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**WOMAN IN THE PLOT:
HENRY JAMES'S ASPERN PAPERS**

HANA WIRTH-NESSER

The *Aspern Papers* is the story of an unsuccessful attempt to reconstruct a story that took place many years before the beginning of the narrative. In this respect it is no different from many other of James's narratives, which Todorov has characterized as always being "the quest for an absolute and absent cause . . . The existence of an essential secret . . . which sets the whole present machinery of the narrative in motion . . . The cause is what, by its absence, brings the text into being" (145). The story in this case is that of a literary biographer obsessed with love letters penned by his subject, the author he has deified; letters he believes are the key to the story of Jeffrey Aspern's life and hence to the completion of a critical biography of the poet. But to reconstruct the story of Aspern's love of a woman who inspired his art, the narrator must contend with the guardians of those letters, two women, both unmarried, Aspern's former mistress and her niece. The unnamed narrator has a clear idea of the function of these women in his literary scheme, in Aspern's life, and in society. He is not prepared for what eventually transpires.

Before examining the structure of narrative retrieval in the text and its relation to gender, let us first locate *The Aspern Papers* among James's works. Within James's canon, *The Aspern Papers* takes its place generically among the artist tales, narratives that, in a self-conscious and self-reflexive manner, address a panoply of questions about art: the dynamic of literary production and reception, the moral and aesthetic choices faced by the artist, the fate of the text in a world of readers and critics, where hermeneutics is bound up with ethical commitments. Included

ing ability or Miriam Rooth's acting genius. In both cases, their creativity is something previously scripted—they are simply the chosen vehicles for an outside force. Moreover, their art is intertwined with their bodies; it has no existence apart from them. They are always the force of life as it challenges or undermines the world of art.

That women are never the artist but often the art, is, of course, not unique to James who is simply using one of the oldest conventions in Western civilization. If the male is always Subject and absolute, and the woman is always Other, in Simone de Beauvoir's terms, then woman can never be creator. The myth of male primacy in theological, artistic, and scientific activity is deeply rooted in Western culture and has been documented extensively. As Susan Gubar has pointed out, "This long tradition of the author as a male who is primary and the female as his passive creation . . . clearly excludes women from the creation of culture, even as it reifies her as an artifact within culture" (247). James's fictions are virtuoso reenactments of this trope. In *The Aspern Papers*, women guard, sleep on, control, and eventually burn the sought-after literary papers necessary to the biographical critic, the narrator of the tale, if he is to reconstruct the life of the poet, Jeffrey Aspern. In this tale and within the rest of his canon, James goes beyond simply depicting male artists and female muses. He develops intriguing variations of the female "artist," showing, for example, how the female can develop a displaced aesthetic drive that results in a passion for manipulation and power, for using the lives of others as the raw material for her creative energies—Madame Merle, Olive Chancellor, Kate Troy, Juliana Bordereau.

The Aspern Papers presents an interesting case in the poetics of James, where the structure of the tale, the search for the absent and absolute cause, is intertwined with the art theme, with female characterization, and with the more general issue of artistic creation and gender.

What exactly is the story which the narrator of *The Aspern*

in this genre are tales such as "The Author of *Beltraffio*," "The Lesson of the Master," "The Real Thing," and "The Figure in the Carpet." In these tales, apprentices, critics, painters, or other representative figures in the world of art are in search of some elusive element that promises success in their various artistic endeavors (Wirth-Nesher). In every case, the artist figures are male, and the women characters in the tales always play subordinate parts, sometimes as the muse who, according to her traditional role, inspires the artist to create, sometimes as the impediment to artistic creation, sometimes as an enigmatic figure whose relation to the artist's creativity is shrouded in mystery. In "The Author of *Beltraffio*" the artist's wife bears the name of an illustrious literary muse, Beatrice, but she is actually a Puritanical figure who opposes and annihilates art; in the "The Lesson of the Master," the enigmatic lesson concerns woman's rightful role in the making of art, but only in terms of the male artist's need for her—does woman enhance or inhibit the artist's creativity, and what is the price of renouncing romantic love? In "The Figure in the Carpet," a woman appears to possess the secret of the figure only because she has been the confidante of her literary husband, but she's not telling.

