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# *Revising Henry James: Reading the Spaces of The Aspern Papers*

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IN his sixties, Henry James spent four years of his life creating the definitive collection of his fiction, the New York Edition of *The Novels and Tales of Henry James* (published 1907–1909). Selecting the fiction he wanted to represent him after his death, revising that fiction and defending his artistic choices in his prefaces, and directing the design of the edition's physical features (frontispieces, binding, paper, and type), James re-presented his individual works, his career, and, thus, himself by defining how we should confront the corpus of his texts and the text of his artistic life. The entire project of the New York Edition became, in a sense, the project of revising Henry James. By attempting to present James's artistic oeuvre as a structured, unified whole, the New York Edition announced James as an "author" in the Foucauldian sense of the word, as one who seeks to control the production and dissemination of his work.<sup>1</sup> As an example of the kinds of revision (re-seeing) James did for this project, the New York Edition of *The Aspern Papers* (1908) appeared with not only new textual revisions but also a preface, a frontispiece, and new companion tales in volume twelve of the New York Edition.<sup>2</sup> If we consider the revisions of *The Aspern Papers*, then, not merely as the textual variations between the first edition (1888) and the 1908 edition, but as a narrative of revision that extends from the original idea recorded in James's notebooks to

<sup>1</sup> Michel Foucault, "What is an Author?" in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, ed. and introd. Donald F. Bouchard, trans. Bouchard and Sherry Simon (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1977), p. 128.

<sup>2</sup> *The Novels and Tales of Henry James*, New York Edition, 24 vols. (New York: Scribner's, 1907–1909); hereafter cited parenthetically as NYE. Although Scribner's issued two more volumes of the edition in 1917 after James's death, I do not consider them part of the authorized collection because they were not approved, prefaced, or directed by James.

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the extra-fictional elements of the New York Edition (and even James's life), then James's re-tailoring of the tale becomes a new narrative in itself: a narrative in which the author tries to control his text and to direct his readers' responses to it.

In exploring the nature of this narrative of revision, we must confront the issue of what a text is. Is the text merely one or another published version of a story? Or is the text composed also of all the external paraphernalia that re-present the story, the works of James's entire career in his definitive edition, and finally, James himself? In his discussions of cultural history, Roger Chartier poses some applicable questions about texts. Referring to the anthropologist's recording of popular folk tales based on real events, Chartier asks, "Is it legitimate to consider as 'texts' actions carried out or tales told?" Furthermore, "can we qualify as a text both the written document (the only remaining trace of an older practice) and that practice itself?" In some cases, the "text exhibits the event, but it also constitutes the event as the result of the act of writing."<sup>3</sup> Similarly, I would suggest that the ultimate text of *The Aspern Papers* is not merely the authorized revised tale of 1908 but also the narrative of revision extending from the new presentation of the New York Edition all the way back to the original oral tale that James heard in conversation and recorded in his notebooks. "Texts are not deposited in objects—manuscripts or printed books—that contain them like receptacles," Chartier argues, nor is a text merely to be understood "as an abstraction and reduced to its semantic content, as if it existed outside the written objects that present it for decoding." The meaning of texts "is always dependent on their particular discursive and formal mechanisms—in the case of printed texts we might call them 'typographical' (in a broad sense of the adjective)."<sup>4</sup>

To apply this to James, I would say that the text is more than one or the other version of the story bound between the covers of a book. Determined in part by the way in which it is presented to us "for decoding," the revisionist narrative of the 1908 *Aspern Papers* presents us not only with textual revisions but

<sup>3</sup> *Cultural History: Between Practices and Representations*, trans. Lydia G. Cochrane (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1988), p. 99.

