

# 'TALENT OFFENDS, GENIUS TERRIFIES': MYTH AND PERSONA IN THE BIOGRAPHICAL RESEARCH ON CHRISTOPHER LANGFORD JAMES

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## ABSTRACT

*Christopher Langford James (1952 – 2008) was a Zimbabwean-born composer, orchestrator and pianist, whose style conflated traditional European musical textures with southern African instrumentation, rhythms, and harmonies. His compositions include works such as Four Portraits for Pianoforte in Four Movements (1982), Songs of Lamentation and Remonstrance (1985), Images of Africa (1987), and Paradise Regained (1999). While my research on James's life and music has uncovered multiple angles for critical inquiry, the dominant narrative that emerged from interviews with his family, and discussions with colleagues, was that of mental illness.*

*This article argues that mental illness – while being a very real condition experienced by James – can simultaneously be understood as doing persona work. Through the intersecting frameworks of persona studies and life writing, this article critically interrogates the understanding of stereotypical concepts of mental illness within the construct of what Kim Barbour terms 'artistness'. Through critical examination of how mental illness is understood and interpreted as a central construction of artistness, this article speaks to the complexity of the construction of James's biography, and how the narrative performance of James's mental illness can be understood within the framework of persona studies.*

## KEY WORDS

Artistness; Persona; Christopher James; Biography

*... the really important thing about myth is its character of a retrospective, ever-present, live actuality ... neither a fictitious story nor an account of a dead past; it is a statement of a bigger reality still partially alive.*

(Malinowski 1954, pp. 102-103)

In August of 2015, my doctoral supervisor Stephanus Muller and I travelled around South Africa, interviewing Christopher James's various family members, friends, and colleagues. I had made an error in calculating the timing of our schedule, and as a result we found ourselves in Pretoria on the last day of our fieldwork, with a few hours to spare before our red-eye flight back to Cape Town. Pretoria had been where James had experienced the worst of his psychotic episodes, and he had spent time in two psychiatric hospitals in the city. We decided to occupy

our time by visiting Weskoppies, the public hospital where James had been treated. Our decision for this visit was to investigate what procedures we could follow within the ethical boundaries of research and patient care, to acquire some form of firm diagnosis on James's condition.

We arrived at Weskoppies just after lunch on Friday, 14 August. Muller commented to me that the institution's position outside of the city, but next to one of Pretoria's townships where the apartheid government had forcibly placed black citizens, was indicative of the way the apartheid government saw the status of the mentally ill. Upon our arrival we were shocked to find that there were no staff on duty – medical or administrative – and we were left to wander the grounds without any form of guidance or supervision. The gloomy buildings, seemingly abandoned in advance of a weekend's revelries, heightened to me a key aspect of critically engaging with James's biography: that although James's artist persona was performed through the myth of the tortured artist, this persona had its locus in tangibility. Under my feet I felt the linoleum floors of the institution where James had been committed, I felt the physicality of the reality of James's illness. That while the James persona was performative, that it was formed through mythic tropes surrounding how we understand "artistness", it was also a life lived by an individual who was once very real.

Christopher Langford James (1952–2008) was a composer born in Zimbabwe (then Rhodesia) who spent most of his life in South Africa. His compositional voice displays a dexterous versatility ranging from small single-instrument works, to large-scale orchestral compositions. While James's compositional output is by no means insignificant within the South African Western Art music landscape, my own research was created within a dearth of scholarly engagement with his work, meaning my construction of biographical sketches relied heavily on archival fragments and interviews with family, friends, and colleagues. While my research on James's life and music has uncovered multiple angles for critical inquiry, the dominant narrative that emerged from interviews with his family, and discussions with colleagues, was that of mental illness. From 2015 to 2017, I embarked on research which involved creating – primarily through archival sources – the first ever biographical account and extensive musicological discussion of James and his compositions.