Woman's secondary place within the world of artistic creativity is a common motif in the rest of James's canon as well. Woman is rarely an artist herself, but rather a model or muse, and often, like Pygmalion, the work of art itself. Woman can inspire the making of art, she can impede its execution or reception, but she cannot create art herself. Isabel Archer's transformation into a portrait is the most striking example of this motif. When female characters *are* writers, they are scribes of the lowest order, sensational journalists like Henrietta Stackpole or sentimental hacks, like Susie Stringham, churning out Harlequin romances. When they are creative individuals, they create with their bodies, not with pens, paint brushes, or chisels, and they do so intuitively, the creative force speaking through them, without the genius of hard-earned craft, such as Verena Tarrant's mesmerizing speak-

Papers attempts to reconstruct, the story which haunts the narrative of the strategies to acquire the letters? From the perspective of the narrator, it is the story of the romance between Jeffrey Aspern and Juliana which, according to his philosophy of art, is valuable information contributing to a better understanding of the love poems written for and inspired by Juliana. As a literary biographer, he is obsessed with the letters, which he sees as the documents containing the secret of Aspern's great artistic achievements. He and his collaborator, or in his terms his "fellow worshipper" (156), have already opened "lights into his life," while this one area remains in the dark, the area of Aspern's romantic attachment and desire.

Jeffrey Aspern hovers over the tale like a deity, the force of art over the force of life, the force of romance over expediency. Within the romantic view of the imagination maintained by the narrator, he, as a literary critic, is merely a secondary figure in the enterprise of art, once removed from the genuine power of the imagination. And just as Jeffrey Aspern, the male poet, towers over the narrator in the realm of art, so Juliana Bordereau, the poet's muse and lover, towers over Miss Tina when it comes to romantic love. Both are second-degree shadows of their grand predecessors in art and love. When the narrator portrays Aspern and his lover as another Romeo and Juliet, he has no illusions about his own eligibility for that part:

just such an air as must have trembled with Romeo's vows when he stood among the flowers and raised his arms to his mistress's balcony. I looked at the windows of the palace to see if by chance the example of Verona (Verona being not far off) had been followed; but everything was dim as usual, and everything was still. Juliana, on summer nights in her youth, might have murmured down from open windows at Jeffrey Aspern, but Miss Tina was not a poet's mistress any more than I was a poet.

The narrator plans to use what he vainly perceives to be Miss

Tina's incipient love for him in order attain his goal as a man of letters. Miss Tina, in keeping with her gender role, nearly uses the critic's obsession with art to achieve woman's primary goal, marriage. But it is never that simple in a Henry James text. Even when it comes to gender roles, where James did conform to conventions, he did so with clever twists along the way.

As in any detective formula, story B (the sujet) exists in order to reconstruct the absent story A (the fabula). But this is a detective story only from the point of view of the narrator, who presumably knows most of the biography of Aspern, and sees this episode of his own life as motivated solely by the desire to obtain the last bit of evidence for the reconstruction of his subject's life story. He will fail in obtaining the papers, as they remain another instance of a permanent information gap in James, of the same order as the ones in the artist tales discussed above and in, to cite another example, *The Turn of the Screw* (Sternberg). We will examine how this particular permanent gap, the inaccessibility of the letters, is part of the theme of woman as objet d'art later in this paper. From the perspective of the reader, the total life of Aspern is both inaccessible and irrelevant. The reader recognizes, however, that there are telling analogues between the story of *The Aspern Papers* itself, story B, and the absent story A, or the life of Jeffrey Aspern, analogues that cast the dramatised narrator in a mocking and ironic light. For in story B, the unsuccessful quest for the papers also reads like a parodic reenactment of story A. In the latter, as the narrator perceives it, a man loves a woman who in turn serves him as his muse; she is useful to him for his art, but she is only an episode in his life. In story B a man *pretends* to love a woman who can serve him in his artistic-critical ambitions, but the woman does not let him get what he wants. In fact, Tina's relationship with the narrator can never be a reenactment of the love affair in story A, because one of the characters has made it her mission to obstruct any such replay. Juliana's purpose in story B is to control the situation and to manipulate the narrator into

marrying her ward. In short, Juliana is intent on orchestrating events so that Tina's life will *not* be a repetition of hers. Juliana's actions in story B, therefore, namely her goal to acquire money for Tina either to insure her independence from any man or to acquire a dowry that will insure her marriage, appears to be an undermining of her *own* role in story A as it is perceived by the narrator. That is, the narrator sees Juliana as the romantic fallen woman, whose life is centered on remembering her glorious romance, as the tarnished muse. Instead, we are shown a shrewd and calculating woman who cares about financial security and who engages in power games.