<sup>4</sup> Chartier, p. 12.

also extra-fictional elements contained in the new edition. Moreover, the text is not merely composed of these various “parts” (preface, frontispiece, companion tales, binding) put together to make a “whole”: the text also exists in the spaces between the frontispiece and the preface, between the other tales in volume twelve—an intertextuality defined by gaps and interstices between the individual elements of the New York Edition. Even more complexly, the text is not only the physical object of the New York Edition but also the action that brought that edition into being: not just the exhibition of the “event” (the tale, a happening that is over when we close the book) but also the constitution of the “event exhibited as the result of the act of writing” (James’s action of revision leading up to and producing the New York Edition). Or, to use Roland Barthes’ terms, a text is not static as is a work (an object to be held, put on a shelf), but is process, performance, play of language and space and reader. The text “asks of the reader a practical collaboration”:<sup>5</sup> we must participate in not only the narrative of the tale but also the narrative of revisions—reading and playing with(in) the textual revisions, frontispiece, preface, companion tales, and the spaces between all of these.

The earliest alterations James made in the story of *The Aspern Papers* transformed a conversation recorded in James’s idea notebook into the tale first published serially in the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1888.<sup>6</sup> In the notebook entry a Captain Silsbee takes up residence under false pretenses with Lord Byron’s aging former mistress, Claire Clairmont, in the hopes of procuring some important Shelley and Byron letters in her possession. When the elderly Clairmont dies, the captain approaches her middle-aged niece about the papers, and she responds that he may have access

<sup>5</sup> “From Work to Text,” in *Image-Music-Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Noonday, 1977), p. 163.

<sup>6</sup> *Atlantic Monthly*, 41 (1888), 296–315, 461–82, 577–94. After serialization, Macmillan published British and American book editions of the tale in the fall of 1888. In 1890 the American edition was reprinted. No substantial revisions appeared between the serialization and various book editions until the New York Edition of 1908. See Leon Edel and Dan H. Laurence, *A Bibliography of Henry James*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982). Given James’s revisory practices during the composition of the New York Edition, it is likely that he used one (or more) of the earlier book editions as his base for making textual changes; to my knowledge, no manuscript version of the tale has survived. Hence, basically two versions of the tale exist.

to them if he marries her; the captain runs away.<sup>7</sup> In James's tale the captain/lodger changes into an editor who narrates the story, claiming he wants the letters of poet Jeffrey Aspern only to make public the truth about him. Nonetheless, the entry in the notebook and all later versions of the tale are cut from the same cloth: a duplicitous lodger tries to obtain the important papers of a famous dead male poet by ingratiating himself with two aging women. But in James's tale the niece burns the coveted letters. This ironic maneuvering combines the story's germ with information James recorded about the real owner of certain Byron letters, Countess Gamba, who allegedly burned one of them because she believed that the published letters would discredit Byron.<sup>8</sup> Thus, when James wrote the tale in 1887, he stitched together two separate stories about real people to fit one fictional poet.

In general, James most frequently altered the tale for the 1908 version by snipping out or inserting short phrases or sentences. No re-arranged scenes, cut scenes, added scenes, or changes in the progression of the story exist. Even the seemingly minor alterations, though, create a difference in connotation that helps readers to evaluate the rather questionable narration and to judge the editor himself.

Stylistically, James heightens the metaphorical content of the language by adding similes and imagery that not only embroider specific scenes but also piece together various segments of the story. For example, James increases the romantic quality of the story by frequently replacing the mere "papers" or "documents" of the first version with words much more connotatively loaded: "relics," "tokens," and "spoils" (p. 11); "literary remains" (p. 12); and "mementoes" (p. 44).<sup>9</sup> Some of the more interesting metaphorical additions to the 1908 edition concern the narrator's portrayals of Juliana Bordereau, Aspern's former mistress, in three

<sup>7</sup> *The Complete Notebooks of Henry James*, ed. and introd. Leon Edel and Lyall H. Powers (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1987), pp. 33–34.

<sup>8</sup> *Notebooks*, p. 34.

