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The Literal and Literary Circulation of Amelia Curran's Portrait of Percy Shelley

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Henry James's novella *The Aspern Papers* (1888; rev. 1908) has typically been read as a critical examination of the literary scholar's obsession with the mystery of creativity (Person). There are numerous autobiographical resonances to James's own life in the tale, for instance, his interest in Pushkin, Walt Whitman, Julian Hawthorne, and Constance Fenimore Woolson (cf. Tambling; O'Leary; Edel; Scharnhorst). But this essay will focus instead on the strange afterlives of Lord Byron, Percy Shelley, and Claire Clairmont in *The Aspern Papers*. Presented as a famous American poet from New York and once the beloved of the now elderly daughter of a prominent American portrait painter, the portrait of the ghostly Jeffrey Aspern—not his papers—is the central and haunting object of desire in the story. One of the most memorable images after reading the story is that beautiful disembodied male head, called a "relic" by the narrator, that has circulated from its original and very private storage place in Juliana's pocket (93) into the pocket of the narrator after Juliana's death (131) and finally to its ultimate relocation in a public place of honor above the narrator's writing desk (143). James intended this portrait to be modeled on Amelia Curran's painting of Percy Shelley, completed in Rome in 1819, a portrait that was so well known that it had assumed iconic and almost religious status by the time James was writing his novella [<http://www.xs4all.nl/~androom/biography/i002657.htm>]. Depicted sitting with a long quill pen in his beautifully shaped hand, the portrait of Shelley was an idealized representation of masculine poetic creativity, of the highly feminized male poet in love not with human bodies but with the ideas of art and beauty.

That portrait of Shelley becomes a heavily coded homosocial exchange object, triangulated within the story by a series of convoluted negotiations between two women and a man (Juliana, Tina, and the narrator), or two men and a woman (Juliana's father the artist, Juliana, and Aspern). The earlier historical incident on which the story is based was also triangulated in multiple ways: for instance, by Byron, Shelley, and Claire Clairmont; or Byron, Claire and Allegra, their daughter; or Mary Shelley, Percy, and Claire; or Percy, Claire, and possibly their mysterious daughter. In short, *The Aspern Papers* is about how desire circulates in families and by extension cultures, or specifically, how the act of creating cultural products and their residue, objects, actually short-circuits familial desire, producing a strange substitute-formation, the scholarly artifact—whether papers or portrait—as homosocial fetishized exchange object.

The originating anecdote that James heard and that motivated his writing of the story is based on his learning that Claire Clairmont had recently been living with her niece Pau-

line Clairmont in Florence and in supposed possession of some priceless Shelley letters (cf. Stocking). At almost the same time he also heard about a conversation with the Countess Gamba, a relative of Lord Byron's last mistress, the Countess Teresa Gamba Guiccioli, who confessed that she had destroyed at least one scandalous letter exchanged between Byron and Teresa. As James noted after hearing these anecdotes, "I delight in a palpable imaginable *visitable* past—in the nearer distances and the clearer mysteries, the marks and signs of a world we may reach over to as by making a long arm we grasp an object at the other end of our own table" (x). Grasping the personal histories of both Shelley and Byron from the near past as if they were objects on a table allows James to place them also within our imaginative grasps, and, more importantly, he seems to be privileging the need to come to terms with the literary heritage of "Romanticism" with a capital R. What James has created in this work is an enactment of the obsessive power of literary and scholarly desire, as if those fetishized and dead male Romantic poets, laid out on a dissecting table, can be grasped, seized, and resurrected as love objects, not by their discarded female paramours, but by the masculine literary tradition itself.

It is fair to observe, however, that in discussing *The Aspern Papers* there have been a few errors and oversights made by James scholars, a usually meticulous group of people. Throughout the criticism, Claire has been erroneously referred to as Percy Shelley's "second wife," as well as Mary Shelley's cousin, her sister, or her half-sister (Edel 337; Person, 30). In fact, James himself makes this mistake (vii), but Claire was the illegitimate daughter of Mary Jane Clairmont, a woman who was living next door to William Godwin when he became the widower of Mary Wollstonecraft and the father to both their two-week old daughter, Mary, and Wollstonecraft's illegitimate daughter, the three-year-old Fanny Imlay. Mrs. Clairmont, as she called herself, had never married and yet she had a son and daughter, paternity unknown (presumably not to her). Godwin was desperate for a caretaker for his two daughters and Mary Jane Clairmont found herself in the right place at the right time. In fact, shortly after their marriage Mary Jane gave birth to Godwin's only son and namesake, William, a name used later for the unlucky younger brother of Victor Frankenstein and, of course, the first victim killed by Frankenstein's creature. So much for Mary Shelley's attitude toward her step-siblings. The fact that Claire and Mary grew up in the same large and fairly chaotic household did not make them sisters or cousins. Legally, they were stepsisters, but Mary had contempt for Mrs. Clairmont and she spent her life bitterly regretting the tie she had with Claire, who saw Mary as a sexual and intellectual competitor (Gittings and Manton).

