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# ***The Cult of Art in Henry James' s "The Aspern Papers" (1888)***

*And as I fixed upon the down-turned face  
That pointed scrutiny with which we challenge  
The first-met stranger in the waning dusk  
I caught the sudden look of some dead master*  
T.S. Eliot, "Little Gidding"

Henry James's "The Aspern Papers" is both a popular and, according to critics, very fine story composed in a period of rich creativity, while the author was writing *The Tragic Muse* and *Princess Casamassima*. It belongs to a series of texts described by James as tales, that is narratives which develop a single anecdote and are too long to be short stories and too short to be novels. The author sometimes used the tale to explore the complexities of literary life which was his main focus in a whole series of stories. "The Aspern Papers" could be classified among the tales dealing with the specificities and peculiarities of creation and what revolves around it. The story recounts a critic's quest for a great poet's letters written to his muse, who is the last survivor of the poet's acquaintances. To reach his goal, the narrator finds accommodation under a false name in the old lady's house, and through ruse and deceit, he attempts to get hold of her literary possessions. He draws the line at marrying her niece though, and when he regrets and returns to her, he finds the papers destroyed by the rejected heir.

In his New York edition preface to "The Aspern Papers," Henry James expands on the genesis of his story which is based on an anecdote related by a Boston collector; in the hope of finding Shelley's and Byron's papers, he takes rooms in the Florentine home of Claire Clairmont, Byron's mistress. When he discovers that the price to pay for them is to marry the old lady's middle-aged niece, he gives up the treasure hunt and flees. James highly valued the creative potential of

this situation and spoke elatedly about it: “[...] history, ‘literary history’ we in this connection call it, had in an out-of-the-way corner of the great garden of life thrown off a curious flower that I was to feel worth gathering as soon as I saw it” (James: 1953 159). It was in the wings of literary history, then, that James found inspiration, or “the first impulse,” as he called it (James: 1953 159), for this tale. “The Aspern Papers” developed on a fortuitous incident that inflamed James’s imagination opening up a vista of literary relations full of dramatic potential. The author clearly stated that “nine tenths of the artist’s interest in [...] [the facts] is that of what he shall add to them and how he shall turn them” (James 1953: 163). James turned this somewhat amusing anecdote into a homage to the power of the past, as well as to the artistic ideal and the ethical dimension it ineluctably involved.

It is worth noting that there was a shift in the thematic interests of James by the end of the mid-eighties, namely from the American-European antithesis to more universal moral concerns which could truly accommodate the theme of lost innocence central in the author’s work. In “The Aspern Papers,” the three main characters lose their innocence through their implication, to a greater or lesser degree, in the possession of or quest for the poet’s invaluable papers. Through his narrator’s monomaniac quest for the poet’s papers, James investigates the cult of art which, as the Latin etymology of the word indicates (*cultus*), signifies worship, its observances and various manifestations, such as the preservation of relics and the creation of icons. The negative connotation, attached to the term in this tale, complexifies and enriches the story which investigates a rich gamut of literary relations under the lens of the ethical dimension of art in an artistic city.

James’s shift of setting from Florence, where the events of the literary anecdote took place, to Venice reveals the spell that the city cast upon the author’s mind. Venice was for James the Museum city *par excellence*, offering “the palpable, visitable past” which the author “delighted in” (James: 1953 164). In a sort of mystical visitation to the quester, the poet reminds his biographer, who invoked him, of the capital importance of the place: “aren’t we in Venice together, and

what better place is there for the meeting of dear friends?" (38)<sup>1</sup>. This intimate meeting between master and pupil takes place under the cultural firmament of the most propitious for such a city of encounters. Moreover, it is in the antiquated glamour of an old palace that James sets his ancient female character who possesses the living past in the form of a bundle of documents. This bunch of letters is James's fictional gift to the city which provides him with its own pieces of art, used by the author, as we shall later see, as a nexus of meaning. James's sensitivity to the visual arts certainly found fertile ground in this place of predilection. Only Venice then, the city of cities, could harbour the hidden exhibit which the narrator sets out to possess. As the title indicates, the Aspern papers are in the centre of the narrative and provide the link between the characters. Bonds are created or broken around these papers which mediate three main sets of relations in the tale: master and pupil, the author and his muse, the man of letters and the laywoman.