James is clearly treating the narrator ironically, demonstrating the blind spots and failings in the calling of the literary biographer who is himself too calculating and devoid of passion to understand Aspern's art, let alone his life, and too insensitive to the needs of the woman to understand Juliana's obsession for money. James is taking a hard look at the enterprise of criticism and literary biography and at the romantic cult of the author, as he did in many of his artist tales, where he unmarks the pretensions of aestheticism. But in *The Aspern Papers*, he is also examining the place of women in the world of imagination and art, and he does so by drawing on the cultural and literary tradition of two female types popular in Victorian fiction, the single woman as either the fallen woman or the spinster.

Miss Tina is the spinster; only one year earlier James had written of Olive Chancellor in *The Bostonians* that she "was unmarried by every implication of her being," and that "she was a spinster as Shelley was a lyric poet." As this judgement is rendered by a self-deluded and arrogant male, Basil Ransom, it is therefore suspect. The narrator in *The Aspern Papers* also sizes up Miss Tina as a spinster, and assumes that her unfortunate status will make her susceptible to male charms. As Nina Auerbach has argued, the Victorian old maid was no longer the witch of earlier periods, but rather a comic grotesque or a sacrificial angel. Yet such fictional old maids may sometimes "unleash

unexpected powers" (115). Auerbach writes, and this is certainly the case with Miss Tina, who does the unexpected, as James gives her the tale's climactic moment in her report of the burning of the papers.

Whereas Tina is the chaste old maid, Juliana is the fallen woman. In fact, the narrator *invents* a biography for her that conforms to this convention, in which she is the stereotypical bohemienne, the loose woman, the Violetta of La Traviata, banished from decent society, living and dying for illicit and forbidden love. Her name, Bordereau, signifies her living at the edge, the outer border of society. The narrator observes that

There hovered about her name a perfume of impenitent passion, an intimation that she had not been exactly as the respectable young person in general. Was this a sign that her singer had betrayed her, had given her away, as we say nowadays, to posterity? Certain it is that it would have been difficult to put one's finger on the passage in which her fair name suffered injury. Moreover, was not any fame fair enough that was so sure of duration and was associated with works immortal through their beauty? It was a part of my idea that the young lady had had a foreign lover—and say an unedifying tragical rupture—before her meeting with Jeffrey Aspern. She had lived with her father and sister in a queer old-fashioned expatriated artistic Bohemia.

The narrator creates a disreputable past for her to guard the reputation of his idol, and to provide some moral justification for her marginal and meager existence subsequent to the love affair. But Juliana is more than a fallen woman and former mistress; she was also Aspern's muse. James depicts the present Juliana as a practical and manipulative woman, a far cry from the fallen woman of myth.

Both Juliana and Tina are, of course, in exile from woman's conventional family-bounded existence, in Auerbach's terms, and the narrator is prone to see them as the stereotypes of the self-

sacrificing celibate and the aging virgin on the one hand, and the fallen woman and temptress on the other. In Victorian iconography, the two are often united, as both have ambiguous positions with regard to family life, and as one of the few respectable activities for spinsters was ironically the reclamation of fallen women (a topic Joyce cannot resist for *Dubliners* in "Clay"). When the narrator invades the bedroom in order to search for the precious letters, he is faced with both women, as Juliana collapses into Miss Tina's arms; in *The Aspern Papers* these stereotypes of the single woman collapse along with the women themselves.

James's notebooks can be helpful here in discussing both the gender-related and aesthetic themes in the work, particularly his use of female types. First, he notes that he was inspired to write the tale as a result of hearing an anecdote about letters of Shelley and Byron which were in the possession of Byron's aged former mistress (and mother of his daughter, Allegra), and of a thwarted scheme to acquire the letters which ended in the mistress's niece making marriage a condition of their transfer. "Certainly there is a little subject there: the picture of the two faded, queer, poor and discredited old English women—living on into a strange generation, in their musty corner of a foreign town. . . . Then the plot of the Shelley fanatic" (71-72). The women are *discredited*, James implies, because of the shady past of the former mistress, her sexual transgression costing her a respectable place in society. And the seeker of the letters is a fanatic, one who clearly adheres to a romantic cult of the author, who is himself discredited for his naive and voyeuristic attitude toward art.