Part two of this family romance occurs when Mary Godwin began having an affair with the married and very promising young poet Percy Shelley. Like some eerie *doppelgänger*, Claire was compelled to seek out an even more popular and also married poet, Lord Byron, and to begin an affair with him. As Mary became pregnant with Percy's lovechild, so did Claire after four months become pregnant with Byron's child, giving birth to a daughter named Allegra, a child who survived only until her fifth birthday (Grylls). Byron stepped in shortly after the birth of Allegra and claimed his rights as a father, taking the child away from Claire and eventually placing her in a convent outside of Ravenna where she died from typhus, most likely brought on by neglect (Holmes, 420-23; 439-49).

Part three of the Claire Clairmont story, however, was the subject of the most notorious gossip throughout Claire's life. In 1815, and again when they all lived together in Geneva, Byron, Claire, and the Shelleys were rumored to be engaged in a "league of incest," the four of them randomly intimate with each other, with Robert Southey only too willing to spread the tale far and wide. Even more shocking, however, in January 1819, Percy Shelley appeared in a Neapolitan courthouse with an infant girl and without his wife in order to take out birth papers for a baby that he named Elena Adelaide and who he claimed was his own. This mysterious action has long puzzled Shelley biographers as Mary did not give birth to a child at this time and both she and Claire destroyed their journals for the six months prior to the child's birth. No one knows definitely who the mother of this child was, but certainly the theory that Claire was the actual mother has been advanced and been supported by a number of odd events, including a servant in the household who attempted to blackmail Percy about the incident (Holmes, "The Tombs of Naples," ch. 18; Bieri, vol. 2, ch. 5: "Paradise of Devils: Naples"). Certainly it has long been asserted that Percy and Claire had an affair that even Mary knew about and was forced to condone. Evidence for this affair is strewn throughout Percy's letters as well as his "Epipsychidion," where Claire is represented as a "tempest" to Mary's "moon."

This historical background, well known to scholars of Romanticism, reveals that Claire was recognized throughout her own era as a fairly notorious woman, possibly giving birth, like her mother, to two illegitimate children, fathered by two different men. By blatantly aligning his portrait of Juliana Bordereau with Claire, James would have been broadly winking to his contemporary reading audience, most of whom would have known about the intimate history of such a woman, who was notorious as a poetic groupie. Gossip, it would appear, has become a form of high art in this tale. But if one does not know that Claire was exchanged between both Byron and Shelley, and that in fact she was rumored to have had an illegitimate daughter with each of these famous poets, then the nuances of James's story are lost.

Notice how the portrait—representing a visual presentation of the idealized and bodiless male poet—functions in opposition to Aspern's papers—or the literal and factual—throughout the story. In order to make my case that the portrait of Aspern is intended by James to recall to his contemporary readers the portrait of Percy Shelley, I shall trace the public circulation of Amelia Curran's painting. The National Portrait Gallery (London) has seven portraits of Shelley, including the 1819 Curran oil painting, the Edward Williams's watercolor [<http://www.xs4all.nl/~androom/index.htm?biography/p000047.htm>] and the oil by George Clint, "after Amelia Curran, and Edward Ellerker Williams," known as the composite portrait (ca. 1829). The Clint painting [<http://www.npg.org.uk/live/search/portList.asp?search=sp&Text=percy+shelley>] seems like a "better" portrait than Curran's, with more detail and facial definition. Mary Shelley apparently tried to commission an improved version of the Curran in 1829, requesting a composite of the Curran and the Williams portraits (Trelawny's Preface to his *Recollections*; White; Smith; Barker-Benfield). The earliest public appearance of a copy of the Curran portrait occurred in the ornate frontispiece of the Galignani brothers' edition of *The Poetical Works of Coleridge, Shelley, and Keats* (Paris, 1829), containing bust-length likenesses of all three poets. Mary Shelley used a different, waist-length derivation of the Curran portrait as the frontispiece to her edition of Shelley's *Poetical Works* (Moxon, 1839). Another source where James might have seen a variant of the Curran portrait can be found in the third edition of *Shelley Memorials: From Authentic Sources* (1859), edited by Mary Shelley's daughter-in-law Lady Jane Shelley. Harry Buxton Forman used a similar portrait as the frontispiece of his *Poetic Works of P—B—S—* (1876). Forman's 1882 edition of the volume used yet another variant of the portrait featuring the poet's disheveled hair, loose collar, and long quill pen. William Michael Rossetti's three-volume edition of the *Poetry of Shelley* (1878) has a cut-down and slightly revised variant of the head, neck, and loose collar as the frontispiece for volume one. Suffice it to say that James would have had multiple opportunities to see both the Curran portrait and the two major adaptations of it done by Edward Williams and George Clint. The Clint painting was then adapted as an engraving by Edward Francis Finden and used as a frontispiece to the 1839 *Poetical Works of Percy Shelley* (Daly) as well as within *Finden's Landscape Illustrations to . . . the Life and Works of Lord Byron* (Murray, 1832).