It is quite interesting that in the year when "The Aspern Papers" was written, James was writing a series of critical appreciations of his favourite novelists and tale-tellers, especially the French, among them Balzac, Flaubert, and Guy de Maupassant. He was, then, himself under the sway of his own masters. James's act of paying tribute to them parallels his character's endeavours to do the same for his own poetic icon. It is even more interesting that the tale seems to be indebted to Hawthorne's novel, *The House of the Seven Gables*, as Millicent Bell demonstrates in her study *Meaning in Henry James*. Bell maintains that James is reluctant to acknowledge this literary debt in his New York edition preface: "Admitting so frankly the *donnée* from life – the story of Silsbee and Miss Clairmont – he is silent about the blossom plucked from the past of literary example" (Bell 192). There is no proof, though, that James's silence was voluntary. However, whether conscious or unconscious, this instance of intertextuality points to the story's literary ramifications and echoes the master-pupil

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<sup>1</sup> All the quotations from "The Aspern Papers" refer to the Zulma classics edition of *The Italian Tales*.

theme in *The Aspern Papers*, given James's own reverence for Hawthorne.

The uniqueness of the master-pupil relation was most dear to James who also investigated the specificity of this bond in "The Lesson of the Master" and "The Pupil". Contrary to these two stories, the master is not only dead in "The Aspern Papers," but also physically unknown by the pupil, except through pictures. Therefore, the narrator's devotion to the poet could never be met with any kind of reciprocity; the pupil could never realistically hope for his master's acknowledgement, which creates the pathos that surrounds this variant of the master-pupil bond and makes the pupil's endeavours to get hold of and make public the master's private work all the more poignant. Even in this one-sided variant of the bond, the pupil's faith in the master is no less staunch, "The world, as I say, had recognised Jeffrey Aspern, but Cumnor and I had recognised him most" (13). Although this relation is wholly based on the master's work and the osmosis has been achieved only through reading, the erotic element that subtends this special relation, as George Steiner demonstrates in his study *Lessons of the Masters*, is no less present either. In his quest for the papers the pupil loses himself in the labyrinth of love. The poet's presence is perceived by the narrator from the very moment he approaches the palace that is supposed to shelter the papers: "Jeffrey Aspern had never been in it that I knew of, but some note of his voice seemed to abide there by a roundabout implication and in a 'dying fall'" (12).

It becomes overwhelming when the narrator meets the poet's muse: "Her presence seemed somehow to contain and express his own, and I felt nearer to him at that first moment of seeing her than I ever had been before or ever have been since. Yes, I remember my emotions in their order, even including a curious little tremor that took me when I saw the niece not to be there" (25). The intimacy, this tête-à-tête entails, turns the old lady into a vicarious object of desire, which is confirmed by the narrator's urge to touch her: "I felt an irresistible desire to hold in my own for a moment the hand Jeffrey Aspern had pressed" (30). Although Bell rightly observes that the narrator's "curiosity is implicitly sexual — a rage to impermissibly penetrate — to

ransack drawers, break into cabinets in order to seize hold of papers that are arguable love letters" (Bell 192), calling this curiosity "voyeuristic", just like other critics<sup>2</sup> he misses the main point of this fundamental literary relation which is "eros, [...] and indeed love", according to Steiner (Steiner 2).

Nevertheless, the narrator can neither touch the lady nor see her, as she always appears with a green shade over her eyes except once, as we shall later see. As Jean Starobinski puts it: "Le caché fascine. [...] Il y a, dans la dissimulation et dans l'absence, une force étrange qui contraint l'esprit à se tourner vers l'inaccessible et à sacrifier pour sa conquête tout ce qu'il possède." (Starobinski 9). Miss Bordereau's hidden eyes are emblematic of the force that drives the narrator to her. Thus the possession of the papers could be experienced by him as the only form of fulfilment of his desire, which explains his readiness to go to extremes for their sake. Moreover, the ambient misogyny in the narrator's discourse could be accounted by the demands of exclusiveness which passion entails. This is how he refers to the women in the poet's life: "Almost all the Maenads were unreasonable and many of them unbearable" (14). It is no surprise, then, that at the end of his story, the pupil refers to his condition as "the most fatal of human follies" (102), which could be read as a definition of love, and finds himself prostrate with grief before his master's picture.