When James did write the work, he made a point of discrediting the literary biographer, the tale's narrator. He is portrayed as a ruthless, calculating, and maniacal individual whose notion of reading a text and understanding literature is not only misguided, but downright treacherous and unethical. He cares more about knowledge of the life of the creator than the work of art, and he is so wanting as a human being that were he to obtain

the precious papers, he would be incapable of truly understanding them. As he is a character treated ironically and judged harshly, his comments about women must also be perceived as suspect. The text presents counter-evidence to his view of women, mainly in his meeting his match in Juliana when it comes to being calculating. He is a man quick to place observations in the context of gender roles, particularly because his plan depends on the two women's conforming to his idea of their character. The "divine poet," as he terms him, who "hangs high in the heaven of our literature for all the world to see . . . was not a woman's poet." As for his relation to Juliana, he concedes that "There had been a impression about 1825 that he [Aspern] had 'treated her badly,'" a phrase he is careful to distance himself from through quotation marks, and that "there had been an impression that he had 'served,' as the London populace says, several other ladies in the same masterful way." The narrator and his literary colleague have made it their mission to exonerate him, and "we had never failed to acquit him conscientiously of any grossness." In short, Aspern had always been a gentleman, whereas Juliana had never been a lady, as the narrator's sheer speculation, his *invention* of a prior lover for her would affirm. The other women who flung themselves at Aspern were, in the narrator's terms, "Maenads" pursuing Orpheus, in short, frenzied and mad women, women whose excessive sexuality made them orgasmic followers of Dionysius, while poor Aspern was actually Orpheus, heroic for his art and faithful in love. As for the Misses Bordereau, he claims that "they have the reputation of witches." When he pretends to court the ladies with his bouquets, he makes a point of defending his own manliness by naming philosophers, statesmen, and captains who have found amusement in cultivating flowers. In summary, for the narrator, Jeffrey Aspern was a romantic poet in the Byronic tradition, a man of great passions, besieged by mad women, and for a time devoted to a woman whom he did not deflower, but rather whose passions had made her disputable before his arrival. This is the story that the

literary biographer has invented, and this is the biographical narrative for which the letters, he is certain, can serve as conclusive evidence. Thus, the narrator has structured Aspern's life around conventional gender models, and he sees it as his literary mission to be the preservation of Aspern's manly reputation.

James finally demonstrates that the narrator is wrong not only when it comes to his understanding of art, in this case of literature, but that he is also wrong when it comes to his understanding of women. The Misses Borderreau do not act in accordance with his stereotypes; everything they do undermines those ideas. In his romantic and patriarchal view of art and life, he has underestimated the women's survival instinct. He is not prepared for Juliana's stress on finances, on her driving a hard bargain for the sake of providing for Miss Tina. He is also oblivious to the possibility of Miss Tina's actually being her daughter, the illegitimate child of the romance between Aspern and herself. Both the facts and hints in the text, and the source of the story being an affair of Byron that bore him a daughter, Allegra, make it likely that Miss Tina is Aspern's child. The narrator expects Juliana, as Aspern's muse, to be beyond business dealings, and he expects Miss Tina, as the middle-aged spinster, to be susceptible to his persuasion. But these women, like other Jamesian heroines, are a life force, and they are intent on obtaining some measure of freedom.

Although James did not create female characters who were artists, he did endow some of his women characters with the courage and the energy to resist stultifying conventions in society and in art. While Miss Tina is no rebel for woman's freedom, she is a victim of a power play set in motion by a man who sees woman as a means to an end, and a woman who *was* used as a means toward an end, in each case the end being art. At the end of *The Aspern Papers*, Miss Tina is free of the spectre of the letters which, by virtue of their content, could discredit her position in society, and by virtue of their value, could make her a partner in marriage based on deceit. As for the narrator, his

desire for the letters, his strategy for acquiring them, and his concept of literary interpretation are predicated upon his concept of woman. In exposing what James considered the narrator's misguided view of art, whereby he bypasses the text for a voyeur's view of the life, he necessarily exposes the narrator's equally misguided view of woman as types—object, mistress, muse, and spinster.