This article places at its core the construction of what Kim Barbour (2014) terms "artistness". Through close examination of archival artefacts housed in the Christopher James Collection stored at the Documentation Centre for Music (DOMUS) at Stellenbosch University, this article presents a critical discussion of how James's artistness persona was enacted. By viewing these artefacts within persona studies literature and the context of James's life, this article provides new critical perspectives not only on James's life, but also on how mental illness contributes to the formation of the artist persona. This is not to say that mental illness is not a real ailment experienced by James, but that, in the context of artistness, mental illness does persona work. Therefore the presence of mental illness within a composer's biography contributes to the enactment and interpretation of their artist persona. Through critical examination of how mental illness is performed and interpreted as a central construction of James's artistness, this article speaks to the complexity of the position of mental illness within the conceptualisation of James's biography, and how James's mental illness can be understood as a contributor to interpretations of his artist persona.

This article also considers the theoretical intersections between artistness persona and myth, and how these two discourses not only share similar intellectual frameworks and foci, but that myth forms a part of artistness persona. By considering myth as a critical intellectual lens through which to contextualise archival artefacts from the James Collection, this article considers how the discourse of persona studies aligns with that of myth, and how these dual

theoretical positions can be productively utilised within biographical constructions of artists' lives.

## MENTAL HEALTH

Mental illness constituted an indelible presence in James's life. In researching James's mental health, multiple terms were used by James himself as well as his family, resulting in a lack of a precise diagnosis. Christopher James's mother, Marjorie James, stated both in her interview with Stephanus Muller in 2010 and in her interview with me in 2015, that her son had bipolar disorder, which he had self-diagnosed in his early high school years. Chris James's daughter, Melissa, stated that she preferred not to give her father's condition a label, while his ex-wife Tina described him as having both bipolar disorder and schizophrenia, and that his condition was complex, and not simply a case of extreme highs and extreme lows. This lack of concrete diagnosis is also evident in James's letters, in which he described his illness as "not schizophrenic but...bi-polar disorder (manic depression)" (C James 1999b) and as a "schizo-affective bipolar disorder" (C James 2006).

What is known was that Chris James did have mental health issues, and that he had spent time in psychiatric hospitals in Pretoria, having been admitted to both Denmar and Weskoppies. In his diaries, James made regular notes of his admission to and discharge from these institutions. In both private and public spheres James was open about his illness, and despite the differing opinion of how to label his condition (or whether it should be labelled at all), his family have displayed a similar openness and honesty in the years since his death.

In a letter he wrote to his doctoral supervisor Scott Huston, dated 3 December 1986, James speaks candidly about his illness, saying: "I've actually just had a serious nervous breakdown from which I am still recovering". He showed similar candour in a letter to David Smith on 4 December 1996: "Thereafter I suffered a major nervous breakdown and have still not recovered fully after *UShaka*". This candour was also present in his letters of a more professional nature. On 20 April 2003 he wrote to his friend Christopher Ballantine, and after appealing for a position at the University of KwaZulu Natal where Ballantine was a professor, continued: "Regarding the schizo-affective illness I suffer from, I have made an almost complete recovery from my last major breakdown (in 1995 and 1996)".

Even in his most public forms of communication, his compositions, he declared his vulnerability. Titles such as *Four Portraits* (in its original title of *Suite Schizophrenia*), as well as *Three Tranquilisers* for piano, reveal James's illness to the world. The title page of James's symphonic tone poem *Paradise Regained*<sup>1</sup>, reads: "The work was created under difficult personal (particularly mental health) circumstances and is a tribute to South Africans of all races and creeds for their resilience in the face of misfortune".

Considering the openness of both my subject and interlocutors, I was able to speak with similar openness and candour about James's mental illness in my research (and continue to invoke this privileged position as I continue to publish on James's life). Yet I felt it essential to be careful in the way I approached James's illness, and for his illness to not be the only or predominant focal point of my research on James. Mulvihill and Swaninathan (2017, p. 1) describe life writing as storytelling, and there is impetus on the storyteller therefore to be mindful of "the powerful agency vested in the meaning-making storyteller, who must also understand that they are a story-creator first before they are a storyteller". In committing to create a life-and-works study about someone suffering from these ailments, careful consideration has to be given with regard to what information is made public in the research and how it is done, and what information needs to remain private which serves no function

other than revelation. These considerations inaugurate the perennial questions about intrusion, respectfulness, protection and the way in which these ethical considerations interact with the selection of material.