There is little doubt that the narrator's discourse consecrates his object of love aggrandised by art. His ultimate cult is that of the art of speech, embodied by Jeffrey Aspern, who becomes alive and active, a man in flesh and blood, in the narrator's imagination. Religious vocabulary abounds. In the light of the narrator's urge to get hold of the papers, it does not even sound hyperbolic; "One doesn't even defend one's god: one's god is in himself a defence" (12), albeit slightly sibylline, "'One would think you expected from it the answer to the riddle of the universe,' she said; and I denied the impeachment only by reply-

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<sup>2</sup> cf. Lustig T.J. "In such tales as [...] "The Aspern Papers" James had already returned to the realms of private psychopathology, to the themes of possession and vampirism which had marked his early stories (Lustig 90).

ing that if I had to choose between that precious solution and a bundle of Jeffrey Aspern's letters I knew indeed which would appear to me the greatest boon" (12). As for the letters, they are naturally the sacred "relics" (17) of the "divine poet" (13). In this Venetian summer of thrills and heartbeats, the critic becomes fully conscious of the far-reaching implications of his work and his experience takes on a mystical tinge,

My eccentric private errand became a part of the general romance and the general glory – I felt even a mystic companionship, a moral fraternity with all those who in the past had been in the service of art. They had worked for beauty, for a devotion; and what else was I doing? That element was in everything that Jeffrey Aspern had written, and I was only bringing it to light. (38)

The narrator becomes part and parcel of a universal team, a task force in the holy service of art. Aesthetics and metaphysics blend and yield the apotheosis of art. The notion of a sacred brotherhood created by art is to be found in such artistic groups as the Nazarenes and the Nabis. Although the narrator is not a poet, as he himself admits, his critical and biographical work ushers him into a higher reality discovered by an inner vision. As a consequence, he is one of the elect whose mission is to reveal a spiritual truth. Disappointment had led many of the artists in the Nabi group to assume the identity of the martyr and Christ figure. At the end, struck by the loss of the papers and thrown back into a dingy reality, the narrator assumes a posture of suffering: "I can scarcely bear my loss" (106). He seems to be a jaded pilgrim before his holy icon.

If the master-pupil bond seems to be the strongest in the tale, as it is shaped by the discourse of an auto-diegetic narrator who relates the vicissitudes of a full-blown passion, another literary relation emerges from his account of the events, that of a poet and his muse. The critic's biographical flair digs up a quaint romance between two Americans in Europe. Expatriation deepens the romantic aura that surrounds the idyll: "When Americans went abroad in 1820 there was something romantic, almost heroic in it, as compared with the perpet-

ual ferrying of the present hour" (42). At the same time, the narrator stresses "the Americanness" of the poet and his muse: "His own country after all had had most of his life, and his muse, as they said at that time, was essentially American" (43). James's concern to confer upon his country a literary tradition it did not have is balanced by the universal quality Aspern's muse attains, when she loses all her national characteristics and becomes "an American absentee" (40).

James builds a female character worthy of a great American poet. To start with, the narrator places her along prestigious women such as Mrs Siddons, Queen Caroline and Lady Hamilton who become referential characters in the story. Miss Bordereau belongs to the tradition of strong women in James's fiction who can be traced back in the author's childhood. Leon Edel is quite enlightening about them: "the mother's relatives are all strong females holding their men under their thumbs [...]. The Great Aunt probably sat as Juliana Bordereau in "The Aspern Papers" 'throned, hooded, draped' as the small boy saw her" (Edel 107). Miss Bordereau's niece, Tina consolidates the image of the muse as a woman of substance and power: "Everyone can be managed by my aunt" (65). Indeed, Tina's testimony fully supports some of the narrator's inferences concerning the poet and his muse. The biographer depicts Miss Bordereau as a bold, adventurous and contemptuous-of-convention woman who challenges the morals of her time for the love of a poet. If the intimacy of the affair is mostly conveyed through the worshipping eyes of the narrator, Tina's quoted words can only give credit to it. "'She's very fond of them'" (63), "'Oh, she lived on them'" (98), she says about the poet's papers. However, there is no first-hand revelation of the muse's relation to the poet. Miss Bordereau remains the mysterious lady who preserves the privacy of her story to the end. Vainly has the narrator besieged her secrets. Although Tina is the one who finally destroys the papers, it is Miss Bordereau's will to carry her secrets with her, like a Pharaoh to his tomb, that triumphs.