<sup>9</sup> I base my study of *The Aspern Papers* on the novella as it appears in *The Complete Tales of Henry James*, ed. Leon Edel (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1963), VI, 275–382 (hereafter cited as *CT*), which uses the first book publication for its text, and on the NYE, XII, 3–143. Further references to these texts will appear parenthetically, the larger page number referring to the 1888 version when the two versions are compared.

major meetings with her.<sup>10</sup> The most important change occurs in the narrator's last encounter with Juliana. Here he achieves a great victory: for the first and only time he beholds the glorious eyes made famous in Aspern's poetry, "extraordinary eyes" (pp. 362, 118) that had been hidden from him previously by a green veil. Unfortunately, this victory is undermined because Juliana surprises him in the ignominious position of hovering around her bureau, where he suspects the letters have been locked up. At this point in the 1888 edition, the prowler reports merely that Juliana's eyes "made me horribly ashamed" (p. 362). But the extent of his embarrassment and the immensity of his act are greatly magnified by the figurative language added to the revised edition: her eyes "were like the sudden drench, for a caught burglar, of a flood of gaslight" (p. 118). The new simile dramatizes Juliana as a magnificent and fierce personality, while it depicts the intensity of her "extraordinary eyes"—blinding, dazzling, light-bringing, truth-seeking. At the same time, the image convicts the editor by likening him to a would-be (bungling) thief who sneaks into a home under the protection of nightfall while the owner is away. The editor has intruded into Juliana's home under the darkness of lies after the original owner of the papers—Aspern—has gone away. The editor's attempted crime places Juliana in the position of virtue violated.

This simile also emphasizes the narrator's fundamental misreading of Juliana's abilities: like the burglar who invades property when the home-owner is gone, the editor assumes that Juliana will be metaphorically "gone," her advanced age making her a befuddled and dull old woman—a dupe unable to see through the editor's charades and suspect him of desiring the papers. But as he discovers—in Juliana's astuteness at charging a large sum for rent, in her manipulating him about the cost of the Aspern portrait that he has agreed to sell for her, and in her foresight in hiding the papers from everyone—she is perfectly equipped to "catch" him in his acts. Her mind's eye is also "extraordinary," able to see him clearly, as with a flood of light.

In contrast to outfitting Juliana with increased bullishness and authoritativeness, James dresses up the middle-aged niece

<sup>10</sup> Compare, for example, the encounters beginning on *CT* 291, NYE 25; *CT* 324, NYE 68; *CT* 362, NYE 118.

Tina Bordereau in an appearance and a manner more appealing, making her a more complex character who is less easy for the reader and narrator to dismiss.<sup>11</sup> By distinguishing Tina's finer qualities, James's alterations make readers even more likely to welcome her and to apprehend the symbolic truth of the scheming editor's literal statement, added in 1908, that he tried to meet Tina but "kept missing her" (p. 66). Other revisions in the narrator's story help the reader more quickly to identify the "publishing scoundrel" (pp. 363, 118) as exactly that: an uncaring, manipulative egoist waging war so he can take the spoils.<sup>12</sup>

Perhaps, though, the single most important revision awaits us in the closing sentence. At this point in the story, the narrator, back in his American home, broods over the portrait of Aspern that hangs over his desk—a portrait for which he has paid dearly. The earlier edition reads, "When I look at it [the portrait] my chagrin at the loss of the letters becomes almost intolerable" (p. 382), whereas the New York Edition states, "When I look at it I can scarcely bear my loss—I mean of the precious papers" (p. 143). The latter emphasizes the narrator rather than the papers and raises the question of whether the narrator thinks that he has lost something more substantial than the papers.

Questions about exactly what the narrator has lost and how much he is aware of that loss have caused debate among critics.<sup>13</sup> But, significantly, what is "intolerable" in the first version is not the burned letters or a sense of loss, but the narrator's "chagrin," his shallow feeling of embarrassment at having failed

<sup>11</sup> See, for example, textual changes on the following pages: *CT* 289, *NYE* 21; *CT* 302, *NYE* 39; *CT* 321, *NYE* 63; *CT* 366, *NYE* 123; *CT* 381, *NYE* 141–42.

<sup>12</sup> See *CT* 276, *NYE* 5; *CT* 282–83, *NYE* 12–13; *CT* 319, *NYE* 61.

