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Henry James’s “The Aspern Papers”: Between the Narrative of an Archive and the Archive of Narrative

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If your life is burning well, poetry is just the ash.

—Leonard Cohen

In Henry James’s “The Aspern Papers,” an anonymous editor arrives in Venice with a single goal: to pursue the letters of the great American Romantic poet Jeffrey Aspern. At the time of the novella’s opening, Aspern has already been dead for many years and the letters in question belong to their recipient and his former mistress, Juliana Bordereau, an expatriate American who lives with her niece in a “dilapidated old palace” (NT 3). The narrator is so eager to obtain Aspern’s correspondence that he is willing to make love to Juliana’s middle-aged niece, Miss Tina, though he runs away when she offers the papers to him in exchange for marriage.¹ Following his escape, Miss Tina burns the letters and, as a result, Aspern’s archive is forcibly closed, its end achieved in the finitude established by destruction. And yet, from the ashes of Aspern’s archive emerges an *other* archive: an archive of narratives defined by the lack of Aspern’s letters.

In my reading of James’s novella, the anonymous editor epitomizes the Derridean notion of *mal d’archive*—“archive fever”—in his monomaniacal desire to preserve the titular private correspondence from the increasingly likely prospect of its destruction. Following the fundamental ambiguity of the Derridean concept, the narrator’s burning passion to add the letters to the Aspern archive is met by its op-

posite, the passion for burning the letters and their subsequent destruction. Thus, despite the narrator's claim that these hidden "treasures" (87) would be "of such immense interest to the public" (82), he cannot prevent their burning. Instead of erasing the trace of their record and obliterating their history, the burning of the letters results in a fundamental archival indeterminacy. Rather than closing off the past, the reduction of Aspern's papers to ashes opens it up: this erased archive allows for the formation of a *different* archive, consisting of narrative appropriations, ambiguities, unanswered questions, and second-guesses. The traces of this archive can be found in the narrator's self-reflective narrative, so riddled with absences and inconsistencies; in James's preface to the novella for the New York Edition; and in the numerous literary and visual adaptations of the text that have been produced since its original publication. Indeed, in its self-reflexive textuality this essay itself can be seen as one further component of Aspern's archive.

In light of the above, I propose to explore James's novella in terms of Derrida's notion of the burning archive, considering first the mobility informing the relationship between the individual archival records, which in turn upsets the temporal modality of the archive; second, the archivist's ambivalent relation to the archive's haunting disturbances and spectral presences; and third, the productive, often unpredictable, possibilities that emerge from the archive's open-endedness and undecidability, whereby the past is both remembered and re-created through repetition and interpretation. More important still, I contend that while the archive's openness to infinite readings, revisions, and additions is by definition threatened by its ultimate destruction (in this case incineration), this same threat is also a necessary catalyst for the creation of new work. To be more precise, even though in Aspern's case the burning of the papers might result in the potential annihilation of their memory, not only the archival impulse remains inexhaustible but this lack of a lack (of "the sacred relics," [NT 43]) generates a proliferation of writing coming out of the ashes. From the ashes of Aspern's archive, in other words, new writing emerges—and thus the destruction of these letters is also generative. As Derrida notes, "Ash awaits us" (SQ 20); it hovers, suspended between ground and ether, never quite going away, and thus always implying the possibility of a "spectral revenance" (18). There is no radical destruction "without any reminder, without any trace, without any ashes" (SA 42).² Ash is "something that remains without remaining, which is neither present nor absent, which destroys itself, which is totally consumed, which is a remainder without remainder. That is, something which is not" (PI 208). This something in the nothing, the remnant that eludes us but nevertheless continues to haunt us, is what drives the archive forward. The call not just to follow the trace, to grasp it and decipher it, but to add and supplement the lack of a lack is what keeps the archive open. To paraphrase Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas, the remnant is what keeps the archive alive and undecidable and "assures it a future" (28).

