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The Ethics of Privacy in Henry James' *The Aspern Papers*

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'It's quite futile for writers to try and hide their deepest secrets […] the truth will eventually be discovered and revealed by the indefatigable biographer' (James 58)

In Henry James' novel, *The Aspern Papers*, the relationship between life-writing and the ethics of privacy is explored through the conflicting perspectives of the author and his narrator. This essay will illustrate how the narrator's violation of the ethics of privacy is driven by his role as a biographer and a pursuit for fame, leading to the narrator's identification with his subject. On the other hand, James advocates for a strict ethical code, condemning any violation of privacy as morally wrong and sees the biographer's pursuit as futile.

Critic Zachary Leader reflects on the study of life-writing, noting that some life-writers seek to preserve a 'formulaic' form of life writing, expressing qualities such as 'authenticity, sincerity, interiority and individuality' (James 1). This essay argues that it is these metrics that James bases his understanding of 'the ethics of privacy' and it is these metrics that James' unnamed narrator arguably denounces in his pursuit of the 'letters'. In doing so, James sets the binary framework of his novel – the 'biographer's quest' vs. the 'ethics of privacy'. The narrator claims, 'I can arrive at the papers only by putting her off her guard […] hypocrisy and duplicity are my only chance. I am sorry for it, but for Jeffrey Aspern's sake I would do worse still' (James 106). The narrator explicitly abandons the value of 'sincerity' and 'individuality' as he simultaneously convicts and acquits himself, suggesting that on a moral ground his actions are wrong but 'for Jeffrey Aspern's sake', his pursuit is justified.

The narrator forsakes his conscience in the name of Aspern, hence forsaking his 'individuality'. In doing this the narrator effectively frees his conscience from the burden of moral malpractice which he views is elicited from biographic necessity, allowing him to gain a fuller understanding behind a writer's work. Here, the narrator's speech embodies the understanding that Biographer, Jeffrey Meyers, conveys: that a crucial motive behind 'the biographer's quest' is to explore literary history (James 56). Clearly, for a biographer, biography

cannot be concerned with the ethics of privacy (‘I would do worse still’ (James 106)) if ‘life-writing’ is to be realised as a literary genre. Meyers goes on to say, ‘it's quite futile for writers to try and hide their deepest secrets […] the truth will eventually be discovered and revealed by the indefatigable biographer’ (James 58). Given this, it can be said that the genre of ‘life-writing’ reflects the broader human pursuit for knowledge.

However, it must be noted that if James’ narrator's motives to obtain the letters were exclusively rooted in the desire to uncover literary history, he would succeed in this pursuit. Yet James denies his narrator’s wishes, suggesting his disapproval of his narrator is because of his ulterior motive: the pursuit for fame. The author, George Orwell, discusses the concept of 'sheer egoism' as a motivation for his writing, so that his legacy persists even posthumously (Morrison 205). Here, although the narrator is distinguishable to Orwell in profession, part of his motivation to obtain the letters can be likened to the same reason. James also instils this understanding in characters such as Juliana, who asks the narrator, ‘whom should I be afraid of if I am not afraid of you?’, signalling both her suspicion of him but also her fearlessness (James 116). Juliana highlights the narrator’s inconspicuousness in her home, which she only entertains for the sake of monetary gain (‘shall you bring the money in gold?’ (James 116)). In his characterisation of Juliana, James suggests that privacy in the novel is not only objectified in the ‘papers’ but also personified in her appearance. The narrator describes, ‘she had over her eyes a horrible green shade which, for her, served almost as a mask’ so that ‘she might scrutinise me without being scrutinised herself’ (James 112). The narrator realises that his inability to see her eyes does not mean she cannot see him in return. This tempts the narrator, presenting him with the challenge to uncover yet another item as James invites readers to estimate how far the narrator is willing to go to get to the letters, i.e. what are the limits to biographical inquiry?

This is answered at the end of the novel when the narrator physically violates Juliana's privacy by entering her room in search of the papers. The physical threshold the narrator had to cross to enter the room symbolises the brink between morality and temptation ('at the hour of temptation and secrecy' (James 160)), as the narrator, unsurprisingly, succumbs to the latter. As a result, it is Juliana who suffers the consequences for 'she had lifted the everlasting curtain that covered half her face, and […] I beheld her extraordinary eyes […] she had fallen back with a quick spasm, as if death had descended on her' (James 161). Here the narrator has, finally, succeeded in beholding Juliana's 'extraordinary eyes', violating her privacy and capitalising on her vulnerability. The understanding James intends to reach is that if the ethics of privacy is breached even momentarily, like Juliana's permission of the narrator's lodging (despite her suspicions), the biographer is no longer exclusively culpable. Juliana's acceptance of the narrator and usage of the papers as leverage has unwittingly made her a player in what James views as a corrupted game.

