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The Aspern Papers: A Comedy of Masks

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(May 1836), the third chapter of the novel, Dismal Jemmy describes the central figure of "The Stroller's Tale" thus: "The most spectral figure in the Dance of Death, the most frightful shapes that the ablest painter ever portrayed on canvas, never presented an appearance half so ghastly." Again, for example, in chap. xxxii of *Nicholas Nickleby*, in the tenth monthly part (January 1839), Nicholas and Smike see the confusion of London thus: ". . . all these jumbled each with the other and flocking side by side, seemed to flit by in motley dance like the fantastic groups of the old Dutch painter, and with the same stern moral for the unheeding restless crowd."

These facts taken together suggest a conclusion somewhat different from Professor Maclean's but just as suggestive of the moral scope of *Pickwick Papers* and of the evolution of Dickens's genius, as well as of the relation of the inserted tales to the novel as a whole. For although "The Stroller's Tale" initially contrasts with the comic atmosphere of the main story, it contrasts much less when re-read with an awareness of the dark world Mr. Pickwick comes later to know. Moreover, by January 1839 Dickens could see the world of *Nicholas Nickleby* explicitly in such terms and with "the same stern moral." Logically, then, by the terms of his maturing conscious moral vision, Dickens would and did look back at *Pickwick Papers* as an entirety ten years later and see, imaginatively and intuitively ordered there, Holbein's vision.

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The Aspern Papers: A COMEDY OF MASKS

INTERPRETERS OF *The Aspern Papers* have, I think, unduly stressed its moral seriousness. This opinion seems tenable if one ponders what James means by "the idea" of a novel. A statement in "The Art of Fiction," written the same year (1888), offers the critic a perspective on the question:

This sense of the story being the idea, the starting-point, of the novel, is the only one that I see in which it can be spoken of as something different from its organic whole; and since in proportion as the work is successful the idea permeates and penetrates it, informs and animates it, so that every word and every punctuation point contribute directly to that expression, in that proportion do

we lose our sense of the story being a blade which may be drawn more or less out of its sheath. The story and the novel, the idea and the form, are the needle and thread.

These observations also recognize the quality of art that James calls “the test of execution.” How he attains it is another thing, for it “is his secret,” though “not necessarily a jealous one.” But “he cannot disclose it as a general thing if he would.” Indeed not! The secret constitutes the burden of the critical act. This responsibility involves an attentive study of the scrupulous craftsmanship that controls the design of the idea in its ultimate form—the completed novel.

Traditional interpretations of *The Aspern Papers* ignore this implicit caveat. They generalize themes of the violation of privacy and spiritual sterility from the action level of the story. In effect, meaning is educed from the naked idea of inspiration, James’s conviction that an anecdote he had heard was worth fictional development. Without reading the novel itself, one can peruse its summary in the *Notebooks* and come with the interpretations I have mentioned:

Certainly there is a little subject there: the picture of two faded, queer, poor and discredited old English women—living on into a strange generation, in their musty corner of a foreign town—with these illustrious letters their most precious possession. Then the plot of the Shelley fanatic—his watchings and waitings—the way he *covers* the treasure. . . . It strikes me much. The interest would be in some price that the man has to pay—that the old woman—or the survivor—sets upon the papers. His hesitations—his struggle—for he really would give almost anything.

In the novel James retains even the price for the papers in the anecdote—marriage. Ostensibly, then, the elaboration of this idea into a long narrative is misspent virtuosity if the reader can infer no more from it than from the entry in the *Notebooks*.

James’s feeling of triumph in the execution of the work precludes this view. The reader, therefore, is under obligation to seek out creative mutations of the central inspiration. Here the preface to *The New York Edition* is helpful. Answering a critic who protests his distortion of the character of Jeffrey Aspern, he writes:

“Where, within them, gracious heaven, were we to look for so much as an approach to the social elements of habitat and climate of birds of that note and plumage?”—I find his link with reality then just in the tone of the picture wrought round him. *What was the tone but exactly, but exquisitely, calculated,*

the harmless hocus-pocus under cover of which we might suppose him to have existed? This is the tone, artistically, of "amusement" (italics mine).

This passage tells us that James's grotesque heroines actually "cover" or *mask* their relationship with the past. This means that they also mask the meaning of Aspern's poetry, which is, at least in the narrator's mind, a genuine recreation of the past in terms of its beautiful women. Nor can we forget that James deliberately masks Juliana:

Then came a check from the perception that *we weren't really face to face*, inasmuch as she had over her eyes a horrible green shade which served for her *almost as a mask* (italics mine).