I am not alone in reading "The Aspern Papers" in relation to Derrida's *mal d'archive*. Eric Savoy has eloquently linked the auto-destructive—or, in Derrida's words, "archiviolithic" (FI 10)—drive of the archive in James's novella to James's own life and in particular to his sexual proclivities. Savoy persuasively argues that "James's archival conflagration, the destruction of 'evidence,' and the subsequent *absence*" is "simultaneously central to the biographical project and resonant with James's fictional poetics" ("Aspern's" 63). Similarly, Ryan Barnett and Serena Trowbridge read the

Aspern papers as “an archive of memory and of mourning” (8). Following Derrida’s play on the double meaning of *mal d’archive*, as both an archive fever and evil or sickness caused by the archive, the authors underline “the ethical imperative which the archive demands” but which the novella’s protagonist insolently defies (12). The archive in James’s text engages the reader in “an ethics of remembrance” that, they conclude, informs James’s fiction as well as his biography.³

These readings are paradigmatic of the tendency among Jamesian scholars to conflate the fictional archive with James’s biography and to read its destruction in relation to James’s own destruction of his private papers in the autumn of 1909. James described the decision to burn these files as consistent with “the law that I have made tolerably absolute these last years . . . of not leaving personal and private documents at the mercy of any accidents, or even of my executors!” (*HJL* 541).⁴ According to Leon Edel’s dramatic rendering of the fiery episode, “[a] great Anglo-American literary archive perished on that day” (436–37). This same incident in turn features prominently in scholars’ analyses of the frequency with which letters are destroyed in James’s other fiction—a characteristic that has led some to call him a “prodigious letter burner” (Rosenberg 257). Savoy’s claim that the recurrence of letter burning in James’s *oeuvre* “points inevitably to the climactic act in the biography” is emblematic of this view (“Literary” 116).⁵ I am not concerned, here, with the veracity of these claims and how they square against James’s own wish for authorial privacy but with how they fit into what we might call the broader Jamesian archive. Put differently, I am interested in the temporal ambiguities opened up by these readings that, I contend, are in keeping with Derrida’s own understanding of the destabilizing effects of a living archive. Building on the work of Sigmund Freud, Derrida’s theory of the archive highlights not only the cumulative effect of adding new records to an existing archive but the potential for each new addition to destabilize the archive and shift our understanding of the meaning of its other component parts. Crucially, Derrida argues that later events and experiences have the capacity to alter not only the overarching significance but the individual nature of prior events: thus a subsequent act and its record may alter the very identity of those that came before (Hamilton et al. 53). From this standpoint, what is interesting is not so much the correlation between James’s depiction of letter burning in “The Aspern Papers” and his destruction of his own archive; rather, it is the effect that the novelist’s actions have had on subsequent readings of his earlier work, fictional and nonfictional. The example of “The Aspern Papers,” persistently read as performatively enacting James’s committing to fire his own biographical materials (Savoy, “Aspern’s” 63), as “a pathetic comedy raised to the level of an extraordinary time-vision” (Edel qtd. in Rosenberg 257), as anticipating by twenty years and in fiction the novelist’s archival conflagration (Gage) and immortalizing his “tactics of secrecy” in the “ritual of the burning of eponymous love letters” (Anesko 3) reinforces the archive’s unstable and dynamic relation to time and destabilizes the relation between antecedents and consequences. Thus, the site’s openness confers on the novella an elusive kind of afterlife, based on its *destinerrant* appropriations, to use Derrida’s term (a coinage of destiny/destination and error/erring), which encapsulates his concerns of wandering, misdirection, and deviation, underscoring all textuality. If we assume, in other words, that Aspern’s archive is subsumed in James’s archive, the biocritical readings above suggest also how later records (in this instance, the 1909 “gigantic bonfire” [Edel 436]) can retrospectively

affect our understanding of an author's earlier work and alter its meaning and broader import.⁶ We find here confirmation of Derrida's argument that archives do not merely preserve the archival content of the past but that in their openness to revisions, (mis)appropriations, and (mis)interpretations they can in fact alter its very fabric. Archives, to an extent, re-write or re-invent the past: "The archivization produces as much as records the event" (*FI* 17). This is not to deny James's active decision to discipline his literary and private corpus,⁷ nor to underestimate the complicity between authorial revelation and concealment (Salmon 89), but to note the ever-changing construction that the process of meaning-making of the archive entails.⁸