<sup>13</sup> See Wayne Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1961), pp. 354–64; Anna Salne Brylowski, "In Defense of the First Person Narrator in 'The Aspern Papers,'" *Centennial Review*, 13 (1969), 215–40; John Gerlach, "Closure in Henry James's Short Fiction," *Journal of Narrative Technique*, 14 (1984), 60–67; Kenneth Graham, *Henry James: The Drama of Fulfillment: An Approach to the Novels* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975); Robert T. Levine, "A Failure of Reading: *The Aspern Papers* and the Ennobling Force of Literature," *Essays in Arts & Sciences*, 12 (1983), 87–98; Robert C. McLean, "'Poetic Justice' in James's *Aspern Papers*," *Papers on Language and Literature*, 3 (1967), 260–66; Daniel J. Schneider, "The Unreliable Narrator: James's 'The Aspern Papers' and the Reading of Fiction," *Studies in Short Fiction*, 13 (1976), 43–49; and Walter W. Wright, *The Madness of Art: A Study of Henry James* (Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1962).

to manipulate the letters out of two women he thought he could easily fool. I would suggest that, curiously enough, it is precisely because the narrator feels the need to explain, to name his loss, indeed, to *revise* himself in the 1908 version (“I can scarcely bear my loss—I mean of the precious papers”), that we know he experiences a more ambiguous, unnameable loss and suffers because of it (“can scarcely bear”). The thing he “can scarcely bear” this time is not chagrin but “my loss,” an unspecified loss that he confesses and then immediately revises to “the precious papers.” Why, if the papers are the real loss, does he not simply say, “I can scarcely bear the loss of the precious papers”? I suspect that he does not say this because James knew the difference in connotative meaning between these two sentence structures. In the reference to the papers after the dash, the narrator revises himself at the level of the story, a revision that intensifies, reflects, and comments on James’s own revisionist efforts throughout the New York Edition. As, when we read Emily Dickinson’s poetry, we must read not only her words but also the spaces created by the dashes between her words (filling in the gaps, reading the blankness that both separates and connects the printed words), we must also read the spaces between the various kinds of revision in the New York Edition. So, too, must we read the space created by James’s dash in the last sentence of this story.

The narrator’s concluding revision names the material loss as a kind of afterthought, as though the narrator has been thinking of a less tangible kind of loss—a more personal one born of deeper feelings than humiliation or greed—but wants to save face in front of his audience, an audience to whom he has presented himself all along as controlling, uncaring, and triumphant. Thus, he amends himself to keep us from thinking that he could possibly be starting a process of re-vision that would allow him to recognize what he has sacrificed in his game-playing: integrity, ethics, dignity, honesty, compassion. The ambiguity of the last sentence creates the ironic poignancy of the ending and of the entire tale, for one doubts whether the editor himself can articulate exactly what he means by “loss,” especially since he has shown himself throughout the story to be less than fully aware of his conscience, of fine moral distinctions, or of delicate questions of ethics.

This final textual revision and the many others do present



a changed narrative: although the story remains almost exactly the same, the manner of presentation changes crucially. The additions and emendations deepen our understanding of character, reinforce thematic content, and intensify the narrator's unreliability and treacherousness. Moreover, the ambiguity of the ending increases the complexity of the narrator's character and emphasizes the ethics of the story.

