William Story and his contemporaries use the word *story* uncritically, to mean a simple anecdote or tale, and with a touching blankness about its being also his name: the pun is never made in the documents James reproduces. James’s preparedness to make use of the word stands by contrast as an enactment of the play of thought he recommends here; it is his ‘intellectual reaction to the circumstance presented’, and a development of his biographical *donnée*.

A second ‘theoretical’ passage likewise anticipates the Prefaces, and proposes a further discrimination. The occasion is James’s recollection of his acquaintance with General Sir Edward Bruce Hamley, the British author of *Lady Lee’s Widowhood* (1853); in particular a memory of Newport, Rhode Island in 1865, of James listening to a young friend of his Temple cousins relate how she had met the then Colonel Hamley in England and argued with him about the Civil War. The scene that passed between Hamley and the girl plainly interested James on this occasion. He does not reproduce it now in detail, just sketches it in with a military metaphor (saying he ‘liked to think’ of Hamley ‘as perhaps retreating before his brisk adversary in no too good order’ (WWS ii 230)); but we may guess at its dynamic by analogy with the fictional scenes James was subsequently to write between bright patriotic American girls and gallant, amused, but stiff and disconcertable English or Europeanised American men – international episodes of which this is offered as a type. He remarks of his fictional imagination, early and late: ‘Such were to remain the consequences of the imaginative habit – that trifles light as air (I leave my impression for that) only had to offer an appearance of interest to become absurdly concrete, in which form they constituted figures, pictures, stories’ (WWS ii 230)<sup>4</sup>. We are not now reading one of *those* ‘stories’; but what we are reading is certainly a story, as James at once acknowledges, attempting to curtail his digression: ‘I prolong more than

I had meant my very small story' (*WWS* ii 230). This 'very small story' is a personal recollection, an episode in what James calls 'the history of our impressions' (*WWS* ii 230); but since he remembers his Newport impression as subject to an instant imaginative development that constituted it as a figure or picture or story, his recollection of its history may be justly spoken of as the story of *that* story. The formula adumbrated here turns up in James's Preface to *The Ambassadors* as 'the story of one's story itself' (*LCFW* 1309); the Prefaces' autobiographical stories of James's stories make up a composite history of his imagination<sup>5</sup>. And we may look forward again from this passage to James's memoirs, whose narrative method unfolds from the retrospective digressions in *William Wetmore Story* and in a manner confounds biography and autobiography.

For all these appropriations of the word to his own uses, James's relation to *story* does have a directly biographical aspect – one that concerns his writing in the Life-and-Letters genre, with the possibilities that form uniquely affords (as Christopher Ricks has shown)<sup>6</sup> of juxtaposing given words. We see James here achieving for biography the status of 'poetry', as poetry is generously and exactly defined in the Preface to *The Golden Bowl*. James argues in this Preface that 'any literary form conceived in the light of "poetry"' must be read aloud to be adequately appreciated.

The essential property of such a form as that is to give out its finest and most numerous secrets, and to give them out most gratefully, under the closest pressure – which is of course the pressure of the attention articulately *sounded*. (*LCFW* 1339)

We should remember that James dictated *William Wetmore Story and His Friends* to his second typist, Mary Weld – an origin in audible speech that may be imagined as favouring attention to this '*sounded*' dimension of the text, indeed as making certain coincidences unignorable. I would suggest accordingly that the finest secrets of this literary form are the effects of rhyme and assonance James manages around the word *story*.

The emotional range James achieves by these means best appears from what he does with the fact that the Storys' first years in Italy (1848-54) coincided with frequent appearances in Florence and Rome by

the actress Adelaide Ristori. James's handling of the near-coincidence of their names is matter at first for a pleasantly envious evocation of a time before his own first acquaintance with Italy. 'They were always seeing Ristori', he writes (*WWS* i 116), noting her as a familiar figure in the texture of their early experiences; and as a marker of passing time, as he casts forward twenty years to his own memory of seeing her – 'even then no longer young' – on the same stage, at the Teatro Cocomero in Florence (*WWS* i 117). Her name ideally fits her for this recurring role, as James joyously registers: 'The great Ristori is [...] by this time restored to them, and they applaud her first appearance, for the season, in Rome' (*WWS* i 132). The resounding chime of *Ristori* with *restored* is slyly amplified two sentences later and *à propos* of another matter, in acknowledgement of a liberty that is, so to say, there for the taking: 'Story, in a vivid letter, as we shall see, makes ingeniously much of this' (*WWS* i 133).