Derrida's insistence that we recognize the archive's openness to the future is intrinsically connected with both the desire of the archivist to collect, organize, and conserve archival material for the future and his/her ability to interpret and illuminate them once he has done so. The endurance of the archive and its amenability to revision and re-interpretation, in other words, is contingent upon both the quality of the materials and the skills of the archivist. Fittingly, the scholar in James's story, who is also the narrator, describes himself as "a critic, a commentator, an historian, in a small way" who specializes in "the great philosophers and poets of the past; those who are dead and gone and can't, poor darlings, speak for themselves" (*NT* 89). He seeks to substantiate his status as a thoroughly unbiased biographical investigator by demonstrating the scientific nature of his research methodology and repeatedly reiterating his undying commitment to the truth. Thus he invokes, for example, "some definite facts" that he and his co-editor have found and that he has "brought with me from England" (1). He insists that Aspern's memory "had nothing to fear from us because he had nothing to fear from the truth" (6) and that, as a critic, he is committed to "lay bare the truth" (145). The narrator's abiding faith in objective historical analysis is evidenced by his efforts to find "the one living source of information"—that is, Juliana Bordereau—and in his belief that the letters buried among the "phantoms and dust, the mere echoes of echoes" (8) of archival records will shed light on Aspern's life more broadly. Thus, he informs Miss Tina that this quest "isn't for myself" and emphasizes that the papers would be of "such immeasurable importance as a contribution to Jeffrey Aspern's history" (82).

Nevertheless, the literary archivist will prove incapable of retaining his disinterested scholarly position. His obsession with "arriv[ing] at [his] spoils" at any cost stands in stark contrast with his commitment to dutifully produce archival evidence (11). He admits that "Hypocrisy, duplicity are my only chance. I'm sorry for it, but there's no baseness I wouldn't commit for Jeffrey Aspern's sake" (12). Having been persuaded that Jeffrey Aspern is the "property of the human race" (63) he wants to be sure that Aspern's corpus will be made available to anyone who knows how to "frame" this kind of knowledge. As a worshipful admirer acting "in the service of art" (43), he believes that "battered and tarnished frames" are sometimes "more desirable than the canvases themselves" (16). Indeed, rather than relying on facts and data, he violates the logic of the archive, toying with plots that are openly hypothetical and devising narratives that provide access to reconcilable meanings. For instance, the narrator's co-editor, Cumnor, develops a theory that, when young, Juliana may have been a governess, engaging in a clandestine relationship with the poet. He, however, "had hatched a little romance" (47) about Juliana's past, according to which she was the daughter of an American artist whose studio Aspern visited as a sitter. He

candidly admits that he “spins” theories about her “perverse and reckless, albeit . . . generous and fascinating character” (47), according to which Juliana might have had a foreign lover and “an unedifying tragical rupture” (48) before she met Aspern. In the eyes of the would-be historian, Juliana’s adventurous past would absolve Aspern from rumors that he had “treated her badly” (7), making him not the seducer but the victim of female wiles. Moreover, the narrator readily professes that he and his colleague “had never failed to acquit [Aspern] conscientiously of any grossness” they were “able to investigate,” although he in particular “judged [Aspern] more indulgently” than his friend (7). And, paradoxically, though the narrative plot is driven by the desire to acquire Aspern’s papers, the narrator confesses that the successful completion of this endeavor “would have been the most difficult episode to handle” (9). It is possible then that, had he taken possession of the (incriminating) letters and had he recovered them for the archive to ensure its conservation and completion, the editor would have become the *archon* of Aspern’s archive, its only guardian, determined alone to guard and guide its records, to preserve its memory by “superrepressing” (suppressing and repressing) its openness (*FI* 79). This *mal*, evil or malady of archivization, the irrepressible desire to create a “successful archive,” to impose coherence, permanence, and decidability to it, is identified by Derrida as “archival violence” (1) and is related to the death drive. Derrida notes that the urge to make the archive definitive involves “the violence of forgetting, superrepression . . . , the anarchival, in short, the possibility of putting to death the very thing, whatever its name, which carries the law in its tradition” (79).