In spite of all we can learn by comparing the various story versions of *The Aspern Papers*, however, these alterations are not the only ones we should consider when discussing how James re-tailored his tale. James's addition of the frontispiece to volume twelve of the New York Edition suggests how we should envision the fictional setting of the tale. In 1906 he directed A. L. Coburn, photographer for all the frontispieces, to photograph a friend's house and garden in Venice for possible illustration of the volume of the New York Edition in which *The Aspern Papers* was to appear; the Palazzo Capello, James wrote, "was the old house I had more or less in mind for that of the Aspern Papers."<sup>14</sup> James preferred that Coburn photograph a view of "the big old Sala, the large central hall of the principal floor of the house" (*Letters*, p. 427), but he also suggested the garden. The black-and-white photograph James chose for the frontispiece shows an oblique angle of a potted tree in the courtyard standing by a darkened arch entrance to the house. The photograph is barren—almost sterile compared to the garden scenes described in the tale itself—composed mostly of clean lines and containing no human presence. In this way it is like many of the frontispieces—a building or part of one, an arch or opening, and no discernible human bodies. While we would be remiss to attribute the ultimate artistry of the frontispiece of volume twelve to James (the talented Coburn having made many of the choices that led to the final product, here and in all the frontispieces), we should be intrigued by James's desire that its subject refer to *The Aspern Papers* (since there were four stories in the final vol-

<sup>14</sup> *Henry James: Letters*, IV, ed. Leon Edel (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1984), 426 (hereafter cited as *Letters*). James wrote *The Aspern Papers* in 1887 shortly after a trip to Venice, where he had friends staying at the Palazzo Capello. See Edel, *Henry James: The Middle Years: 1882–1898* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1962), pp. 213–27; Edel, *Henry James: The Master: 1901–1916* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1972), pp. 335–36; and *Letters*, pp. 426–31.

ume) and that the frontispiece should depict in some way a part of the real house that he had envisioned for the fictional home of the Bordereau women. By choosing for his frontispiece a photograph of Palazzo Capello—a real place that James had visited himself and the exact home he had envisioned for his characters as he wrote the tale—the author tries to reproduce for us *outside of the story* the setting for his tale, to replicate precisely, but externally, the bit of reality on which his imagination built.

In doing so, James seems to contradict his general comments about illustrations in his last preface, that to *The Golden Bowl*: “Anything that relieves responsible prose of the duty of being, while placed before us, good enough, interesting enough and, if the question be of picture, pictorial enough, above all *in itself*, does it the worst of services” (NYE, XXII, ix–x). Coburn’s illustrations, however, are acceptable “through their discreetly disavowing emulation” (x). The reproduced subject, “the reference of which to Novel or Tale should exactly be *not* competitive and obvious, should on the contrary plead its case with some shyness, that of images always confessing themselves mere optical symbols or echoes, expressions of no particular thing in the text, but only of the type or idea of this or that thing” (xi). Obviously, Coburn’s photographs are not always types, but here the real thing James tried to reproduce in his fiction, the frontispiece to *The Aspern Papers*, by James’s own admission in a private letter, having a direct correlation with the text. James’s labelling the frontispiece “Juliana’s Court” also contradicts his statement that frontispieces are to be seen as “expressions of no particular thing.” Moreover, the caption “Juliana’s Court” blurs even further the space between the fictional and the real since it attributes possession of the real palace of the setting to a specific fictional character (not all the frontispiece captions do this). We end up, then, with an intricately textured fabric where the fictional and the real—like warp and woof—weave together an exquisite pattern: James visits the real Palazzo Capello in 1887 before writing *The Aspern Papers*, fictionalizes it for the setting of his tale, asks Coburn to photograph the actual palace in Venice, labels the photograph of a real building with a title connecting it to a fictional character, and then denies in his last preface that his illustrations represent real or specific things, insisting instead that they are “echoes” or “type[s].” Thus, it becomes more

and more difficult to distinguish and unravel the warp from the woof, the fictional from the real. It would seem that James is revising not merely a story but also his own past as a writer, extending the narrative of revision beyond the story and into his life.

In addition to directing our mental picture of the Bordereau home through the frontispiece, James asks us to read the New York Edition of his tale in conjunction with a preface (indeed with a whole set of prefaces) and three other new companion tales. These less obvious (re)presentations of the story do more than merely decorate it: they re-exhibit the story, displaying it in different ways.