This happy cluster of echoes prepares for a simpler, sadder one 150 pages later, which makes less of the pun but achieves more with it: 'the Storys were restored to 93 Piazza di Spagna' (*WWS* i 285). Again one blinks at this rather; but in context it is the reverse of a provocation. The Storys had been away from Rome on account of an illness of their two elder children which resulted in the death of their six-year-old son, Joseph. James's sentence reads:

Concerning the early part of that winter in Rome and the remainder of it, after the dark cloud had discharged itself and the Storys were restored to 93 Piazza di Spagna, where they were then living, a pleasant legend of kind, distinguished visitors still survives, one of them incomparably benevolent to a languid little girl who needed amusement and who was to be for ever grateful. (*WWS* i 285)

The benevolent visitor is Hans Christian Andersen and the little girl the surviving child, Edith Story; that 'pleasant legend' is of course itself a *story*. On the next page James reports a children's party at which Andersen read 'The Ugly Duckling' and Robert Browning 'The Pied Piper of Hamelin': 'which led to the formation of a grand march through the spacious Barberini apartment, with Story doing his best on a flute in default of bagpipes' (*WWS* i 286). These improvised domestic theatricals are a homely revival of Ristori's performances four years earlier. Further, we may imagine that the ending of Browning's poem – the disappearance of Hamelin's children; and the one remaining boy, whose loneliness is the mirror image of

a bereavement – might have acted on that occasion as it does now in James’s allusion, as a chance re-enactment of loss and a commemoration of what could not be restored. The Storys’ son was at the time of his death, James writes, ‘the most precious of their possessions and ever afterwards to be remembered as such. No person or thing, in their life, was again to have an equal value’ (*WWS* i 284). James’s arrangement of echoes acknowledges this human value, and with great subtlety and sympathy returns to the simplest biographical sense of the word he elsewhere so refines upon; tells a story about other people.

#### Abbreviations – works by Henry James

*CHJHA* – *The Correspondence of Henry James and Henry Adams, 1877-1914*, ed. George Monteiro (Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University Press, 1992)

*LCFW* – *Literary Criticism: French Writers, Other European Writers, The Prefaces to the New York Edition*, ed. Leon Edel and Mark Wilson (New York: The Library of America, 1984)

*N* – *The Notebooks of Henry James*, ed. F. O. Matthiessen and Kenneth B. Murdoch (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1955)

*SLHJEG* – *Selected Letters of Henry James to Edmund Gosse 1882-1915: A Literary Friendship*, ed. Rayburn S. Moore (Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University Press, 1988)

*WWS* – *William Wetmore Story and His Friends*, 2 vols. (Edinburgh and London: Blackwood, 1903)

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<sup>1</sup>Sheila Teahan, 'My Sculptor / My Self: A Story of Reading', *Henry James Review*, 23 (2002), 246-54; Marnie Jones, 'Telling His Own Story: Henry James's *William Wetmore Story*', *Biography: An Interdisciplinary Quarterly*, 10 (1987), 241-56; Bruce Redford, 'Keeping Story out of History: Henry James's Biographical *tour de force*', *American Literature*, 57 (1985), 215-25.

<sup>2</sup>I borrow the phrasing 'had ... no story' from James's notes of 15 February 1899 for the short story published in 1902 as 'The Story In It'. In his notebook James refers to this fiction with a French formula (the story contains a debate about adultery in the modern French novel): '*L'honnête femme – n'a pas de roman story*' (N 275); which comes out in English (with an instructive awkwardness of repetition) as *the 'A decent woman has no story' story*. The period of the tale's gestation and composition (May 1898-February 1900) overlapped with James's early researches for *William Wetmore Story and His Friends* and his visit to Rome in the early summer of 1899 to look at the Story family papers. I would suggest that the argument James stages in 'The Story In It' around what constitutes interest ('story') in fiction can be read as a preliminary sketch of the biographical project he was considering at this time, a project made problematic by a scarcity of usable documentary materials and by the placidity of William Story's life; thus, both tale and biography are responses to the question of how one might see a story where none appears to be.

<sup>3</sup>The typographical error is noted by James, with distress, in a letter of 2 October 1903 to Edmund Gosse: 'My principal "last 6 weeks' news" is that my Story vols. (which I am glad you received) contain a horrid misprint somewhere, which I couldn't correct in your copy – a dreadful "causal" for "casual"; also that, through an accident, I had to send you a vol. 1st that I had cut (one I had kept for myself,) instead of a fresh one. But these are details – as well as the fact that there are 2 or 3 provoking little misplacements & omissions of punctuation – perpetrated *after* my last proof had gone back right. Find & correct the beastly "causal" – I only spied it & shuddered & closed the vol. in terror lest I shld. find another, & didn't dare to look at it again – so didn't heed where it is. *Basta*' (SLHJEG 205).

<sup>4</sup>It is characteristic of James's reverberant late manner that in professing to drop a possible development – 'trifles light as air (I leave my impression for that)' – he should be holding it out to the reader still in the form of an allusion, in this case to *Othello*: 'Trifles light as air / Are to the jealous confirmations strong / As proofs of holy writ' (*Othello*, ed. E. A. J. Honigmann (Walton-on-Thames: Thomas Nelson & Sons, 1997, repr. 1998), III iii 325-27). To follow this one up properly would take us beyond the limits of the present paper, though the concerns activated here in the interplay between source-text and allusion are pertinent to all of James's late non-fiction – the imaginative appropriation of material (so to say, the handkerchief as *donnée*), the definition of jealousy, the value of the apparently trifling.

<sup>5</sup>This phrase comes in the Preface to *The Portrait of a Lady*: 'if one could do so subtle, if not so monstrous, a thing as to write the history of the growth of one's imagination' (LCFW 1076).

<sup>6</sup>See Ricks's 1991 Clark Lectures on 'Victorian Lives' ('E. C. Gaskell's Charlotte Brontë', 'Froude's Carlyle', 'Tennyson's Tennyson'), as reprinted in *Essays in Appreciation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996; repr. Oxford University Press, 1998).