## **PERSONA STUDIES AND ‘ARTISTNESS’**

In considering persona, Moore, Barbour, and Lee argue that the conceptualisation and curation of persona is performative (2017, p. 4). Persona can be understood less as an individual expression of self, but rather how the individual constitutes their identity within a public space or perspective (Marshall, Moore & Barbour 2019). P. David Marshall describes this as “an investigation of the presentation of self” (Marshall 2014, p. 166). This public construction of self therefore becomes the way in which we wish to be considered to the world, and the creation of this persona is cultivated through decisive actions of the individual.

Persona studies is described by Fairchild and Marshall as a “mutable concept”, allowing it the intellectual dexterity to be utilised in a variety of scholarly discourses, including music studies (Fairchild & Marshall 2019, p. 1). While the disciplinary boundaries of this field are in flux and broadening, of particular interest to my work on Christopher James is Kim Barbour’s theoretical construction of “artistness”. Barbour’s use of this term engages with “recognisable tropes and typologies that fit within established notions of what it means to be an artist” (Barbour 2014, p. 2) and how these characteristics are expressed, performed and interpreted. Artistness is therefore “the performance of a specific role: that of the artist” (Barbour 2014, p. 5). By conceptualising the performance of artistness through a historico-culturally informed understanding of what it is to be an artist, Barbour’s notion of artistness provides an intellectual lens through which to explore the persona of the artist, and how this is performed.

The notion of artistness, or “the quality of being an artist” (Barbour 2014, p. 5), is informed by Erving Goffman’s 1959 book *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. The performative nature of the self here is the dual presentation of fulfilling a role on the one hand, and simultaneously behaving in line with societal perceptions of one who performs said role. In the case of Christopher James therefore, the performance of his artistness is both the composing of music, and behaving in a way that society understands a composer to behave. Thus “the performance of artistness is the performance of a socially constructed role, made up of identifiable elements drawn from historically grounded discourse of what it means to be an artist” (Marshall, Moore & Barbour 2019, p. 134). Throughout this article, Barbour’s construction of artistness, as well as those performative characteristics that comprise artistness, will be used as interpretive tools to critically consider James’s own performance of artistness within the biographical paradigm.

## **ARTISTNESS AND MENTAL ILLNESS**

If, as Marshall, Moore and Barbour (2019) argue, artistness is a conflation of a series of “identifiable elements”, consideration should be taken into identifying these elements and considering them critically. By constructing James’s biography through the lens of artistness, I argue that mental illness can be considered as one of the elements that make up artistness. That is to say: mental illness can be understood as a part of the construction and enactment of the artist persona. Such a position could create discomfort, particularly for those who experienced James’s illness first-hand as of course mental illness is not only a part of an artist persona, but also is experientially real. It is a lived experience that – certainly in the case of James – caused pain and formed the basis of immense struggle. My position here is not to deny the reality of

mental illness, but rather to view it being simultaneously a real condition and experience, as well as being part of the artistic persona construction.

In considering mental illness as a lens through which one interprets both biographical narratives and creative works, Mary Elene Wood's book *Life Writing and Schizophrenia: Encounters at the Edge of Meaning*, provides valuable critical discourse. Wood examines the literary output of New Zealand author Janet Frame, who herself had spent a period of eight years in and out of institutions. This critical examination of Frame's life and writing illuminates what Wood terms "The public fascination with mental illness" (Wood, 2013, p. 177), and how the narrative intersection of artist and mental illness is "...very compelling" (Wood 2013, p. 177). Yet Wood is critical of this fascination, and argues that it is a delimiting approach to critical biographical considerations, stating that this: "reading of her [Frame's] 'condition' gave her work a certain charisma, but it also limited expectations of her as a writer and restricted interpretations of her work" (Wood 2013, p. 174).

This singular interpretation that reduces creative work to instances of mental illness has concerned me throughout the duration of my research into Christopher James. Of course, James's illness was part of him, and this article certainly does not argue for a Victorian prudishness towards this obvious reality. However, to simply define James by his mental illness is to stifle potentially interesting and accurate ways of understanding his life and reading his music.

It seems productive to me that the above is a position of understanding James's expression of his artistness persona. Because the notion of artistness is in itself a construction of a series of intersectional overlapping aspects of identity, mental illness is one of a potential of arrays of performative aspects that inform an artist's persona. In the case of Chris James, mental illness has been centred within this article as the interpretive springboard in reaction largely to its centrality within my interviews. Yet I argue that mental illness – in conjunction with other enmeshed myths of what it is to be an artist – informs and shapes James's performance of his own artistness persona.

