

Selected pages from:

Millicent Bell, “ ‘The Aspern Papers’: The Unvisitable Past”, in Bell, Millicent, *Meaning in Henry James*, Harvard University Press, 1991.

"The Aspern Papers":
The Unvisitable Past

JAMES'S PREFACES to his revised fiction in the New York Edition constitute curious, framing second thoughts. These self-interpretive comments sometimes extract an original intention only partially evident in the writings they introduce, sometimes even add a perspective which gives prominence to an idea that is only subordinate—when it is not contradicted—by the story or novel standing alone. Sometimes they even neglect to mention what the reader is likeliest to identify as the work's most evident theme. And yet the distortions of the prefaces, if one may call them that, disclose latencies in the prefaced fiction that one would not otherwise have noticed; we read again to discover these as well as the themes suggested by the unaided text.

In no case is this more striking than in that of "The Aspern Papers." In his preface to the revision of 1908, written twenty years after the original publication of the story, James relates how his "germ" came to him as gossip about a modern manuscript hunter who discovered the astonishing survival in Italy of Claire Clairmont, the half-sister of Mary Shelley and the mother of Byron's child. The story James wrote turns upon the very hinge of this anecdote—that the letters the researcher sought were finally offered to him on the condition that he marry the niece of Miss Clairmont, a price he was unwilling to pay. The dilemma of the would-be biographer of the fictitious Jeffrey Aspern is the dramatic center of James's tale, which seems to belong to a whole family of Jamesian stories illustrating moral and emotional defection in the aesthetic personality. But James gives no indication in the preface of how this situation must have fascinated him, and does not discuss his narrator, this bemused anonymous person who relates his own misadventure. James speaks instead of the effect upon his imagination of

His eagerness to get inside is born not only of a desire for knowledge but of admiration to the point of envy of the mysterious Aspern's amorous past. He is the excluded third person in a triangle of desire. Voyeurism, of course, is a sexual perversity, and the curiosity of the narrator of the "Aspern Papers" is implicitly sexual—a rage to impermissibly "penetrate"—to ransack drawers, break into cabinets in order to seize hold of papers that are arguably love letters. So, James suggests that curiosity about others—even about others in the past, about history—is a temptation to a perversity both sexual and intellectual. Here, again, the sense of Hawthorne's presence in "The Aspern Papers" returns to mind. The voyeuristic curiosity which James represents in the "Aspern Papers" narrator is like Miles Coverdale's impotent, prying observation of the passions of Zenobia and Hollingsworth, his sexually diffused fixation on another man and the woman in love with him.

The configuration of the story even more directly establishes a connection with *The House of the Seven Gables*.⁵ It is, indeed, startling to place alongside James's story the situation of Holgrave, the lodger who presents himself under a false name with the aim of learning secrets contained in ancient documents guarded by an elderly lady, the mistress of the house, and her younger female relative. Like James's character, Holgrave is tempted to make love to the younger woman in order to get closer to the secrets, and only by the miracle of love is he saved from the crime of heartless curiosity to which James's character succumbs. Details multiply, as we compare the story to Hawthorne's novel. The shabby Venetian palazzo of the Bordereau ladies, analogous to though different from the old Salem house, also possesses a garden which the Holgrave-like lodger cultivates. A miniature of a beautiful young man is Juliana's token of her lover of long ago, as it is Hepzibah's token of her adored brother in that remote time before his prison burial. James's subsurface reference to Hawthorne's two novels is the more striking because James does not acknowledge his indebtedness in his preface which, like all the New York Edition prefaces, claims to search out the sources of the author's inspiration. 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. Yet some of his story's details can be explained only by the fact that they were already in Hawthorne—like the Venetian garden, which the narrator claims to love for its very improbability (it is explicable only because it has

been transported from Salem to Venice!). But Hawthorne, for all his insistence upon a dark theme of perpetuated wrong, had written an optimistic fairy tale in *The House of the Seven Gables*. The ending in which love reconciles the past and the present in the marriage of Holgrave and Phoebe is precisely what cannot take place between James's narrator and Tina Bordereau. Unlike the Aspern papers, Hawthorne's irrecoverable old document is blithely forgotten. James cannot repeat Hawthorne's story to its end any more than he can be another Hawthorne.

