

Cryptic Relations in Henry James's "The Aspern Papers"

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Henry James's "The Aspern Papers" is a novella that signals its part in the advent of the modern. Beyond Miss Bordereau and her putative niece Tina, there are cryptic relations in the sense described in Derrida's writings on cryptophoria and the archive. Consideration of Derrida's late work allows a reading where a psychoanalytic understanding of yearning, loss, and death can be read as important structural elements of the novella. The action of the story, on the face of it, is simply laid out, hinging as it does on the attempts by the nameless narrator, a literary biographer, ostensibly to obtain the papers of the fictional dead literary writer, Jeffrey Aspern. Enclosed in a chest, the eponymous archival papers' embodied aspect can function as a cipher for the casket of Aspern's literal body and as the site of cryptic doubling and splitting of the narrator's subjectivity whilst he enacts patterns of aberrant mourning. As archive and object, as the materiality of the written word, the literary papers allow consideration of trace, signaling, and the demands of Derrida's *mal d'archive*. There is an aporia in causal explanation regarding the events for the reader. It is rather the chthonic structures, following Derrida, that allow us properly to navigate the novel.

The protagonist, James's typical narrator-observer, holds an obscured centrality in the work, gesturing aesthetically at any but his own interior. When he speaks, he does so in the "nom-de-guerre" (AP 7) rather than his own name. He is Derrida's modern Subject: "one's subjectivity can never achieve mastery or authenticity, but is always already divided, broken up, by an experience of mourning" (Critchley, *Living* 40). He at once disavows and confirms the articulation of a borrowed self, a ventriloquizing that he projects onto other key characters:

"That question's your aunt's; it isn't yours. You wouldn't ask it if you hadn't been put up to it."

“She didn’t ask me to ask you,” Miss Tina replied without confusion.
(AP 31)

The narrator’s (split) self is doubled and inscribed in the written words of Aspern and in his spectral presence, and it is this linguistic Symbolic order that exerts itself, calling from the crypt. This psychic emanation has called him here, and he is doing its bidding. So strange is the narrator’s unstable, yet central, presence, we as readers are left to question what it is that is finally his motivation in pursuing the papers, especially as regards the compulsion—“a fine case of mono-mania” (2)—of his professed aim, with its accompanying lack of direction and application. It is this compulsion and his repetitious enactment that signal the presence of a crypt. The papers are, as literary remains, always already an archive. For Derrida, “nothing is less reliable, nothing is less clear today than the word ‘archive’” (Derrida, *Archive* 90). The archive results in the *mal d’archive*, a fever or circuit of desire:

never to rest . . . to run after the archive . . . to have a compulsion, repetitive, nostalgic desire for the archive, an irrepressible desire to return to the origin, a homesickness, a return to the most archaic place of absolute commencement. (91)

For the narrator, this place of absolute commencement is also the traumatic core of the cryptic relations, and his desire is coded by the demands of the archive.

The house the narrator enters is cast as a house of mourning, steeped in the presence of the past. The house is a multiple sarcophagus, as if of a Pharaoh, or the multiplying of *matryoshka* dolls, the papers in a casket within a casket. Tina has “a look of musty mourning, as if she were wearing out old robes of sorrow that would not come to an end” (AP 69). The narrator describes himself as one “that forces his way into a house of mourning” (46). The chest-as-casket functions as Freud’s *Kästchen*, or *Kasten*, the place of castration and death, with the dead Aspern as the inconceivable presence of annihilation—“it is always a dead person who is death’s delegate” (Rickels 26). He seeks to find the place of burial, looking for the chest that contains the papers, obsessing over the secretary in Miss Bordereau’s room, “a tall secretary . . . of the empire . . . a receptacle somewhat rickety” (AP 53). He is attempting here to “ontologize remains, to make them present, in the first place by identifying the bodily remains and by localizing the dead” (Derrida, *Specters* 9). If the casket is identified with the remains of Aspern, the elderly Miss Bordereau is a medium or technology for communion with the dead, as relic/reliquary. The narrator looks in her for “a single pair of eyes into which his had looked or to feel a transmitted contact in any aged hand that his hand touched” (AP 4).

The sense of transmission quoted here is key. The narrator hopes to decipher that which is being telegraphed from the crypt, but the transmissions themselves are problematic. James himself was an enthusiastic sender of telegrams, of which 136 are still extant (Calendar). Ten years after the publication of “The Aspern Papers,” James frames a story around telegraphy in another novella *In the Cage*, with a similarly anonymous narrator trying to decode messages. Henry James the author and the nar-

rator of “The Aspern Papers” are both steeped in the modern, “the age of newspapers and telegrams and photographs and interviewers” that the old lady has managed to circumvent—“it was a revelation to us that such a self-effacement was possible in the latter half of the nineteenth century” (AP 4). The modern male narrator has indeed fallen into the discourse of the master/author, and the female characters are bound as elements in his narcissistic circuit.