## **MENTAL ILLNESS AS PART OF JAMES'S ARTISTNESS PERSONA**

If "artists perform artistness" (Barbour 2014, p. 45), how did James's mental illness contribute to the performance and reception of his artistness? Of particular importance here is the potentially uncomfortable proposition that mental illness is both a real condition and experience, and part of an artist persona. Within the discourse of persona studies, Moore, Barbour and Lee (2017, p. 4) write that: "The public performance of the self is neither entirely 'real' nor entirely 'fictional'. The accomplishment of performativity means that a persona connects together and meshes all the various characteristics that are staged and presented in the everyday and intended to interact with others". Within the construction of a biographical narrative, there is certainly a form of duty on the part of the biographer to ensure the accuracy of their research. Within the interrogation of persona, factual accuracy is less of importance, as such an approach considers what can be deduced about the artist persona through the telling of anecdotes, whether accurate or not.

For an example of this, one can look at an event in James's life. In 1986 James was hospitalized in a government-run psychiatric hospital in Pretoria, called Weskoppies, following a severe nervous breakdown mere days after the birth of his daughter. After James attempted to escape, he was placed in a high-security ward of the hospital where he was not allowed pens or pencils. In my correspondence with his ex-wife Tina, she stated that James had taken to using

burnt matches in lieu of pens or pencils to sketch musical ideas on the wall of his room at Weskoppies.

In unpacking this anecdote, there are a number of interpretive layers, many of which feed into tropes of understanding of the artist with mental illness. Such interpretations do not necessarily hinge on accuracy, even though there is no reason to believe that Tina James is being dishonest about her husband's behaviour. However, this story lines up with stereotypical perceptions of artists with mental illness as being unable to control their desire to create and who go to extremes to ensure an ability to create. This has implications on the way others view the artist, and additionally impacts the artist's perception not only of themselves, but also of the notion that the creative impulse is one that transcends the creator's immediate scenario and surroundings. In a letter to his father on 17 June 2001, James states that he believes composition is for him a "divinely given" gift.

James also displays a dexterity in using certain tropes of the tortured artist in his own thinking about his work and his place within South African and global music history. On 6 November 2001, nearly fifteen years after he and Tina divorced, he described the divorce to his mother as "probably the most tragic divorce in the history of music" (C James 2001a). In other letters, he attributes the reason for the divorce as Tina being "tired of living with a composer" (C James 1989). Here James utilises the trope of the misunderstood artist, impossible to put up with due to his behaviour. Again, this is based in some truth. Tina James described living with Chris as difficult, not due to him being a composer, but rather due to his erratic use of his anti-psychotic medication.

James arguably aligns himself most notably to the historical trope of mentally unwell composers in the letter he wrote to Marjorie on 4 February 1999, macabrely nine years to the day before his passing:

*As you know, Mother, we composers have very controversial lives, particularly if we suffer from some emotional and mental instability. Just remember how much Beethoven, Schumann and Tschaikovsky (sic) suffered, not to mention the way in which Wagner, Berlioz and Debussy suffered. Also, as you are well aware Vincent van Gogh suffered enormously from being so badly misunderstood by his generation. (C James 1999b)*

In this letter, James lists composers whose life stories are linked almost inextricably to illness and suffering. The inclusion of van Gogh – the only artist in James's list who is not a composer – is itself equally telling, as van Gogh's struggles with mental illness are widely known. Here James links his own issues with mental health with those who hold prestigious places within their artistic canons, further performing the trope of the tortured artist unappreciated in his lifetime.

In critically considering these archival artefacts and biographical sketches from my research into James, what can be seen is that James's mental illness is linked to his self-perception, as well as how others perceive him, as an artist. James's letters seem to make this link quite explicit, and it thus seems productive to consider that James's mental illness forms one of an array of "identifiable elements" that form his persona of artistness. In the context of James's life, his mental illness is doing persona work. This provides an interesting extension on Barbour's notion of artistness, as notions of artist persona continued to be grappled with in the persona studies discourse.

## MYTH AND THE ARTIST

I would argue that, in conceptualizing and, in a sense, codifying the “identifiable elements” which make up an artist persona, critical engaging with the notion of myth is productive, as this discourse engages with similar territory as that of persona studies, but in differing ways.