The would-be biographer of Jeffrey Aspern is another voyeur; his greatest desire is to possess another's love story. For himself, such a narrative is out of the question. If he has ever loved anyone, we do not hear of it, though he uses the word "love" to express his feeling for the dead Aspern. Only once, perhaps without recognizing it, he feels the faint breath of love, when a transfigured Tina seems beautiful—before she becomes again (after he learns of the destruction of the papers) the plain person she has always been. Tina Bordereau, were she lovable and he loving, like Phoebe and Holgrave, might have enabled him to live again, and so know the love of Aspern and Juliana—and so recapture the past.

Before this moment, any duplication he feels when he thinks of himself as paying court to her is only an ironic parody of Aspern's ardent courtship of her aunt. All his gestures toward the Bordereau women—the melancholy watching and waiting for the sight of them, the tributes of flowers, the studied gallantry—may seem to fulfill his early declaration to Mrs. Prest that he would, to get the papers, "make love to the niece" (XII:14). But his later self-justification, that he had *not* actually made love to Tina, has this ground: his love-making is so perfunctory a gesture that justly, when he assumes a tone of romantic hyperbole, calling the older lady "inhuman," she mocks him with, "That's what poets used to call women a hundred years ago. Don't try that; you won't do as well as they" (XII:72).

James speaks of the visitable past as "palpable"; it is no accident that the thing his narrator seeks is an object he longs to touch, while he is deficient in the sensuous awareness of a lover. The narrator, as he dreams of the papers he hopes to obtain, says, "they made my life continuous, in a fashion, with the illustrious life they had touched at the other end" (XII:43). But he will never achieve that continuity by literally touching the papers at his own end. It is significant that the elderly Juliana refuses to shake his hand. It was not the custom

(XII:136-137). Maybe he is merely, as I observed in the beginning, a "light" man—he seems to condemn himself to that degree when he concludes that he had "deplorably trifled."

He now feels ready to give over the search for the Aspern-Juliana story—he and Cumnor have enough material for their book without it. Yet after another night, his mood swings back to a passion for his "goods," and he goes to see Tina again. When he does, an "optical trick," or her own mood of forgiving renunciation, or his revived longing for the papers—we cannot tell which of these—makes her image bloom before his eyes with a "phantasmagoric brightness." And he thinks, "Why not?"—but only for as long as it takes her to tell him she has burnt them all. Once more she is "a plain dingy elderly person" (XII:143).

Tina's temporary transformation in the view of the narrator is a last instance of the relativity that has governed all judgment throughout the story. It also has in it some suggestion of the supernatural, of a fairy tale by which the ugly person is made beautiful by love. The miraculous transformation is offered and quickly withdrawn, though. Tina's change is shown as a possibility to the reluctant lover, who fails to understand that her love has already made the ugly princess beautiful but only *he* will make her appear so to him permanently. One can also say that "The Aspern Papers" is a folktale quest narrative (for "sacred relics"), in which the questing hero strives to penetrate a stronghold, a moated castle, in order to seize a treasure. The guardian of the castle is ancient and formidable, possessed of dark powers against which he invokes the aid of a ghostly patron. But the paradigm does not hold to the end: "Get out of it as you can, my dear fellow," Aspern's portrait says, abandoning the seeker to his failed story.

If the narrator's story is one of failure it is possible to shift our emphasis sufficiently from him to consider that Tina's story may represent a modest triumph. The ending encloses her in old-maidhood as conceived by the masculine imagination—pitiable, solitary, without sexual charm. But, like Catherine Sloper's repudiation of the returned Townsend, she may have imposed a modest story of her own upon her experience—and created her "morsel" of narrative needlework. Juliana's plot to provide a marriage-ending for her has been as much a failure as the narrator's effort to capture the papers. But in destroying them, Tina, no longer the victim of either, has acted on her own behalf.