Despite Juliana’s resistance, the papers-as-archive exert their own performative aspect of modernity’s technologies in their broadcast-ready audience. The narrator conjures the medium and performativity of a broadcast-receiving public when he remarks in attempting to convince Tina to let him see them that the papers would be of “immense interest to the public” and that he has invaded the house “like a reporter” (46). The narrator, with his uncertain core and unlikely relations, is Benjamin’s man of the technological age: “an age of maximum alienation of men from one another, of unpredictably intervening relationships which have become their only ones” (133).

It is possible to detect a telegraphy of caesura, a kind of Morse code, in the frustrations of the narrator’s plans. These arhythmic pauses in action allow meaning to emerge—“without interruption,” Derrida maintains, “no signification could be awakened” (*Writing* 87). In these silences is the call of the crypt, the undertow of the archive. They conjure a very modern silence redolent of Beckett and Cage. For the reader too, our ability to discern the intermittences, noise and gaps, the interference of the modern world, rather than a clarity of signal, is the haunting of the world of technological modern.

The narrator’s insinuation into the household is met with rebuff after rebuff. When he attempts more contact with Tina, “abruptly, and without any ceremony of parting, she quitted me and disappeared” (AP 21); “I had no results to speak of . . . I had not . . . had even a moment’s contact with my queer hostesses” (22); “The old lady had promised to see me, but the old lady thought nothing of breaking that vow” (22); “she turned away from me quickly as she had done . . . for a long time, I never saw her . . . I had never met so stiff policy of seclusion” (23); “[I] worked and waited and mused and hoped” (26); “the truth of it was that she began to hide again” (37). James includes the playing of Schubert’s music in various *mises-en-scène* throughout his works. He may well have had the more complex operation of Schubert’s music in mind in his use of caesurae in “The Aspern Papers.” Falconer suggests of “The Aspern Papers” that the disjunctures in Schubert’s middle section of the *andantino* of his *A Major Sonata* act as models for the work. These create a sense of disorder and ambivalence that in literature might produce “the loss, or temporary loss, of the sense of the work as a whole” (13). Anticipating here the musicality of modernist works such as Joyce’s *Finnegan’s Wake*, beyond “pleasurable effects of ambiguity” (Falconer 13), the arhythmic pulse that is set up by the variable interval regularity of these caesurae lend them not only a strange musicality but an aspect of coded telegraphy from beyond the grave. Here is seduction by sensation—here is Derrida’s trace, the work produced in the action, death.

The structural logic of these pulsing caesurae, these obscure frustrations and the quiet that follows, is a signaling to the narrator from the crypt, but as encryptions that he cannot read. These slippages, these interferences, are a cryptic code that belongs to the technology within the ark. They belong to the logic of the crypt itself and not to that of the listener. The narrator is jarred like the marionettes in Kleist’s

vision: “often, when merely shaken in a haphazard fashion, the entire mechanism slipped in to a kind of rhythmic motion” (Kleist 265); the reader too, is shaken into step by this patterning. Miss Prest remarks that having begun so easily by gaining rooms in the house he was “lacking boldness [and] wasting precious hours” where he has failed to follow through any further. He is clearly conflicted and does not see the inconsistency of his approach, pleading that he “was really so vigilant” (AP 22). The reader is left to question what his aims might be at a more chthonic level, if not merely to obtain the papers. Rather than pursuing his aims directly, he enters into looped behavior: “I took walks and drives . . . spent hours seated smoking . . . I reflected I had better try a short absence first” (67). The repetition of approach, frustration, and pause that structures the action of the narrator is an enactment and repetition of encrypted trauma, a repetitious behavior that is itself the equivalent of a secret speech or hoarded pleasure: “This experience, this memory and this desire have given birth to a secret speech whose words . . . acquire the status of the coveted object” (McCarthy 85). The crypt is itself a fetish, after a “taboo-forming experience of a catastrophe, and finally beneath the catastrophe, [it becomes] the perennial memory of a hoarded pleasure” (Abraham and Torok 22). The pursuit and frustration have themselves become the coveted object; he judges these days “almost the happiest of [his] life” (AP 26). He enacts and encourages from the start a structure of repetition, where Juliana and Tina will always already refuse him, the repetitious action itself completing the desirous circuit.