Barbour also makes this link, arguing that artistness is informed by a discourse of the “myth of the artist” (Barbour 2014, p. 5). Thus, in understanding artistness, it seems pertinent to consider the notion of myth, and how this is applied to artists. It is important to understand that, as with our usage of artistness as an interpretive tool, the myths used as theoretical frameworks are not based in untruths, but often founded on a degree of fact (Bain 2005; Midgley 2003; Finnegan 2006; Samuel & Thompson 1990). Luisa Passerini describes myth and history as being two poles, the first involving stories that are more metaphoric and the other, stories with a clearer grounding in analytical fact. Oral history, Passerini argues, moves between these two poles, often distorting their mutual exclusivity, and thus has the ability to link the mythical to biographical frameworks of individual lives (Passerini 1990, p. 45).

Roland Barthes (1972, p. 107) described myth as “a system of communication”, and Mary Midgley (2003, p. 1) wrote that myths are: “networks of powerful symbols that suggest particular ways of interpreting the world”. This argument is also made by Alistair Thomson (1990). Yet myth-making is not only a tool used by one person to understand another, it is also a tool for understanding ourselves, a marker for our own self-identity (Finnegan 2006; Samuel & Thompson 1990). Thus, if myth-making is an interpretive framework used *internally* and *externally* to understand a person, it can be seen as productive for the biographical scholar to analyse life stories through the lens of myth: “Any life story, written or oral, more or less dramatically, is in one sense a personal mythology” (Samuel & Thompson 1990, p. 10). Much like these personal mythologies, persona relies on the creation of artistness and the ways it is interpreted by the people to whom this is communicated. By understanding that both myth and persona play simultaneously intersecting and interlocking roles in these mechanisms of understanding, we are able to attain a deeper understanding of the subject. Jean Peneff writes:

*The mythical element in life stories is the pre-established framework within which individuals explain their personal history: the mental construct which, starting from the memory of individual facts which would otherwise appear incoherent and arbitrary, goes on to arrange and interpret them and so turn them into biographical events. (Peneff 1990, p. 36)*

As with persona, one can understand myth in this context as being performative, a mechanism through which to understand the complexity of the individual. Additionally, both discourses reject the notion that seeking truth or untruth within their respective frameworks is productive. In the case of myth, “it is too simple to dismiss such images as ‘fantasy’, for they have their reality in people’s lived experience” (Finnegan 2006, p. 180) and “[t]he key step ... is not the crude weighing of ‘myth’ against ‘reality’” (Samuel & Thompson 1990, p. 14). Thus, we see two discourses with similar foci: how the presentation of the self, and the interpretation of a life, is performative, collective, and functions in the spaces between truth and untruth.

Those historical figures involved in creative endeavours are arguably the most susceptible to interpretation through myth, in particular through attempts to read and understand their work. As previously stated, to embody an artist persona is itself performative. The Barthesian myth of the artist extends beyond the idea of the artist as seemingly transcending of the fleshy confines of the human body, and engages with an understanding of the artist who is perennially engaged with their craft, even when seemingly not actively involved:

*What proves the wonderful singularity of the writer, is that during the holiday in question, which he takes alongside factory workers and shop assistance, he unlike them does not stop, if not actually working, at least producing. So that he is a false worker, and a false holiday-maker as well. One is writing his memoirs, another is correcting proofs, yet another is preparing for his next book. And he who does nothing confesses it as truly paradoxical behaviour, an avant-garde exploit, which only someone of exceptional independence can afford to flaunt. One then realizes, thanks to this kind of boast, that it is quite 'natural' that the writer should write all the time and in all situations. First, this treats literary production as a sort of involuntary secretion, which is taboo, since it escapes human determinations: to speak more decorously, the writer is prey of an inner god who speaks at all times, without bothering, tyrant that he is, with the holidays of his medium. Writers are on holiday, but their Muse is awake, and gives birth non-stop. (Barthes 1972, p. 28).*