The narrator initially claims that he wants to purchase the Aspern papers and his original design is to try to locate where they are stored in the shabby Venetian rooms that the women inhabit. He settles on a "particular tall old Empire secretary with brass ornaments of the style of the Empire—a receptacle somewhat infirm but still capable of keeping rare secrets" sealed with a "peevish little lock" (100). When he seems to be staring too blatantly at the secretary, he diverts Tina's attention by mentioning the portrait of Aspern, suggesting that the portrait and the papers are in some way tied together in his mind. And they are, because the secretary

with its "peevisish little lock" becomes identified with the literal and by extension, with Juliana's body, just as the portrait reminds one of the narrator's obsession with the metaphorical, the idealized and abstract, a bodiless poet. In his manic pursuit of the remains of Jeffrey Aspern, the narrator enacts a recognizable cultural script: he desires to recreate the masculine poetic genius as all mind, free from the taints or corruptions that are inherent in associating with the female body, and concomitantly with generation, reproduction, and emotion. To say that the text encodes a loathing for the female body is not to say anything particularly new about it (cf. Church; Reesman; Veeder; Brown; Hadley). What is most psychologically telling is the way that Claire's personal sexual history functions as a very broad wink to the reading audience, an unspoken and yet underlying source of scandal and nausea, suggesting a revulsion toward the female body which in turn sets off the even more intense need to fixate on the masculine and beautiful disembodied head.

In juxtaposition to the open and engaging face and beautiful eyes of Aspern, James presents Juliana's eccentric habit of wearing a green eye shade, a gesture that transforms her into something of a death's head: "the upper half of her face was covered by the fall of a piece of dingy lacelike muslin, a sort of extemporised hood which, wound round her head, descended to the end of her nose, leaving nothing visible but her white withered cheeks and puckered mouth, closed tightly" (104). The veil is finally raised when Juliana catches the narrator raiding the secretary for the papers: "Juliana stood there in her night-dress, by the doorway of her room, watching me; her hands were raised, she had lifted the everlasting curtain that covered half her face, and for the first, the last, the only time I beheld her extraordinary eyes. They glared at me; they were like the sudden drench, for a caught burglar, of a flood of gaslight; they made me horribly ashamed" (118).

This scene is the moment we have been waiting for since the story began: the confrontation of the hero with the Medusa's head. Like a little boy rustling around for some secret in his mother's drawers, the narrator is caught in a nursery drama, the reenactment of a primal scene in which he has attempted to ferret out the sexual secrets of his substitute parent figures. It would appear, in fact, that this act is an invasion of the tainted female body in order to remove for safe keeping the literal remains of his masculine poetic deity. This raid on the mother's territory is, for the narrator, an act of homosocial loyalty, a way of disengaging Aspern from his earlier and unfortunate association with the promiscuous and unworthy Juliana.