The implied and real economy that surrounds Miss Bordereau, viewed in relation to James’s historical known telegraphic habit, is one in which words are not only encoded as part of a new economy but also what could be conceived as a form of embodiment in this accounting: “the electric network was integrated into the facsimile of a typical Victorian countinghouse . . . the Victorians were accustomed to seeing words as commodities to be weighed and measured before” (Morus 227). Ultimately the narrator fantasizes an exchange of himself for the papers in an economy of mystical union with Aspern: “It seemed to me I *could* pay the price” (AP 80). During moments of caesura within this repetitious circuit, the narrator turns inward in his own fantastic dialogue, conjuring the specter of the writer Aspern, the Father into which the narrator collapses his own desire: “his bright ghost had returned to earth to assure me he regarded the affair as his no less than mine” (24). He pictures himself in a mystic companionship with Aspern—“I had invoked him and he had come; he hovered before me half the time” (24)—in a way that J. Hillis Miller interprets as homosocial if not straightforwardly homosexual (23).

Matthew Jordan finds in James’s *The Altar of the Dead* a central character “who allows his connection to the past to drain his capacity in the present” (77). Jordan recalls that James was “struck by the rudeness and coldness” (79) of the public response to his friend Woolson’s death, which Jordan sees reflected in the short story. He suggests a complex attitude to remembrance. Rather than an expression of simple loss, there is a happy habitation to be found in the meditation and recovery of memory of the dead, a making space for them in the world (78). Yet what Jordan ultimately finds is that the dead serve as a screen on which desire can be projected and is the character’s ultimate undoing (82) and that what might be a positive value of piety is undone by narcissistic projection.

As projection, the Orphic legend Aspern's pursuer conjures from the crypt is fractured. If Aspern—"not a women's poet" (AP 3)—is in the underworld looking for his love and Juliana, not in the underworld, "an oddly un-spliced Eurydice" (Holland 144), then this displacement might see Orpheus/Aspern bestow his grace on the narrator instead, who is happy to cast Juliana as one with the Mænads—"unreasonable and many of them unbearable" (AP 3). In this we can construct Miss Bordereau as a material screen upon which the narrator can project his circumlocutory desire for the lost father, Aspern, and the Logos, substituting her for the Word itself: "I was really face to face with the Juliana of some of Aspern's most exquisite and most renowned lyrics" (12). Miss Bordereau, wearing an actual screen that shades her eyes, is an Object that nonetheless looks back: she offers in turn her own economy, dangling her niece Tina as a substitute fetish, as phantom limb, a bodily prosthesis, as both a tool and a symbolic currency. Miss Bordereau is directly identified with exchange, as the meaning of her name in the French suggests: *bordereau*, a set of memoranda of accounts, and therefore as implied here, a symbolic debt. She is the prosthetic extension of the debt issuing from the casket. She demands the narrator's exorbitant monthly rent, escalating her economic and fiduciary demands, especially those concerning the niece, Miss Tina.

The eponymous papers that are an always, already archive are also *arkheion*, the seat or repository of the most holy (Ark), as well as for Derrida, etymologically the beginning—Arkhe, the place of the archons, from which comes "the speaking of the law" (Derrida, *Archive* 1–2). The narrator remarks explicitly of Aspern: "one doesn't defend one's god" (AP 12). The narrator is seeking the mystery or material inscription of his own originary: of Aspern he remarks "he had means to write and live like one of the first" (28). If Aspern is framed as the narrator's god, then these documents, these written words, constitute the trace, the tablets of the law, not only as Derrida's Logos but also as a phantasmatic projection and splitting/doubling of the narrator. Significantly it is not known at all to him (and the reader) whether they are extant, and yet he has enacted this complicated and seemingly unproductive venture on the grounds that they might be. Tablets of the Law, the mystic pad of the Name-of-the-Father—of the circulatory bond between deity, or the logos and his people—they are also, as love letters to Miss Bordereau, an accounting, a balance sheet of those relations, a judgment. The papers are destroyed as a consequence of a refusal of that impossible covenant and economy. The crypt demands that the narrator repeat the pursuit-and-obstructions that structure the novel, the repetitive practice that ultimately copies itself, which has no aim but its own copying and repetition. It cannot be brought to completion without short circuiting the narrator's impossible mourning. As archive, however, it will always seek its own destruction: "The archive always works, and a priori, against itself" (Derrida, *Archive* 12).