Contrastingly, the narrator indulges in his corrupted game. Since Aspern is dead, should the narrator be the one to publish the letters, he effectively replaces himself with the poet, earning everlasting fame, much like Aspern has. Whilst the narrator fashions a new name to keep his occupation as a Publisher hidden, ('she has probably heard of Mr. Aspern's editors; she perhaps possesses what you have published' (James 107)), his anonymity also serves as an opportunity for the narrator to indulge in his fantasy, which is to embody Jeffrey Aspern. The narrator withholds his name because it reminds him of an identity that is separate to Aspern, which cannot be possible if the narrator envisions himself as the poet, yearning to be remembered, and held in high regard, much like he admires Aspern. Critic Laura Marcus states that the process of 'writing the life of another must surely entail the biographer's identification

with his subject', revealing the substantial emotional toll associated with 'life-writing' (James 273). Since a biographer has to immerse themselves wholly with their subject to grasp their socio-literary background, the biographer's and subject's identities become intertwined.

This is exemplified in the scene where the narrator finalises his lodging with Juliana, admitting 'I felt an irreversible desire to hold in my own for a moment the hand that Jeffrey Aspern had pressed' (James 116). In this moment, the narrator goes beyond wanting to replace Aspern in reputation, but also wanting to physically connect with him. Before meeting Juliana, the narrator only was able to connect with Aspern on a spiritual level, however after meeting her physically, the narrator is desperate to receive a token of Aspern's affection and approval. Furthermore, this transgression from emotional connection to physical signals the narrator's evolving infatuation. His obsession has reached a point where he essentially identifies himself as a reincarnation of Jeffrey Aspern, and so, his violation of the poet's privacy no longer presents itself as a violation but rather a perceived entitlement.

As a homodiegetic narrator, sharing his story retrospectively, James implores readers to consider the narrator's reliability, and its influence over his understanding of the ethics of privacy. There are instances in the novel where the narrator can recall with clarity his exploration of the city ('I was standing before the church of Saints John and Paul and looking up at the square-jawed face of Bartolommeo Colleoni' (James 172)) but there are also instances where he finds himself incapable of completing his memory of certain events. For instance, shortly after Tita's proposal, the narrator admits 'I am far from remembering clearly the succession of events and feelings during this long day of confusion', undermining the reliability of his narration as he literally defines what a narration constitutes of: 'the succession of events' (James 171). He states 'there were moments when I pacified my conscience', suggesting his awareness of 'events and

feelings' are shaped by his 'conscience', which is heavy with the burden of hosting two identities: that of the narrator's person and that of the narrator's idealised version of himself as Aspern (James 171).

This dual conscience then reiterates the narrator's conviction that he has a rightful claim to the letters. His evolving obsession suggests that his motives extend beyond the desire to uncover literary history or pursue fame as the presence of Aspern in his subconscious compels him to claim what belongs to him. This conviction is only challenged at the end of the novel as Peter Collister states that the narrator is finally 'frightened off by the final bargain offered to him [...] his own life and body exchanged for the real object of his desire: 'the Aspern papers' (James 227). In Collister's observation, the mention of the narrator's 'body' is instrumental in understanding why he is unable to trace his memory of this 'confusing day'. Having attached every other aspect of his individuality to Aspern (his moral and ethical compass, his desires, his emotions), his body is the only vessel that his conscience claims to be inextricably his. Tita's bargain, however, threatens his last connection to his person, forcing him to distinguish between his reality and his constructed fantasy. He is presented with the choice of salvaging his identity or continuing Aspern's identity. This final bargain serves as James' ultimate challenge to the narrator, testing his willingness and pushing the boundaries of biographical inquiry to their limits. Essentially, by being confronted with the reality of marrying Tita and dedicating his life to her, the narrator is forced to consider his own right to privacy. His decision, whether to reject or accept, will ultimately decide if he can preserve 'his life and body' for his own sake (Collister 227).

This triggers the narrator's obsession to unravel, as he hallucinates conversations with Aspern: 'he seemed to smile at me with friendly mockery, as if he were amused at my case'

(James 168). He claims ‘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!”’(James 169). The narrator is being held accountable by Aspern for his violation of his privacy, mocking him with his, soon to be, failure in obtaining the letters. Here Aspern almost comes alive as a character, as conveyed by his capacity to speak, ‘get out of it as you can, my dear fellow!’ (James 169). In doing so, it seems Aspern has finally transferred from the narrator’s subconscious to his conscious, signalling the end of the novel where the fate of the narrator’s pursuit, like his craze, is soon to unravel. Up until this point, the reader has suspended their judgement of the narrator for the privilege of partaking in his quest (Brylowski 222). However, now with the addition of Aspern’s own judgement, everyone seems to be wiser than the narrator, highlighting James’ mockery of him, matched with that of Aspern’s ‘friendly mockery’ (James 168). Here, James beckons the readers to witness the consequences of violating the ethics of privacy as the novel comes to a close. Aspern’s ridicule of the narrator (‘as if he were amused at my case’ (James 168)) is the ultimate humiliation of the narrator, devised by James. This is because, after all of the narrator’s affection for the poet, Aspern comes to share James’ understanding of the futility of the biographer’s quest. Essentially, James has now replaced himself with Aspern, beating the narrator at his own game.

In conclusion, Henry James constructs a thought-provoking novel intended to relay a cautionary tale that carves a fine line between literary dedication and the violation of the ethics of privacy. The narrator’s obsession, and subsequent identification, with Aspern blurs the line between ethical privacy and biographical inquiry. Ultimately, James suggests that a biographer has more to lose than gain as the narrator sacrifices his own identity for the sake of literary ambition.

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