In this foursome of characters, Tina is the least immersed in art. Yet her filiation to the poet's muse makes her special, interesting and useful for the narrator. Through his discourse the reader is presented with two conflicting visions of the niece shaped by the biographer's



changing gaze. It is the critic's "literary heart" (37) that remains cold and unfeeling to Tina's humanity and femininity or flies out to her and momentarily alights upon her loving face. The man of letters' condescending eyes, after sizing her up, settle on a plain laywoman devoid of interest: "Only she had lived for years with Juliana, she had seen and handled all mementoes and – even though she was stupid – some esoteric knowledge had rubbed off on her. That was what the old woman represented – esoteric knowledge" (38). Tina lives in the mystic shadow of her consecrated aunt and thus attracts the narrator's attention. In his quest for the papers he becomes her suitor and seducer drawing her out of her Carmelite's life. When she stands by him and preserves the papers for his sake, she undergoes a series of transformations. From "a piece of middle-aged female helplessness" (94) she turns into an angel of deliverance: "She stood in the middle of the room with a face of mildness bent upon me, and her look of forgiveness, of absolution, made her angelic. It beautified her; she was younger; [...] this trick of expression, this magic of her spirit, transfigured her" (104).

Before such a radical transformation the narrator instantly decides to take the plunge and marry the niece, although he fled when she had presented her conditions to him. As she has already destroyed the letters, the narrator's sudden insight into her inner beauty represents a moment of supreme irony which highlights his blindness. He fails to see that the agent of Tina's transformation is love and that he is sensitive to it. Without the precious documents, Tina instantly changes back into "plain dingy elderly person" (105). His obsession with "a bundle of tattered papers" (100), as he himself called them when he was faced with the dilemma of marrying the niece, makes him impervious to life and love. Tina's love in the tale is the closest to life and enacts the theme of life versus art. The critic's obtuseness to life may be the most severe authorial criticism of the narrator. James subjects his character to scrupulous moral scrutiny.

If the narrator's fatal flaw is to love literature more than life, his semi-unreliability raises a series of ethical issues that question the moral immunity of art. It is no wonder that this character did not fare

very well with the critics: "In the case of "The Aspern Papers" there is no uncertainty about James's attitude toward the narrator: James lets us know that the papers were none of the journalist's business and that the rebuff served him right", says Edmund Edel in his essay "The Ambiguity of Henry James" (Dupee 17). This sweeping statement points to the unlikeability of the narrator, but leaves aside the ambiguity and ambivalence present in the tale. On the contrary, Leon Edel probes deeper into the authorial design, "Between the lines of "The Aspern Papers" James is saying that an artist's life should be preserved from prying hands and that he should be read on his work alone. Yet James is also ambivalently on the side of the biographer who seeks human elements in the artist's work" (Edel 1960: 27). Both critics, though, touch upon the delicate question of the frontier between the public and the private sphere in an author's life. The first question put forward in "The Aspern Papers" is whether each and single document produced by a writer should come under the spotlight. Does an author's private life belong to him or to posterity? Darshan Singh Maini in "The Epistolary Art of Henry James" states that James "entertained a peculiar aesthetic of ambivalence in regard to the whole question of publishing letters", and that he objected to publishing "a certain type of private letter" (Fogel 1993: 359). However, he finally seems to agree with Edel that "the letters of the great man's friend and schoolmates in "The Abasement" described quite accurately James's own view on the matter. Thus if many pages were too intimate to publish, most others were too rare to suppress" (Fogel 1993: 361).

It is quite understandable that James was torn between the man who had to protect his own privacy and that of the people around him, and the author who constantly assessed the literary value of what he wrote that ultimately cried out to be read. In "The Aspern Papers," James dramatizes this issue presenting two radically opposed views, the biographer's and the muse's; the former has no doubt that the papers belong to the public, while the latter dismisses every attempt at their publication. They both act in the name of truth whether accessible or inaccessible. Thus the narrator says in utter conviction: "He had nothing to fear from us because he had nothing to fear from the

truth, which alone at such distance of time we could be interested in establishing" (13). While Miss Bordereau, in full wisdom, sneers at the narrator's naïve readiness to measure the truth of an author's work by private documents and solemnly states: "The truth is God's, it isn't man's: we had better leave it alone" (70). The matter would remain truly unresolved if James did not push his inquiry further. If there is a modicum of truth to be intimated, should it be reached by any possible means? This is the second fundamental issue which makes matters more complex in the tale. Should the end justify the means? James investigates literary life in the light of this old ethical question.