Barthes speaks here to a very specific perception of the creative artist, one who works manically, without rest, to recreate the sounds or images in their head. In considering notions of creativity through a psychological lens, Andrew Steptoe's description of the perception of artists as "... preoccupied with work to the exclusion of social activity ..." (Steptoe 1998, p. 253) aligns with Barthes' portrayal of the writer. Such considerations additionally have links with perceptions of mental illness. Catherine Prendergast (2017, p. 237) describes Frederic Jameson's aestheticisation of schizophrenia as being: "always/already artistic, always/already literary, always/already metaphorical". Such a view links constructions of creativity and mental illness with the Barthesian notion of the work-obsessed artist. What can be seen is the myths that inform artistness are intersected and interconnected. However, this notion of the ever-creative and simultaneously absent-minded artist – while again having roots in real world experiences – is equally performative, and can be seen in the constructions of Chris James. In her interview with me, Tina also spoke of the two years that she and Chris lived in Cincinnati, and that site-seeing trips with him were not ideal because "... his mind was always on the music, so he wasn't a great person to travel with..." (T James, 2015). Tina here reflects a performance and perception of James's artistness: an incompatible travel companion due to artistic distraction. Here we see in James's life a reflection of Barthes' description of the creative Muse as "an inner god" to whom the artist is forced to give constant praise and attention. Those holiday trips in Chris and Tina's "clapped out Datsun with a hole in the floor" (T James, 2015) reflect the duality of artistness and myth: that such actions can simultaneously occupy the space of reality and performance of a persona. These anecdotes reflect a perception of James's artistness as one that, like Barthes expresses, is linked to a seeming inability to occupy one's mind with anything other than the creative impetus.

## MYTHOLOGISING CHRISTOPHER JAMES

The use of myth by both James himself and his family was prominent throughout my interviews and archival research. In her interviews with both myself (2015) and Muller (2010), Marjorie James relayed stories about her son's childhood which indicated an early affinity for music. These ranged from her using music to soothe his infancy illnesses, to the creation of his own musical instrument out of string and a battery box, to being identified by a visiting pianist from the UK (whose name she does not remember and who makes no appearance in the archive) at the age of five as being musically gifted.

As is the case with much theoretical understanding of myth as interpretation of life, there is nothing to say that these stories are untrue, but there is also no evidence to support



them either. Marjorie was the only surviving member of the James family who knew Chris as an infant (his sister was younger than him), and the story about the pianist from the UK is not detailed with information such as dates or names (which is not surprising – Marjorie was 86 years old when she was first interviewed by Muller, and 91 years old when I interviewed her). This means that finding either other interviewees to support her stories, or secondary source material about a pianist playing in Rhodesia, is impossible.

While the accuracy of these statements is a concern in the creation of a historical document on James's life, their veracity is of less importance when interpreting through the lens of artistness and persona construction. What is more important is to probe Marjorie's understanding of her son and his character in light of these stories. The mythic conception of artistic traits being apparent in early childhood is discussed by Christopher Wiley in his 2008 doctoral dissertation "Re-Writing Composers' Lives: Critical Historiography and Musical Biography". Wiley writes: "One key function of the childhood myths retold in biographies was to provide early indications of the adult whom the subject was to become" (Wiley 2008, p. 45). Indeed, we see Marjorie's description of her son following the same process: early childhood excursions into music which would be an indicator of future musical passions and this notion of the gifted child as a precursor to the creative adult. Such constructs actively work to form part of James's artistic persona.

A further contributing aspect of James's artistic persona is James's self-perception as being a misunderstood artist, a position synonymous with post-humous recognition. Throughout his diaries James writes a single phrase repeatedly: "talent offends, genius terrifies". He also expressed a desire for certain of his compositions to only be played after his death due to his perception of them being politically controversial. Writing to his daughter Melissa on 6 May 2007, less than a year before his death, Chris bemoaned the lack of performances of his work by macabrely stating "perhaps the performers in this country are waiting for me to die before they decide to perform my works" (C James 2007).

Despite the notion that biography grants the artist and their work an ability to all but cheat death by having their stories and creations live on, David Attwell (2015, p. 22) writes that: "All good writers dread biography, of course, even when it is not contemptuous. Biography is one of the ways in which the present generation puts the previous one firmly in the past". Within the biographical enterprise, death becomes not merely an unavoidable event within a person's life, but a subdivision between life events and posthumous responses. It is thus not surprising that James's performance of his own artistness is concerned with his posthumous reputation.