These different points are worth examining more closely. For in turning mere speculations into facts, the narrator is not simply an unreliable narrator.⁹ Rather, his ambivalent stance toward Aspern’s archival material reflects the fact that archivists are not neutral observers: the process of archiving renders them actors in the plot and implicates them in a narrative that is as much about the burying and erasing of memory as it is about its preservation. By the same token, archival practice carries within it the seeds of its potential abuse. “Archivists are accomplices to the staging of objectivity,” Brien Brothman maintains (214). As a matter of fact, will the archive unfold the “truth” of the fiction surrounding Aspern’s liaison with Juliana or will it validate the narrator’s “fiction” of the truth about the divine poet being pursued by women, as Orpheus was pursued by the Maenads?¹⁰ Does the narrator really seek the knowledge that the papers are assumed to contain or is his belief of their existence a ploy to keep his affective attachment to Aspern alive? Finally, does the narrator sincerely want to take possession of the letters or does their conflagration in fact fulfill his unconscious desire to get rid of them?¹¹ Archivists want to establish the truth, but, as Derrida would have it, the archive has the signature of the archivist.

Derrida urges us to regard “the work of the archivist . . . [as] not simply a work of memory” but also a “work of mourning” (*SA* 54). The archive allows us to reckon with the dead, keeping them always alive “in us” without either assimilating them or entirely letting them go and, crucially, without reducing their alterity to sameness (Brault and Naas 9). According to Freud’s “normative” experience of mourning, an “interiorizing idealization” of the dead occurs and their loss is accommodated (9n8). By contrast, Derrida sees the work of mourning as a process of succeeding in failing and failing in succeeding,¹² as ghosts of memory continue to haunt us with their spectral presence and resist the closure that results from our internalization of their

memory. In the case of our literary editor-narrator, his yearning for Aspern's archival documents, be it his letters and/or his miniature portrait, is proof of his desire not to let the memory of Aspern fade away. Phrases like "mystic companionship" and "moral fraternity" (NT 43) suggest the narrator's wish to forge continuities through memory between Aspern and himself.¹³ Even more poignant is the narrator's desire to keep not Aspern's memory but Aspern *himself* alive "in him"—as indicated by the use of an apostrophic prosopopoeia when addressing Aspern's ghost.¹⁴ Or, to paraphrase Derrida, the narrator talks with Aspern's ghost, borrows his voice, lets him speak, and gives him speech (SM 176):

That spirit kept me perpetual company and seemed to look out at me from the *revived* immortal face . . . of a great poet who was my prompter. I had invoked him and he had come; he *hovered* before me half the time; it was as if his bright *ghost* had returned to earth to assure me he regarded the affair as his own no less than as mine and that we should see it fraternally and fondly to a conclusion. (NT 42, emphasis mine)¹⁵

Collapsing the binary between life and death, being and non-being, the divine Aspern stands in ghost flesh, speaking to his worshiper's living ears: "Poor dear, be easy with her; she has some natural prejudices; only give her time. . . . Meanwhile aren't we in Venice together, and what better place is there for the meeting of dear friends?" (42). Hovering impalpably between presence and absence, material embodiment and disembodiment, Aspern's specter is once again evoked when Juliana Bordereau draws out of her pocket "a small oval portrait" (93), "larger than the ordinary miniature and representing a young man with a remarkably handsome face, in a high-collared green coat and a buff waistcoat" (94). It is Aspern, although neither is willing at first to acknowledge him by name.¹⁶ Significantly, Aspern's ghost is summoned, through this "little picture" (100), to mediate between the narrator and the Bordereau women every time the first seems incapable of communing with the second. Thus, the dead poet's voice and visage are evoked to reach out to the living. For example, when the bemused narrator asks Aspern's portrait "what on earth was the matter with Miss Tina," Aspern "seemed to smile at me with mild mockery; he might have been amused at my case. I had got into a pickle for him—as if he needed it! He was unsatisfactory, for the only moment since I had known him" (131). Later, when the narrator is uncertain whether to accept or reject Miss Tina's marriage proposal, he seeks Aspern's advice through his portrait, and once again Aspern's ghostly voice rings in the narrator's ears: "What an odd expression was in his face! 'Get out of it as you can, my dear fellow!'" (133).¹⁷