The prefatorial comments to *The Aspern Papers* explain the act of composing the tale and defend some of the choices James made in creating it. He first relates the germ of the story, much as he had recorded it in his notebooks (in fact, the similarities between the two accounts might make readers wonder if he referred to his notebook when composing his preface). The telling of the germ is surrounded by much philosophizing on the difficulty of finding one's subject, on the rejection of facts for the fiction created from those facts, on the romance of the past, on the desire to transpose the story into one about an "American Byron" (NYE, XII, xi–xii) in a contemporary setting, and on the ethics (both artistic and moral) of meddling with the past by confronting Clairmont. In discussing Clairmont, James emphasizes again, as he does in his textual revisions, how we are to judge the actions of the narrator. James tells us that he would not have disturbed Clairmont's privacy and the "visitable past" (x) that she represented even if he had had the opportunity; the "delicacy" (vii) of his decision sets an ethical example for the narrator, implying that the editor's "invasion and research" (61) are a violation of artistic and moral integrity. After explaining many decisions that he made during the composing process, James concludes his comments on *The Aspern Papers* by defending his creation of Aspern against a critic's objection that the United States could not have produced an American Byron at that time in literary history.

Many critical comments have been inspired by James's commentary in his preface that he "delight[s] in a palpable imaginable *visitable* past" (NYE, XII, x). Some readers have criticized

the revised version of *The Aspern Papers* for getting away from the focus on the visitable past, but their concern for the evocation of the past prevents them from appreciating the subtlety and ambiguity of the narrator's present in the last passage. I don't think that James is intentionally misleading us or that he is revising the emphasis of the tale in this prefatorial comment. While James does say that he delights in a visitable past and that he worried about how to make an American Byron and a disguised Claire Clairmont, he does not claim that evoking the past was his main purpose in writing the story, although many critics have assumed that that was primarily what James tried to do. The critical emphasis on interpreting *The Aspern Papers* in light of James's comments on the visitable past has been based, it seems to me, on a naive willingness to accept that what an author may have said he tried to do in a work is actually borne out in the final product, that an author is the final interpretive authority on his work, that an author is necessarily candid about his writings and wants to lay bare for the reader in an easy and direct fashion how to interpret a tale's meaning, and that a sixty-five-year-old man who had, by 1908, written professionally for over forty years and published over nineteen collections of stories and eighteen novels (not to mention numerous volumes of nonfiction and drama) would automatically and with clarity remember what he was about when he first wrote the story in question twenty years earlier. These kinds of assumptions, in turn, are based on the assumption that we should read prefaces from the consumer's point of view, asking, "What do I want to know about this work and how should I read it?" rather than from the point of view of the writer who might prefer, as James does in the prefaces, to focus on composition and a defense of artistic choices instead of on an explanation of meanings. It is a question of whether prefaces should cover the thematic difficulties of reading or the technical difficulties of writing. Obviously, a writer may choose one, both, or neither of these points of view, but in James's case the prefaces focus on the writer's needs rather than the reader's wants.

I would argue that James's comments on the visitable past are misleading only if we are looking for explanations about how to interpret the tale. Furthermore, I suspect that James does not believe it to be his job, in this preface or throughout the entire

project of the prefaces, to tell us the moral of the story or the correct way to interpret it. Instead, he discusses how he composed the work. As he states in the letter to Scribner's setting forth his proposal for the New York Edition, each preface was to be "a freely colloquial and even, perhaps, as I may say, confidential preface or introduction, representing, in a manner, the history of the work or the group, representing more particularly, perhaps, a frank critical talk about its subject, its origin, its place in the whole artistic chain" (*Letters*, p. 367). James does not mention here that he will include instructions about how to interpret the work's meaning or clarify (dodge?) its ambiguities. One could argue, as I have above, that stated intentions, like those in his letter, may not always equal finished products, but a reading of the entire set of prefaces indicates that James abides by his original plan. In the prefaces as a whole, he focuses on how he composed works—discussing subjects, origins, history, technical difficulties and achievements—rather than on how we should interpret them. Through these discussions he can defend his choices, pointing out the artistic merit of his individual works and (more importantly) his entire career.