What can be seen is the persona that James performed utilised various myths of the artist: mentally unwell, unable to focus on anything other than their art, tortured, and unrecognised in their life-time. Through archival materials, this persona is enacted and communicated. It is a persona equally performed by James's family, present in the stories they choose to foreground and reflects their perceptions of Christopher James as a (stereo)typical artist.

## CONCLUSION

This article has spoken to the performance of James's artistness through myth – and the reception of this performance by those he knew during his life. Yet an intellectual avenue for further exploration is the extent to which I as the researcher not only perceived James's artistness persona, but further extended it. I wrote about my first encounter with James through his archive, and how my interest piqued when I heard he had suffered from mental illness:

*Like most of South Africa, I had not heard of Christopher James. When Muller [my supervisor] told me that he had had some form of mental disorder, my ears pricked up. I suddenly became interested, suddenly this man was interesting. I had only a few weeks previously lost a close friend to suicide, and it somehow, somewhat tenuously, seemed serendipitous.*

*I agreed to the project.*

*I write this nearly four years later, and I am still ashamed that my initial interest in Chris was his illness. (Röntsch 2017, p. 18).*

This response – both my initial interest in his illness as well as my retrospective shame – can be seen as my response, or even continuation of James’s performance of his own artistness. The shame I felt in viewing James through this overly simplistic lens can be seen as my own performance of my persona as a scholar, and derived from the intimacy I felt with my subject, having had an insight into his personal life through the archive.

A perennial balance I have attempted to strike with my broader research on James has been the positioning of mental illness. This balance involved an acknowledgement, on the one hand, that the struggles of mental illness was part of James’s lived reality, and on the other directing the historical narrative to portray a nuanced and multi-dimensional person.

One such mechanism for this balance is the consideration of myth and persona within the biographical research on James. My own initial interest in him based on his mental health betrays the fact that I was an active participant in the performance and perpetuation of his artistness persona. That for me – mental health issues were an integral construction of artistness broadly, and when James aligned with this understanding, he suddenly became interesting to me. As the field of persona studies continues to grow and find further interdisciplinary avenues for discourse, the role of persona within biography has the ability to provide – as it has with me – an interpretive and perhaps even methodological lens through which to view the biographical subject, the people in their lives who inform the research, and the researcher themselves. The consideration of the performance of artistness persona, allows for new conceptual avenues of exploration into the role of the composer within their own historical moment, and their reaction to their surrounding environment.

What this research into the enactment of artistness in James’s life demonstrates, is the centrality of interpretation of persona within the biographical paradigm. Like mythologies, persona may be constructed by the individual, but it requires engagement from others to be formed, shaped, and understood. In the case of Christopher James, there are multiple participants in James’s artistness enactment; it is not an undertaking exclusively of his own. The ways in which James’s artist persona was received and interpreted by those in his orbit (as well as myself as would-be biographer) has formed a key position in understanding how this persona is maneuvered. In the same ways that life writing as a discourse has considered the position of its authors (and I am thinking here specifically of Janet Malcolm’s *The Silent Woman*, although it is a common theme within life writing), persona studies will require similar inward reflections.

By positioning the biographical research on an artist like James within the scholarly mechanisms of persona studies discourses, this article has shown that understanding the elements which constitute the enactment of a persona – in this case that of artistness – can yield interesting scholarly results. Exploring how the lived experience of mental illness can form an

integral part of an artist's persona, and how positioning persona within conjoining fields of mythology and life-writing opens up new avenues for consideration of persona and its constructions.

As the first scholar to conduct research into James's life and music, I felt a sense of obligation to him and his legacy. I was granted unlimited access to an archive that held within it documents that were revealing, showing James at his most vulnerable. During my fieldwork trip with Muller, James's family showed us every hospitality, displaying a generosity and allowing unfettered access to all available resources for my research. Part of my obligation – or my end of the bargain as I perceived it – was to create research that was at its core nuanced, that reflected the complexity of this individual. This meant that mental illness could not be shied away from, nor could it form the basis of sensationalist storytelling of the mad composer. I have aimed to place mental illness within my research on James in a position similar to that which it occupied in his life: as one of many constructive elements of his artist persona.

## END NOTES

1. James's work *Paradise Regained* is only related to the Milton poem by its title. See Röntsch, 2020.

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