"To ascribe or inscribe a name or a voice to the dead is performatively to recall the dead into being, to invoke, to resurrect," J. Hillis Miller notes (18). In Miller's view, the narrator's "resurrection" of Aspern is a characteristic trope found in many of James's ghost stories, in which efforts to "recall the dead into being" are motivated by a desire to revive the past. Nevertheless, just as the narrator's desire for Aspern's papers is frustrated and the truth about Aspern cannot be objectively known, so too, the story seems to say, the truth about the past cannot be fully known or possessed but only performatively repeated.¹⁸ While Miller views such performative prosopopoeias as a basic aspect of historical narration, for Derrida the presence of these haunting

disturbances is in fact indicative of archive trouble. As John D. Caputo contends, since the “living past cannot rise up from the dead and speak to us like dead stones,” we “must pick our way among the remains, wrestle with and conjure the ghosts of the past, ply them with patient importunity in order to reconstruct the best story we can” (120). In “The Aspern Papers,” this hauntedness is manifest in the ghosts and mementos that intrude into the supposed rationality of the Aspern corpus. By rendering the archive susceptible to doubt, revision, and re-interpretation, their spectral presence effectively keeps the archive alive. Driven by archival passion, Aspern’s critic readily abandons his professional position and summons the dead Aspern, making him an accomplice and an ally in extricating the letters from the hold of Juliana Bordereau. The letters’ presence feeds his hope that there are secrets about Aspern that he may still uncover. Their existence effectively affirms the “promise” of something to come, and, for as long as they remain outside the narrator’s grasp, it renders the story of Aspern open to revision. The narrator’s faith in the letters is emblematic of Derrida’s description of archive fever as a complex interplay of restlessness, yearning, and desire: “It is to burn with a passion. It is never to rest, interminably. . . . It is to have a compulsive, repetitive, and nostalgic desire” (*FI* 91).

But what happens when that desire is met by its object’s destruction? Does the burning of these letters, as Derrida would have it, amount to a “burning into ashes the very trace of the past” (*SA* 42)? James’s novella is consumed by what Cathy Caruth describes as an “archival drive that simultaneously yearns after memory and offers the possibility of its radical elimination” (75). Its dénouement involves the fulfillment of that possibility. Moreover, as a number of critics have noted, Aspern’s papers actually contain references to their own potential burning. Rosenberg even notes that “[o]ne need only slowly pronounce their author’s name: Aspern,” a near homonym for “ash, burn” (261). In this sense, the papers themselves can be seen to contain the self-destructive urge, the malady or “death drive” that co-exists with the archive-conservation drive (*FI* 10). The papers’ suggestion of their own destruction, in other words, exemplifies what Derrida terms the “invisible necessity” of destroying the hypomnesic archive (11). The prospect of annihilating the letters’ prosthetic memory always already coexists with the desire to conserve them. Read from this perspective, the story’s ending is particularly poignant. As he sits at a table, gazing at a miniature portrait of Jeffrey Aspern, the narrator reflects, “When I look at it I can scarcely bear my loss—I mean of the precious papers” (*NT* 143). This is an expression of mourning for both man and archive and suggests that with the destruction of the archive the man, too, has been destroyed *once again*.¹⁹ The annihilation of the archive is also—if only figuratively—an act of extreme violence.