In the prefaces, James often avoids dictating to us how we should interpret his works; he refuses to give us too much guidance on the thematics of his fiction. As James states in an early review of George Eliot's works: "In every novel the work is divided between the writer and the reader; but the writer makes the reader very much as he makes his characters. When he makes him ill, that is, makes him indifferent, he does no work; the writer does all. When he makes him well, that is, makes him interested, then the reader does quite half the labor."<sup>15</sup> Because James believed that a reader should do half the work, he probably felt no obligation to explain to us in the prefaces how to interpret his fiction: he had already left his clues in the fiction itself. Certainly James worked very hard on the revisions of *The Aspern Papers* to make it even more obvious than before that the story is not primarily about the visitable past but about the narrator, his manipulations and morality (or lack thereof), and his loss.

<sup>15</sup> "The Novels of George Eliot," in *Henry James: Literary Criticism*, ed. Leon Edel and Mark Wilson, (New York: Library of America, 1984), p. 922.

If we look closely at James's preface to *The Aspern Papers*, we see, again, that James avoids telling us directly how to judge the narrator. What, then, are we to do with the prefatorial comments on this tale? The preface comments less on the final product than on the thoughts parading through James's mind during its creation. Indeed, the very process of revising and prefacing the tale may have led James to envision *his* recent past (memories of Italy and the composition of the tale—the author's private history of *The Aspern Papers*) as the following statements suggest: "It was in Florence years ago; which is precisely, of the whole matter, what I like most to remember. . . . So it is at any rate, fairly in too thick and rich a retrospect, that I see my old Venice of 'The Aspern Papers,' that I see the still earlier one of Jeffrey Aspern himself, and that I see even the comparatively recent Florence that was to drop into my ear the solicitation of these things" (NYE, XII, v–vi). We should, therefore, read the preface as James's "revisiting, re-appropriating impulse" (vii) to evoke (and perhaps revise) his *own* visitable past, the time twenty years earlier when he walked the streets of Italy, heard the story of Captain Silsbee, and composed his tale overlooking the palaces and river of Florence. We should read the preface as a history of the writer and the challenges facing him: when James says he delights in a visitable past, he is commenting less on the thematics of *The Aspern Papers* than on his personal taste and the autobiographical reaching-back into his own past contained in the preface—indeed, in all the prefaces. What we get instead of a tale that focuses on the visitable past is a preface that does: it is not Jeffrey Aspern's past that is revisited and re-appropriated but Henry James's.

In considering James's final presentation of *The Aspern Papers*, we need to examine one last important revision: James's choice of companion pieces for the tale in volume twelve of the New York Edition. In his proposal for the edition sent to Scribner's in 1905, James outlined his plans for arranging the selected tales in individual volumes: "My impression is that my shorter things will gain in significance and importance, very considerably, by a fresh grouping or classification. . . . [T]he interest and value of the edition will, I think, rest not a little on the *proper association and collocation* of the others" (*Letters*, pp. 366–67; emphasis mine). Consequently, *The Aspern Papers* appears in the New

York Edition with different companions than before, in accordance with James's wish to drop certain tales from the collected edition and to rearrange the other tales so that they would complement each other thematically. After its original serialization, *The Aspern Papers* first appeared in a volume along with "Louisa Pallant" and "The Modern Warning" (serialized as "Two Countries") in the fall of 1888. "Louisa Pallant" is a story about a middle-aged woman who rectifies an earlier wrong by warning the nephew of her ex-lover that he should not marry her hard and ambitious daughter. It is ultimately a story of honesty and conscience. "The Modern Warning" concerns a woman torn in her loyalties between her Anglophobic American brother and her anti-American British husband; the conflict results in her suicide. The three tales published together comprised a marriage of convenience, for each had been published earlier in the year in serialized form. Otherwise, they have little in common.

