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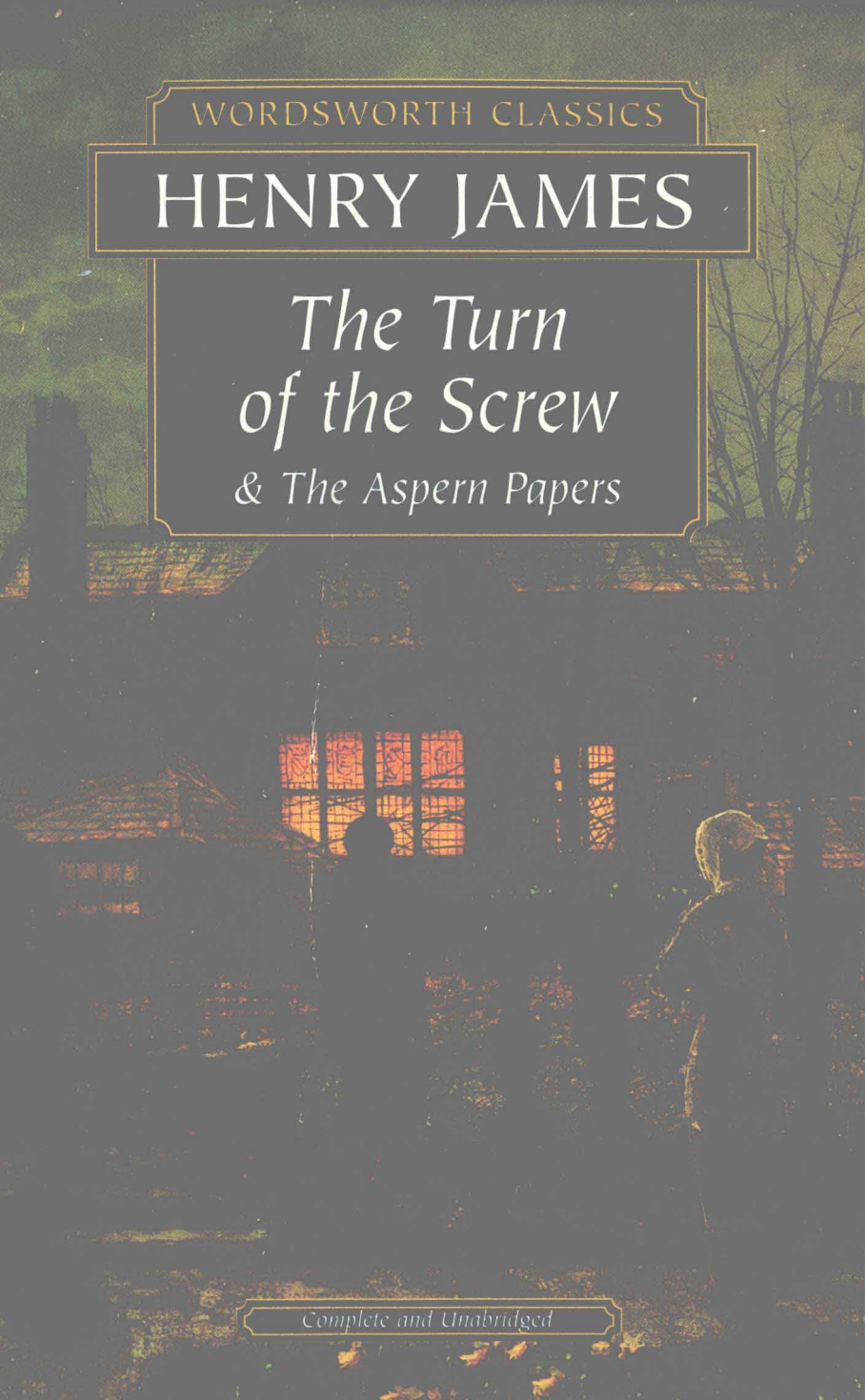
HENRY JAMES

The Turn of the Screw

& The Aspern Papers



Complete and Unabridged

THE TURN OF THE SCREW
& The Aspern Papers

Henry James

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WORDSWORTH CLASSICS

THE TURN OF THE SCREW
& The Aspern Papers

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GENERAL INTRODUCTION

Wordsworth Classics are inexpensive editions designed to appeal to the general reader and students. We commissioned teachers and specialists to write wide-ranging, jargon-free introductions and to provide notes that would assist the understanding of our readers, rather than interpret the stories for them. In the same spirit, because the pleasures of reading are inseparable from the surprises, secrets and revelations that all narratives contain, we strongly advise you to enjoy this book before turning to the Introduction.

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INTRODUCTION

The Turn of the Screw and *The Aspern Papers* are two of Henry James's best known and finest novellas. James himself described this literary form as 'for length and breadth – our ideal, the beautiful and blest nouvelle'.[1] Although he advanced no further specific theories as to the structure, length and workings of the 'shapely nouvelle', James appears to have delighted in its scale and focus, which released him from the limiting constraints of the short story without compelling him to fulfil the conventional requirements of the full-length novel.

Both novellas were originally published in serialised form, the former appearing in the journal *Collier's Weekly* from January to April

1 Henry James, Preface to Volume XV in the New York Edition of *The Novels and Tales of Henry James*, reprinted in *The Art of the Novel*, Charles Scribner's Sons, New York 1934, pp. 217–31

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1898, and the latter monthly in *Atlantic* from March to May 1888. Each might be considered to be a supreme example of a specific genre of short story: *The Aspern Papers*, published in the year after Sherlock Holmes had made his first fictional appearance, is a sort of historical detective tale, concerned with the affairs of literary life and historiographical research, while *The Turn of the Screw* is a ghost story of the kind in which an inexplicable, supernatural apparition plays an important part, the structure of the tale incorporating a distancing frame.