It is possible, then, to situate James as the modernist, enacting traumatic loss in the increasing uncertainty of the stability of meaning and history. Perhaps it is that this novella, published in 1888 not long after the publication of Nietzsche's *The Gay Science* (1882), suggests James is, like Nietzsche, "traumatized by the death of God because he realizes it's a collapse of the basis of meaning" (Critchley, *Impossible* 95). The narrator pursues the material inscription (as he himself is also the doubled material inscription) of his dead god. The irreducible split in the Symbolic and the Name-of-the-Father, the loss of god-the-artist, in and without himself, is the traumatic center

that generates the narrative structure at the core of “The Aspern Papers.” After all, if the “linearity of the printed book is a puissant support of logocentrism” (Miller 5), then James’s commitment to the written word encodes also this loss as a *cri de coeur* of the author in “The Aspern Papers” (as in his fondness for telegraphy, in which each word had its cost and its accounting). James famously burnt his own private papers: “forty years of letters from his contemporaries, manuscripts, scenarios, old notebooks—and piled them on a rubbish fire in his garden” (HJL 436–37).

In terms of the uncertainty with which meaning and James’s sown archive might be put, he alludes, in a letter to his nephew Harry, to his “literary remains” as “my bones” and expresses the hope that they be protected from some “post-mortem exploiter” and “invading chronicler” (806). It is difficult, given this identification of papers and body, to construe this other than as a necrophilic future-fantasy of the penetration and defilement of his own body, a signaling to the impossible pleasure beyond his own death. Is this, then, a double-doubling: of James doubling as Aspern, as archive, demanding its own destruction? Cutting remarks on the exchange in James between corpus and corpse, which he equates with James’s hopes and fears for posterity (51). The absence of Aspern’s corpse and the elusive presence of the papers exists as a form of vanishing, which as a construct “names a power of imagination and writing to transform time, place, and the materiality of the corpse” (65). This vanishing, in the equating of the corpse with corpus, Cutting suggests involves a text dying (the burning of the letters). So doing involves a form of wish fulfilment on James’s part regarding posterity and critics’ defilement of his reputation and memory: Aspern’s letter evades the clutches of the unscrupulous biographer once and for all; Tina cremates them so that they can never be exhumed (68). Thus Cutting infers that for James “it is *better to be forgotten than mediatized*” (160).

The narrator can accede to the Law in the heterosexist exchange offered by the Misses Bordereau—subjection to the Father and avoiding castration. However, lacking the appropriate desirous circuit to close the wound of his mourning, he fails. Tina continues, after the death of Juliana, with these demands issuing from the crypt. In refusing to accept marriage to Tina, the narrator does not accede to the Law-of-the-Father. He remains castrated in the open wound of his own mourning. Is this James signaling to himself, echoing the legend of his own possible material castration on a fence when young (Tambling 109)? If so, it adds a layer of interpretation to the episode in the novella where, in his retreat from any consummation to do with Tina, the narrator ends up gazing on an equestrian statue of Colleoni, the condottiere known to have had three testicles and to have displayed them on his escutcheon, a detail presumed to be not lost on the encyclopaedically minded James. Veeder (after Tanner) notes that “‘Colleoni’ evokes the Italian word for testicle [‘coglione’] and Bartolomeo’s shield featured the image of testes” (35) and notes the narrator “flees to representations of the masculine ideal” (35), which might be constructed as the demand of the crypt.

Sequestered to the demands issuing from the crypt the narrator is offered the status of both puppet and mystical union with his god. In Kleist’s words, “grace . . . appears the purest in human bodily structures that are either devoid of consciousness or which possess an infinite consciousness, i.e. in the jointed manikin or the god” (273). Whilst modern man, according to Freud, has the capacity to become “a kind of prosthetic God . . . we will not forget that present-day man does not feel happy in his

God-like character” (738). The narrator’s prosthetic possibilities give him too much trouble—he was always, already going to refuse Tina—and consequently enable the anarchic function of the archive. He cannot break the cryptic circuit of his desire because the relations themselves have become the fetish, beyond that of achieving the papers themselves. They have enacted their own crypt effect, the tropographical displacement involving “everything a crypt implies: *topoi, death, cipher*” (Derrida, “Foreward” xiii). This fire in the archive is the inevitable obliteration/castration of the self and the agency of the narrator, of the structuring logic of his action and being. He could never have acquired the papers without short-circuiting his own desire—the narrator’s ghostly Aspern demands as much: “get out of it as you can, my dear fellow” (AP 75). The demand of the archive in “The Aspern Papers” is perhaps Henry James’s modern *mise-en-abyme*: following Derrida, “the human being is essentially defined by an experience of impossible mourning” (Critchley, *Living* 40). The splitting/doubling of himself in the papers, in the encrypted fetishistic/prosthetic reservoir of the Name-of-the-Father, and the destruction of the anarchic archive leaves the narrator in a state of abjection outside of a symbolic logic bearing a very modern open wound. As he himself says in the final words of the novel (and his qualification here is telling): “I can scarcely bear my loss—I mean of the precious papers” (AP 80).

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