However, when James published *The Aspern Papers* in the New York Edition, he included it with *The Turn of the Screw*, "The Liar," and "The Two Faces" (in that order), each a story of someone's deception and the harm it causes. In *The Turn of the Screw*, as the history of its criticism shows, readers have been unsure whether the narrator is an honest but naive woman deceived by evil children who have been corrupted by ghosts or whether she is an unreliable narrator who deceives herself and us by believing that innocent children have been corrupted by ghosts only she seems to see. In "The Liar" we are again confronted with a story whose layers of deception give layers of meaning to the title: who is the liar we find most culpable—the boastful but seemingly harmless Captain, his loyal wife who covers for him even though she sees through his falsehoods, or the painter who lies to both of them and manipulates them and his art in a failed attempt to make the couple admit their untruths? Similarly, the title of "The Two Faces" anticipates the many kinds and degrees of two-facedness possible in the story. Mrs. Grantham displays a face of generosity and kindness to her ex-lover as she agrees to dress and introduce into society his new young wife, while planning all along to bedeck the girl foolishly for her coming out. Mrs. Grantham's hardened face contrasts greatly with the pathetic yet beautiful face of her victim as the young wife realizes how she has been deceived. And



Mrs. Grantham's new lover abruptly leaves the party, ashamed that he has been complicit in this hypocrisy and appalled by the contrast of faces he sees all around him.

Characters in each of these stories could say, along with the narrator of *The Aspern Papers*, "Hypocrisy, duplicity are my only chance" (NYE, XII, 12). Each of these stories depicts the ethical, emotional, and even physical damage that people inflict when they manipulate others for their own ends; each story results in a kind of loss, whether of personal integrity, innocence and friendship, artistic morality, or social reputation and others' respect. By placing *The Aspern Papers* in this volume, James revises the story in accordance with his textual alterations to make it clearer than ever that the editor is neither reliable nor respectable, that his guile is destructive—both for himself and for others, and that deception and manipulation of others leads to loss. Whereas the 1888 companion pieces to *The Aspern Papers* may have only emphasized—and then only vaguely—the international theme (itself barely important for the editor's tale), when we read the spaces between the tales in the New York Edition, the selections comment on each other's themes and help us to see again that *The Aspern Papers* is not primarily a story of the visitable past but a story of deception and loss.

One final question we might ask is why James makes the editor's unethical behavior more blatant in the revised version. Perhaps at the time in James's life when he was producing the New York Edition and revising *The Aspern Papers* it was important to him to emphasize that the editor's tactics and ethics are reprehensible. As one who, like the Misses Bordereau, had already been experiencing "invasion and research" (NYE, XII, 61) into his privacy, such as the request by Le Roy Phillips to put together a bibliography of his work, James was more sensitive at this time about the whole issue of what would happen to his private—and professional—life after he was dead and could no longer control the public's study of it (or the publishing world's access to it).<sup>16</sup> This concern and his disappointment about the poor sales of the New York Edition led James in October 1909 to burn many of his own manuscripts along with letters from family and friends, while he requested, in turn, that his corre-

<sup>16</sup> See letter to Phillips in *Letters*, pp. 320–21.



spondents do him the favor of destroying his letters to protect his privacy.<sup>17</sup> Indeed, because no manuscript of *The Aspern Papers* exists, we may suppose that he burned it, too, producing an autobiographical meta-commentary on the plot of his tale and the scruples of its “publishing scoundrel.” In burning letters and manuscripts in his own back yard, James re-enacted the narrative of *The Aspern Papers*, tailoring his life after his art. Thus, the narrative of revision that produced the 1908 *Aspern Papers* may suggest how James wanted his art to be treated (or not to be treated) when he was no longer around to protect himself from critical vultures who, like his tale’s editor, often hover over the literary remains of the famous dead or dying, waiting for the moment to dive down to a repast that will feed their professional ambitions and fill their scholarly bellies. As an alternative to our pouncing upon his private literary remains to create a literary history, James offers us the New York Edition—*his* narrative of his career, *his* Revised Standard Version of his canon—and asks us to read its spaces to construct the ultimate Jamesian text.

<sup>17</sup> See Edelman, *Master*, pp. 142 and 436–37; *Letters*, pp. 541–42.