At the same time, however, examining the novella’s ending through a Derridean lens enables us to acknowledge as well the imaginative possibilities opened up as a result of the papers’ destruction. Their burning, that is to say, allows for the emergence of a new kind of archival event. Critics have noted that Derrida’s *mal d’archive* is premised on the “silent vocation . . . to burn the archive and to incite amnesia” (*FI* 12). Moreover, the postscript to *Archive Fever* ends with an aporia of “what may have burned of . . . secret passions,” burned “without remains and without knowledge” (101). Derrida reminds us that it is impossible to know what has been left out of the archive, what secrets of the past are kept unknown, concealed forever. “One can always dream or speculate around this secret account. . . . But of the secret itself, there can be

no archive, by definition. The secret is the very ash of the archive” (100). Nevertheless, it is also true that fire does not annihilate *everything*. The ashes and cinders that remain signal what came before: they are evidence of an event (the fire in which the archive was burned). In this sense, they are components of an archive of their own.

“Ash,” writes Derrida, “is a figure of annihilation without remainder, without memory or without a readable or decipherable archive” (SQ 68). And yet, in his last seminar, *The Beast and the Sovereign*, his notion of the burning archive corresponds to his notion of a text’s “survival” or “living on” that is enabled with each re-reading (BS 132).²⁰ Having gone from being unread to being unreadable, Aspern’s burned papers at the end of the novella constitute an intangible presence, an unidentifiable trace whose materiality gives the tale its title. Moreover, the ashes of what survives in the fire, the remnant that is not blown away returns in the form of James’s text, which enacts what it cannot bring back into existence. This novella itself, in other words, constitutes an archival record because it archives an event made possible by its own immolation, collecting what is left in the ashes.

Fragile and resilient at the same time, ashes and cinders are the remnants that drive a host of critics and artists to feverishly respond to Aspern’s spectralized letters and imaginatively recreate their content. Diane Scholl, for example, has recently sought to imagine reading Aspern’s letters after their destruction. Read after burning, the ashes and cinders become dispatches or envoys whose incineration reanimates Aspern’s inaudible voice in the letters, awakening Tina to the secret of her parentage.²¹ Similarly, Michael Redgrave’s stage adaptation of James’s novella (1959) ends with Tina reading Aspern’s letters and recoiling in horror at their revelation that she is his granddaughter.²² In 1988, the Dallas Opera presented the world premiere of Dominick Argento’s opera *The Aspern Papers* in which the eponymous papers have been transformed into the score of an opera.²³ John Drury’s long poem, *Burning the Aspern Papers*, likewise reimagines the letters by re-writing their remnants in rhymed verse.

One could go on citing the literary adaptations, artistic renderings, and critical analyses that have sought to recreate Aspern’s letters—“*the remains* of what does not remain” (CI 69, emphasis mine)—to the extent that it would be difficult to decide whether “the letters are so much burned as reborn” (Rosenberg 256). Performing what Derrida calls “a truly ‘pyromaniac dissemination’” (CI 13) Aspern’s burned letters contain within themselves the very condition of their coming to presence, thus “open[ing] the archive out of the future” (FI 68). “The archive has always been a *pledge*, and like every pledge [*gage*]” (18), “a token,” Derrida suggests, directed toward unknown and unpredictable narrative futures.

NOTES

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¹Among the changes that James made in the 1888 edition (first published in the *Atlantic Monthly*) when he revised the text for the New York Edition was the alteration of the niece’s name “Tita” to “Tina” Bordereau. Poole argues that the change of a single letter seems to “shrink and feminize” her name and it allows the narrator “the chance of a more pointedly demeaning gibe about the incongruity between name and person” (231).

²In his 1984 essay “No Apocalypse, not Now,” Derrida ponders the possibility of the archive’s “ultimate,” “total and remainderless destruction,” which would take place in the event of a nuclear war (27). Only nuclear holocaust would bring about “the absolute effacement of any possible traces,” “the only infaceable trace” (28). It would “irreversibly destroy the entire archive and all symbolic capacity,

the very *survivance*,” “at the heart of life” (27). In all other cases, the archive remains potentially open to recall through the persistence of the trace.