Thus the mask of Juliana and the mask of Aspern's poetry conceal "the harmless hocus-pocus" of his life in Venice. And so we glimpse an aspect of the story's tone of amusement, a flavor of narration described in the preface to "The Pupil" as an "addict[ion] to seeing 'through'—one thing through another, accordingly, and still other things through *that*."

The extension of this tone is controlled by the conversion of the raw anecdote into a device of irony, a process that James links in the preface with a desire "to fantasticate" the past of Venice:

that impulse . . . to project the Byronic age and the afternoon light across the great sea, to see in short whether association would carry so far and what the young century might pass for on that side of the modern world where it was . . . bound with youth in everything. There was a refinement of curiosity in this imputation of golden strangeness in American social facts.

In accord with this perspective the hero is made the agent and victim of the new world's view of the old. He adores Aspern because the latter, while in Europe, was able to transcend what in America "was nude and crude and provincial" and to find "the means to live and write like one of the first; to be free and general and not at all afraid; to feel, to understand and express everything." This rebellion against traditional social facts—the conventions of a culture still under the influence of Puritan morality—induces the narrator to discover innumerable nuances of illicit love in Aspern's poetry; for he takes "for granted that Juliana had not always adhered to the steep footway of renunciation. There hovered about her name a perfume of impenitent passion." And so an adolescent curiosity determines his subjective impression of the Byronic age.

James thereby establishes him as a subject of ridicule, and he proceeds to mock his attempts to relive vicariously the tenuous legend of an American Don Juan. In this view the hero's scholarly interest in the personal letters of the poet both reveals and conceals a preposterous narcissism. The comicality of this masked attitude is conveyed in the narrator's boundless delight in Aspern's supposed amorous conquests:

"Orpheus and the Maenads!" had been of course *my foreseen judgment* when I first turned over his correspondence. Almost all the Maenads were unreasonable and many of them unbearable; it struck me that he had been kinder in his place than—if I could imagine myself in any such box—I should have found the trick of (italics mine).

The rejection of women implicit in the Maenad image defines the sensibility of the narrator. His fear of their sexuality, appropriately, identifies him as a Victorian Don Juan.

Inevitably, James forces this idea to inform and permeate the action of the novel. This is first indicated in the termination of the rather inane dialogue with Mrs. Prest in the opening chapter. Asked what expedients he will resort to in order to obtain the letters, he farcically debates the most desperate measure: "I hesitated a moment. 'To make love to the niece.'" Significantly, this narcissism is implied earlier in the same chapter:

I owed definite information as to their possession of the papers—laying siege to it [the Bordereau palace] with my eyes while I considered my plan of campaign. Jeffrey Aspern had never been in it that I knew of, but some note of his voice seemed to abide there by roundabout implication, and in a "dying fall."

The quotation rhetorically planted in this passage captures James in the initial expansion of the anecdote. "Dying Fall," no doubt is excerpted from Orsino's opening speech in *Twelfth Night*. It depicts the Duke in a surfeit of love of love. He loves Olivia from the standpoint of self in a false reciprocity, for she is merely "fancy's queen." Similarly, the narrator seeks in Aspern's papers a vicarious eroticism.

This dissociation of sensibility is also dramatized in the changing of the historical setting of the anecdote, the alteration of Florence to Venice. The city of canals, from the time of the Renaissance, has been a symbol of corrupt love, and thus it serves James as the correlative of his hero's emotional values. Equally important, the city belongs to the history of the Don Juan legend, for Byron wrote his life of the

notorious libertine there. A provocative detail that James borrows for his story indicates that he had the poem in mind. It seems beyond question that Juliana is a surrogate of the beautiful Donna Julia in the first Canto who seduces the sixteen-year-old Don Juan. By association, the artist advises the reader that Juliana seduced Aspern, not to the contrary, as the narrator thinks. The personality of the old woman suggests that in her youth she was no swooning girl but rather an aggressive and resourceful intrigant. James affirms this inference in the context of an implicit discussion of Aspern between Juliana and the protagonist. When he accuses her of being inhuman, she ironically responds: “Inhuman! That’s what the poets used to call the woman a hundred years ago. Don’t try that; you won’t do as well as they.’” This observation on the poet’s past deepens James’s tone of amusement; it brings to the foreground the comic self-deception of the hero.