For her part, Juliana does not survive this shock for long, and very quickly the narrator is into the final stages of negotiating for his desired property with Tina, the heir of Aspern's legacy:

I looked at Jeffrey Aspern's face in the little picture, partly in order not to look at that of my companion [Tina], which had begun to trouble me, even to frighten me a little—it had taken so very odd, so strained and unnatural a cast. . . . I but privately consulted Jeffrey Aspern's delightful eyes with my own—they were so young and brilliant and yet so wise and so deep. . . . now that I held the little picture in my hand I felt it would be a precious possession. 'Is this a bribe to make me give up the papers?' I presently and all perversely asked. 'Much as I value this, you know, if I were to be obliged to choose the papers are what I should prefer. Ah but ever so much!' (131)

Later, when he first hears Tina timidly put forward the idea that he needs to become a "relation" in order to possess the papers, the narrator turns his attention again to the little portrait: "It was embarrassing, and I bent my head over Jeffrey Aspern's portrait. What an odd expression was in his face! 'Get out of it as you can, my dear fellow!' I put the picture into the pocket of my coat and said to Miss Tina: "Yes, I'll sell it for you'" (133). Claiming that he has sold the portrait and is sending her the proceeds, the narrator later comments that as he looks at the portrait hanging above his writing desk, "When I look at it I can scarcely bear my loss—I mean of the precious papers" (143). But James's earlier version of this line (1888) had read: "When I look at it [the portrait] my chagrin at the loss of the letters becomes almost intolerable" (*CT*, 382). There is a shift here that suggests something deeply dishonest. "Chagrin" becomes transformed into "loss," and simple embarrassment becomes instead a trauma that is almost unbearable as the narrator has contemplated the events over time (or the author has had twenty years to consider the real object of his character's quest).

But that revised qualification about "loss," added as a tag at the end of the sentence, functions as a dodge, a way of trying to express what he knows he in fact can bear, the loss of the papers. So is it the papers or the portrait that have functioned as the fetishized love object throughout the novella? If we consider Freud's explanation of fetishism (limited, to be sure, to the male libido as "normative"), we can assume that it is the mother's *difference* from the male body that strikes horror in the boy because it reifies his own fear of castration, his own nausea at her "wounded" body (hence the focus on Juliana's eyes and her horribly withered face). As long as the substitute fetish object that denies the visual trauma can be kept in view (the portrait of Jeffrey Aspern), it allows the boy to continue to believe in the imaginary wholeness of woman (and hence his own wholeness). The fetish, then, becomes a "permanent memorial" to the horror of castration that he had glimpsed in the mother's body. The fetish also is a "token of triumph" and a talismanic safeguard against castration necessary for the male psyche to survive, let alone create works of art (Freud, "Fetishism," 153).

The papers—the literal remains of Aspern—were never the real object of the narrator's quest. He has been

from the beginning obsessed with vicariously experiencing on an artistic or visual level the relationship that Byron and Shelley had with Claire. He is, in short, a voyeur of the most fastidious kind. He himself does not want to sully his hands with Tina, the probable child of Aspern and Juliana. Instead he wants to court the idea of the ghost of Percy Shelley or masculine poetic creativity in his imagination. He wants to participate in an act of homosocial bonding, an alternative sphere that replicates itself not in human beings, but in portraits of human beings. In love with the male image, he seizes the portrait and spends his days staring at it, content with reminiscing about his foray into the castle of Duessa. He braved the female dragons, and emerging with his treasure: the disembodied sacred male head.

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Private Souvenirs: Exchanges among Byron's Southwell Set

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Byron's celebrity, recently charted by Tom Mole from his 1812 "An Ode to the Framers of the Frame Bill," to the self-conscious scrutiny and deployment in *Don Juan*, is filled with souvenirs, gifts exchanged, tokens kept and transformed by the keeping. Many of these souvenirs are body parts, such as the blood on Tom's handkerchief meant as a final keepsake for his Sal that falls, undelivered, as part of Byron's meditation on the ethereality of fame (*Don Juan*, Canto XI). Caroline Lamb sent him a keepsake of her pubic hair, enclosed with a letter that demands yet recants reciprocity: "I asked you not to send blood but Yet do - because if it means love I like to have it. I cut the hair too close & bled much

more than you need - do not you the same & pray put not scissors points near where *quei capelli* ["those hairs"] grow - sooner take it from the arm or wrist - pray be careful" (qtd. in Tuite 59). Pointing out that this letter accompanied a note "decorated with love hearts, crosses and ciphers," Clare Tuite describes the offering as "piquant tokens of tainted love" (60).

A mourning public reproduced Lamb's linguistic re-articulation of Byron's body—arm, wrist, phallus, hair, blood—in the relic hunting that followed his death, when the body itself, his heart, his skull, as well as various articles of cloth-

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