³Zacharias draws the connection between Derrida’s *own* conception of his archive (his wish for it to remain open after his death and his fear of it being forgotten) with that of Henry James which “may be in the process of transformation from the one Derrida feared to the one he promoted” (86). The proliferation of publications related to his life and works “signals the openness and growth in the James archive.”

⁴Letter to Annie Fields, 2 Jan. 1910, friend and editor of Sarah Orne Jewett’s letters. Field’s request to obtain Jewett’s letters addressed to James is denied, as James had already burnt most of them “save as to a certain residuum which had to survive” (*HJL* 541).

⁵Scenes of letter-burning occur in works as disparate as “Sir Dominick Ferrand,” “The Death of the Lion,” *The Europeans*, *The American*, *What Maisie Knew*, *The Wings of the Dove*, *The Golden Bowl*, and “The Jolly Corner.” As Savoy succinctly puts it, these are James’s “attempts to archive the destruction of the archive” (“Aspern’s” 63).

⁶James wrote in a letter of 7 Apr. 1914 to his nephew and “sole and exclusive literary heir and executor” Henry James III: “My sole wish is to frustrate as utterly as possible the post-mortem exploiter” (*HJL* 806).

⁷Spoo writes: “James, who late in life made a prophylactic bonfire of his accumulated manuscripts, notebooks, and letters, wrote during a time when cheap publishing, popular journalism, and celebrity culture were rapidly eroding the ability of authors to conceal their private lives and control their public images, even as copyright law and nascent privacy rights gave them hope of keeping inquiring minds at bay” (89). Stougaard-Nielsen, too, draws the connection between James’s private correspondence, issues of publicity and the material condition of literature.

⁸The relation within archival records and between them and archival fiction becomes even more complicated when considering that, according to James’s preface for the New York Edition, the plot of the novella is based on a true story of a Boston sea-captain who attempted to get hold of some letters of Shelley’s and Byron’s by becoming Jane (Claire) Clairmont’s lodger (*NT* vii–ix). “The Aspern Papers,” James notes, is a retelling of this historical event. At the same time, the Aspern archive is informed by yet another archivable record, one that destabilizes its temporality and transforms it in unanticipatable ways.

⁹Although Booth acknowledges that James’s probable goal was “lucidity within complexity,” he admits that he is “troubled” by the ambiguity of the narrator’s voice (363). The discrepancy between the disinterested scholar and the unscrupulous schemer is what makes Booth wonder: “Was James wrong to ‘give’ the story to a single narrator, a narrator used on the one hand to reveal his own deficiencies with unconscious irony and on the other to praise praiseworthy things?” (362). He concludes that “the narrator’s voice rings false in my ears” (363). From a wholly different point of view, Miller also sees an apparent contradiction in “The Aspern Papers” that relates to two kinds of knowledge: one obtained from historical research that can be narrated and the other one “the blind, bodily, material kind that cannot be narrated” (22). The last one can only be “performatively repeated” (29).

¹⁰Always ready to blame Aspern’s female followers, the narrator says: “Half the women of his time . . . had flung themselves at his head, and while the fury raged—the more that it was very catching—accidents, some of them grave, had not failed to occur. . . . ‘Orpheus and the Maenads!’ had been of course my foreseen judgement when first I turned over his correspondence. Almost all the Maenads were unreasonable and many of them unbearable; it struck me that he had been kinder and more considerate than in his place—if I could imagine myself in any such box—I should have found the trick of” (7).

¹¹Contrary to Church’s claim that “Tina defeats him by burning the letters” (38) that would give him mastery over Aspern’s archive, Veeder believes that Miss Tina actually “does the dirty work for him” because the letters are “saturated with Juliana and thus with heterosexuality,” so he skillfully manipulates Miss Tina to destroy them (“Aspern” 32). “The editor—as a scholar and a gentleman—cannot allow into his consciousness anything so unprofessional and unchivalrous as the desire to burn the papers,” says Veeder (32–33). Rosenberg takes a different approach, claiming that from the start Aspern’s papers “hold within them the suggestion of their own burning” (261).