James depends upon still other historical references to unmask the narrator’s perverted sensibility. The latter’s allusion to a depraved Assyrian king, for example, serves this purpose: “The worst of it was that she looked like an old woman who in a pinch would, like Sardanapalus, burn her treasure.” Her treasure, of course, is the collection of Aspern letters. And since the king is said to have destroyed all the tokens of his debased voluptuousness, then the professed scholar fears an identical loss. A similar verbal slip distorts his impression of one of Tina’s reminiscences. He, anachronistically, relates her past to the decadence of ancient Venice—the sexual license of the *commedia dell’arte* and the adventures of its scandalous rakes: “Her tone, hadn’t it been so decent, would have seemed to carry one back to the queer rococo of Goldoni and Casanova.” This passage, it would seem, clearly establishes the hero’s Don Juan fixation. Moreover, in the light of Goldoni’s activity in the *commedia dell’arte*, it suggests James’s interest in the comic mask of the Italian theatre as a literary device. The career of Don Giovanni, of course, was a stock theme in this drama, and Olympia and Pasquale, the names of the servants in *The Aspern Papers*, were stereotyped in the same roles.

In any event, there are coarse and comical echoes of the *commedia* in the novel, for James burlesques its familiar intrigues in the narrator’s inordinate interest in the emotional lives of Olympia and

Pasquale: "I should have been glad if he had fallen in love with Miss Bordereau's maid or, failing this, *had taken her in aversion*" (italics mine). This patent obsession with erotic transference parallels his speculations about the content of Juliana's letters, and the note of sadism in his vicarious fantasy also reflects the cruelty inherent in narcissism. These morbid inclinations are also manifested in his citations from British history. Queen Caroline, the wife of a depraved king, and Lady Hamilton, the mistress of Admiral Nelson, both disclose the nature of his disordered imagination. This pattern of relationships, I submit, substantiates James's "fantastication" of the Byronic age in its recreation through the undeveloped sensibilities of a Victorian Don Juan.

This view of his artistic execution enables one to isolate other facets of comic action in the narrative. The narrator's simulated love of flowers, for instance, has been accepted as a plausible motive for desiring an apartment in Miss Bordereau's palace. Yet the excuse is egregiously absurd. It is a piece of chicanery borrowed from the complications of the sentimental novel, not from a mature understanding of the Byronic age. And, naturally, Juliana is quick to penetrate this mask of romantic deceit. When the hero unprotestingly pays the exorbitant rent, she is convinced that he is a dupe of love. James crystallizes these implications in a remark made by Juliana after the women have been deprived of their daily quota of flowers: "What else should you do with them? It isn't manly to make a bower of your room.'" The episode of Aspern's picture can be similarly construed. The narrator deems it a sacred relic, but its value is reducible to the preconceptions it sustains in regard to Juliana's intimacy with Aspern, especially their romantic meeting in the studio of her father. As on the occasion of the apartment rental, Juliana simply teases the desire of the hero; then she virtually desecrates her alleged lover when he offers himself as a possible purchaser of the portrait: "I should want your money first!" she retorted rudely." This incident, along with her other selfish and cynical attitudes, indicates that Juliana is not a collector of sentimental mementos. She would sell anything at a price, and James's dialectic continually stresses this fact. It may be that even Aspern did not escape identical haggling in regard to other things.

This conclusion, from the standpoint of tone, would coincide with the inverted Don Juan theme of the novel. James, much earlier, in *Daisy Miller* had resorted to the same comic device in naming the heroine's innocuous attendant in Rome Giovanelli. In *The Aspern Papers* this devaluation of the irresistible lover is carried over into the narrator's relationship with Tina. As her name suggests, she is a feminine Christ, the means of redemption for the pathological curiosity of her friend. Unwittingly, inflamed by his passion for Aspern's papers, he has enacted the role of a lover in his intercourse with Tina. This misunderstanding culminates in her proposal, a comic adaptation of the swooning innamoratas of the Don Juan legend. His belated decision to accept her offer of marriage, a triumph of will over passion, constitutes another travesty on this tradition of love. Their mutual conduct extends the comedy of masks initiated by his infatuation with the illusion of Byronism in Aspern's poetry. At the end of the story the poet's portrait hangs above his writing table, the handsome mask that generated the delusion of the biographer. Appropriately, the last lines in the novel testify to the continuing involvement of the Victorian Don Juan in the dead ashes of a vicarious passion: "When I look at it, I can scarcely bear my loss—I mean of the precious papers." Ironically, he has rejected emotional salvation. As a living woman, not immune to the transfiguration of love, she could have cured his narcissism. Even he unconsciously perceived this in "her look of forgiveness" and "of absolution," that "beautified her" until "a real darkness . . . descended on [his] eyes" when she told him that the papers had been destroyed. Unfortunately, he could not lay aside his mask of self-deception—the love of self of which Aspern was a fetish.

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K. J. FIELDING'S *Charles Dickens*

K. J. Fielding, distinguished Dickens scholar and one of the editors of the forthcoming Pilgrim edition of Dickens's letters, has written in *Charles Dickens: A Critical Introduction* (Longmans: \$3.50) a valuable survey of Dickens's works and of his life as it was related to