On the one hand, there is little doubt about the narrator's nobility of purpose. Intellectual curiosity, thirst for knowledge, love and concern for the Aspern readership are the driving forces behind his quest. On the other hand, however elevated his aim may be, the means to achieve it are base. Henry James, an advocate of objective representation, "shows" instead of "telling." The first person narrative in this story serves this purpose. The narrator carries the full moral responsibility of his discourse. Right from the start, he seems to employ immoral means to fulfil his wish: "I can arrive at my spoils only by putting her off her guard, and I can put her off her guard only by ingratiating diplomatic arts. Hypocrisy, duplicity are my only chance. I'm sorry for it but there's no baseness I wouldn't commit for Jeffrey Aspern's sake" (17).

The sheer accumulation of such means and the gravity of the committed wrongs have an incremental effect. The narrator does not hesitate to exploit female desire, and seduces Tina, thus carrying out his initial plan "to make love to the niece" (19), albeit expressed jocularly at that point. His lies, ruse and deliberate deceit pave the way for the final act of violence which Juliana witnesses. The narrator acts out his plunderer's fantasy and attempts to steal the documents from Miss Bordereau's secretary. It seems highly significant that only at this moment does Juliana turn upon him an uncovered gaze, only at this moment is the narrator enabled to behold her incriminating eyes. If the question of biographical truth seems highly hypothetical and remains unresolved in the story, the truth that Juliana expresses through her accusatory eyes is categorical and ineluctable.

The documents are both sacred relics and "spoils". The narrator is both a Holy Grail Knight and a "publishing scoundrel" (88). His ambivalence is deepened by his temporary dismissal of the letters as "a bundle of tattered papers" (101), when he is faced with the dilemma of accepting Tina's offer. Critics see in this withdrawal the same "'inverted realism' seen in the novels of the eighties" (Fogel 1981: 174). However, the narrator's regret and final reversal restore the idealism in his beliefs. Albeit desolate and defeated, he remains a true believer in the Aspern temple. It is quite paradoxical that in his quest for the truth, the man of letters had to resort to lies, that in his search for transcendence he had to go through a squalid reality. Nevertheless, James's dismissal of his character, built on a balanced combination between aesthetic sensibility and moral callousness, on a divergence between the aesthetic and the moral sense, is not complete. The narrator's contemplation of Verrochio's great equestrian statue of Bartolommeo Colleoni, the famous Venetian *condottieri* throws into perspective the man of letter's moral inquiry into his acts. Although it is not the first time in the story that the critic questions the rightness of his course of action, his showdown with this magnificent piece of art, after he has fled from Tina's proposal, is quite significant, for his interest in it is not aesthetic: "The statue is incomparable, the finest of all mounted figures [...] but I was not thinking of that; I only found myself staring at the triumphant captain as if he had had an oracle on his lips. The western light shines into the grimness at that hour and makes it wonderfully personal" (102).

Through the artistically marvellous statue of a man who disregarded the moral conduct in life, James pinpoints the ethical dimension of art and its faculty to awake its viewer to a moral reality. It is quite likely that the narrator is confronted with his own mercenary behaviour. As Adeline R. Tintner states, "There is hardly a tale among James's one hundred and twelve stories and twenty novels that does not catch within its net some artefact of status [...] provided it can concretely underline some moral, human, or technical point James is making" (Tintner 2). At the same time, Tina's attitude could also be commented through the author's use of the statue, as Tintner remarks: "Tina could be viewed as someone who is working out her own

stratagems" (72). Like a soldier of fortune, Tina demands her price which reveals the ambiguity that complexifies the female characters in the tale. Doesn't Tina take an opportunistic advantage of the documents to force the narrator into marriage and hasn't Miss Bordereau used his interest in them to lure the critic into staying longer in her palace at an exorbitant rent? In any case, there is no happy ending in this tale of love and loss, of unrecoverable past, of an unwritten biography, and ultimately of a shattered dream of innocence.

Is the cult of art a value? In James's scepticism and self-irony there looms a post-lapsarian age of art. "The Aspern Papers" could be read as "a moral fable for historians and biographers",<sup>3</sup> if it did not also focus on the most intense literary relationships to be disentangled from the web of art.

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<sup>3</sup> Leon Edel cited by Anthony Curtis in his introduction to "The Aspern Papers" and *the Turn of the Screw* (James: 1984 7).

<sup>4</sup> Aristie Trendel, Université de Montpellier I (France).

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