While *The Aspern Papers* calls these female stereotypes into question by James's characterization and theme, the text also *assumes* the convention of woman as art object or, as "objectification of the artistic process" (Rowe). Like the art novitiates in the artist tales, the narrator in *The Aspern Papers* learns that access to the world of art, even in the marginal sense of collecting literary biographical artifacts, exacts a price in life, some minimal commitment to the lives of others. To create, the artist cannot renounce life entirely, lest he be bereft of any subject. To read critically, to chronicle the life of the artist, the novitiate must undergo an initiation into the world itself. This world is the arena for human intimacy, for love in its many forms. To renounce this is to remain in the calculating, passionless room of the narrator at the end, with no letters to mark his love of Aspern's poetry; in their place, a portrait of the artist himself, a mock deity who serves as a constant reminder of the narrator's missed opportunity for life, that cost him the letters he coveted.

The letters must remain lost to the narrator because they are not simply a record of an artist's passion for a woman, they *are* woman, as long as woman is an emblem both of desire and of the artistic rendering of desire, as long as woman is Object, the created, and not Subject, the creator. Juliana Borderreau's very name suggests her status as Art: her name evokes Juliet on the one hand, and the letters themselves on the other, for "borderreau" is a paper, an invoice, the proof of a purchase. She is therefore both the ideal of romantic and youthful love as the archetypal character in Shakespeare's tragedy, and the commodity purchased,

the mistress, so that she encompasses both stereotypes of woman as object of love. The narrator tends to see her as the compromised woman, hidden away from respectable society; in the letters he hopes to find the Juliet that she was for Aspern. He has made sure, in his portrayal of Aspern, that his reputation is in no way compromised by his relationship with her. And he certainly does not intend to have his *own* reputation tarnished because of his scheme to obtain the papers. For the narrator, it is not a matter of conscience, only of reputation.

But this is precisely what he will not be able to do. For to possess such papers, it is necessary to confront life, to face the implications of his scheme for the women involved. When the papers pass from the bedroom of Juliana, indeed from her bed, to the hands of Miss Tina, they are clearly the emblem of desire, of passion for woman, of which he wants no part. Tina is also a "borderline," but in keeping with the shift from the romanticized life of Aspern, the genuine poet, to the shadow repetition in the life of the narrator, the papers pass from the bedroom to the kitchen, from the legendary bohemia of mistresses and forbidden pleasures, to the world of marriage. After Miss Tina, in a gender role reversal, proposes marriage and is rebuffed, she burns the papers, appropriately, in the kitchen. Miss Tina, the quiet rebel in his tale, will not take on the role of vestal virgin, guarding the flame of aestheticism; she will contribute to this artistic quest only as wife. She will exact the price of life from the narrator, a price that he is not willing to pay just as he is unwilling to acknowledge his own authorship of that marriage proposal. When faced with the loss of the papers he swoons, the last of the clever gender reversals executed by James (Rowe). The men cannot have access to Art, the women insist, without some prior commitment to Life. This may be a truism in James's world, but one that is rendered here with a characteristic turn of the gender screw.

James wrote *The Aspern Papers* at a time when he was acutely self-conscious about both the potential of the literary biographer

to intrude on the privacy of the artist and the potential of the bachelor to mislead the doting spinster. For James was living under the same roof, the Villa Brichieri, with Constance Fenimore Woolson, an American novelist and grand-niece of James Fenimore Cooper. James's own biographer has recorded the story of this intimate friendship about which he may have begun to feel uneasy. "He treated Miss Woolson as a friendly and charming old maid for whom he had a feeling of kindness because she was devoted to him. And now, through the wall of his ego, he was beginning to feel that perhaps she, on her side, nourished more affectionate thoughts than he suspected" (Edel 226). As readers of James's text and Leon Edel's biography, we can never know whether this sentence is of the same type as that of James's narrator in *The Aspern Papers*, whether Edel is being delicately, discreetly protective of the honor of his male subject whom he obviously reveres. We can be sure of only one thing—that there were letters, many of them, and that James and Woolson had made a pact to destroy their correspondence. When Woolson fell to her death several years later from an apparent suicide, James wrote to a friend, "Miss Woolson was so valued and close a friend of mine and had been so for so many years that I feel an intense nearness of participation in every circumstance of her tragic end and in every detail of the sequel" (358). When he revised *The Aspern Papers* he changed the name of the victimized but heroic grand-niece to Tina from Tita; the latter was the name of Woolson's central protagonist in her most popular novel, *Anne*. If the story of the narrator is an ironic reenactment of Jeffrey Aspern's life, then Henry James's life may be an ironic reenactment of *The Aspern Papers*. But the letters that can prove one narrative truer than another are not available to the reader, because they must be earned in life, and not obtained through art. The letters remain the work of art itself in which *Woman* is inscribed.

Tel Aviv University

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