¹²*Memories of Paul de Man* (qtd. in Dooley and Kavanagh 77–78). Also, in order to retain the faithful memory of the other, says Derrida, mourning must lose its normality, must never be fully completed, and must maintain the pathology of melancholy. “The ‘norm’ is nothing other than the good conscience of amnesia. It allows us to forget that to keep the other within the self, as oneself, is already to forget the other. Forgetting begins there. Melancholy is therefore necessary” (*SQ* 160).

¹³Relying on earlier critics who read the narrator’s relation with Aspern as homoerotic, Veeder claims that the narrator is a fragmented individual who seeks self-possession through his merging with Aspern (“Aspern”).

¹⁴Along with prosopopoeia, the rhetorical figure of apostrophe has received attention due to the work of de Man and Miller.

¹⁵Veeder reads this sentence as showing the narrator’s overdetermined affiliation with Aspern: “That spirit [of patience] kept me perpetual company” (“James” 273). Miller, however, sees this same sentence as proof of the narrator’s effort to use space and place as a means to recover the past: “That spirit [of Venice] kept me perpetual company” (18).

¹⁶Hoeveler argues that “James intended this portrait to be modeled on Amelia Curran’s painting of Percy Shelley, completed in Rome in 1819” (27). To the extent that the novella is read with the preface in mind, Hoeveler’s hypothesis has a strong bearing. What this suggests is that “archivable meaning is also and in advance codetermined by the structure that archives,” as Derrida would have it (*FI* 18).

¹⁷Significantly, according to the editor, it is at this “embarrassing” moment when, unable to look at Miss Tina’s “face,” he bends instead over Aspern’s framed “portrait” (*NT* 133), that “the ghost of the undecidable,” as Derrida calls it, arises (*FL* 24). The narrator is tormented by the “ordeal of the undecidable,” that is, having to decide between two undecidables. The “ghostliness” of his decision to turn down Miss Tina’s marriage proposal “deconstructs from within” his certitude and makes him desperately search for a way to undo it a few days later.

¹⁸In this way, “The Aspern Papers” does not fulfill the retrospective promise of the preface to give the reader knowledge of history, of “a palpable . . . visitable past,” as James claims in his preface to the novella. As Buelens notes, “James shows up a breach between history and narrative that cannot be crossed: a historical event cannot be narrated but only performatively repeated” (13).

¹⁹In the 1888 version of the tale, this sentence reads as follows: “When I look at it my chagrin at the loss of the letters becomes almost intolerable” (*CS* 320). Several critics have noted the shift of emphasis between the earlier and the latter version of the novella. “The general trend of the revisions,” Poole notes, is “toward a more nuanced and more vivid drama of the teller and his tale” (231).

²⁰Derrida comments on “living on” or “survivance”: “This survivance is broached from the moment of the first trace that is supposed to engender the writing of a book. From the first breath, this archive as survivance is at work. But once again, this is the case not only for books, or for writing, or for the archive in the current sense, but for everything from which the tissue of living experience is woven, through and through” (*BS* 132).

²¹Scholl makes the case that Miss Tina is not Juliana’s niece but her daughter by Jeffrey Aspern.

²²Redgrave adapted “The Aspern Papers” to the stage. He also co-produced and directed the play and played Henry Jarvis (H. J.), the literary critic and historian obsessed with the works of Jeffrey Aspern.

²³An opera in two acts with music and libretto by Argento, *The Aspern Papers* imagines Aspern not as an American poet but “a composer of genius” (Valtat-Comet) and Juliana as a former prima donna, Aspern’s mistress and muse. She possesses papers and memorabilia of the composer, including the score of an operatic masterpiece, *Medea*, that Aspern wrote for her. For a more detailed account of “Stage and Screen Versions” of the novella, see Appendix 3 of Poole.

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