However, closer examination reveals a number of similarities between the two novellas. In the period 1907 to 1909 James sought to organise his short fictions, which numbered more than one hundred, into a coherent form, grouping tales according to generic type. By establishing a contextual frame of reference which exposed common elements in the tales, James may have hoped to validate retrospectively his authorial, aesthetic conception. This plan came to fruition as the New York Edition of *The Novels and Tales of Henry James*. Significantly *The Turn of the Screw* was not included in the volume devoted to ghostly tales but was sandwiched between two other 'psychological tales' which depict menacing, almost pathological, mania, *The Aspern Papers* and *The Liar*.

The Aspern Papers and *The Turn of the Screw* relate accounts of obsessive quests for the possession of 'knowledge' or 'truth', a 'truth' which takes the form of secret text, story or history which may ultimately reside only in the mind of the quester. The desire for possession is a substitute for normal human relationships. The narrators become involved in adversarial battles with ambiguous, mysterious protagonists who, it is implied, embody latent, unstable aspects of the narrators' own psyches, impulses which they would prefer to ignore or suppress. The narrators are potentially unreliable, sharing an impressability and susceptibility to outside influences which causes them, as their feelings intensify, to lose control of their narratives. Both tales are characterised by a pervasive atmosphere of emotional and sexual repression. The unrelenting pursuit of knowledge leads to an unwanted confrontation with 'self-knowledge', releasing dangerous energies which threaten the psychological equilibrium of the confused, self-deluding and disingenuous narrators. Ultimately they can only be 'saved' from the 'truth' by the destruction of the very object which they have so compulsively desired.

The Turn of the Screw

There is a silence at the centre of Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw* which stubbornly refuses to be filled. Each twist of the plot drags the reader deeper into the narrative maze and moral quagmire. Each step and detail tantalises with the promise of explanation and resolution, yet each turn of the screw is not a movement towards 'meaning' but a further evasion of definition. The reader reaches the end of the narrative frustrated and exhausted by the ethical battle within: the promised revelation is never supplied and the text retains its secrets.

James's silence may be the silence which is 'everything', an infinite panorama of all possibilities. Alternatively it may represent the 'unknowable'. In a letter to H. G. Wells, 8 December 1898,[2] James implied that his silence was an emptiness, a 'nothingness', and that his novella was 'essentially a pot-boiler and a *jeu d'esprit*' in which he had delighted in manipulating the reader's literary and moral sensibilities. In the Preface he goes further, describing the work as 'a piece of ingenuity pure and simple, of cold artistic calculation, an *amusette* to catch those not easily caught . . . ' (p. xxxii–xxxiii).[3]

If James intended *The Turn of the Screw* to be a 'trap' it is one which generations of critics have fallen into. Since its publication this tale of the corruption of two 'innocents' by unspecified forces of 'evil' has generated an extraordinary amount of critical literature and given rise to a relentless, and continuing, acrimonious debate. The four main issues of contention are the reliability of the governess, the 'reality' of the ghosts, the integrity of the children's innocence and the exact cause and nature of their corruption.

The opposing critical factions can broadly be described as the 'literalists', who include Leon Edel, Allen Tate and Robert Heilman, and the 'Freudians', led by Edmund Wilson. The 'apparitionists', who support the governess, have three basic arguments: firstly, that her description of the man she sees on the tower is immediately identified by Mrs Grose as Peter Quint, a man the governess has never met, secondly, that in the Prologue, Douglas relates that her record of

2 Leon Edel (ed.), *Henry James: Selected Letters*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass. 1987, p. 314

3 Henry James, Preface to Volume XII in the New York Edition, reprinted in *The Art of the Novel*, op. cit., pp. 159–79, and in the present edition, Henry James, *The Turn of the Screw and The Aspern Papers*, Wordsworth Classics, 1993 and 2000, pp. xxiii–xxxvi

employment after the events at Bly was exemplary, and finally, that the sudden death of an otherwise healthy young boy can only be accounted for by the fact that he was truly 'possessed'.

It was Wilson's 1952 article 'The Ambiguity in Henry James',[4] in which he suggested that James's governess is a classic psycho-neurotic Freudian case study, which provoked such a fierce reaction from dissenting interpreters and initiated the on-going battle between 'scientific' and 'imaginative' readings of the narrative. Wilson and the 'non-apparitionists' claim that the ghosts are not real ghosts at all but merely the governess's hallucinations, citing as evidence the Freudian sexual symbolism in the text – the male ghost appearing on the tower, the female ghost by the side of the lake, Flora fitting the mast of her wooden boat into its base. In Wilson's interpretation the sexually repressed governess, her passion awakened by her meetings with her handsome employer, imagines a morbid and paranoid history involving her predecessors

The in/stability of the governess has been one of the most controversial features of *The Turn of the Screw*. Although she remains nameless, the story is essentially her narrative, revealed to us by Douglas. She is both a character within the tale and the agent of its communication, thus the question of her reliability is crucial if she is to be credible in the eyes of the reader. James counsels in his Preface:

> It was 'déjà très-joli' . . . the general proposition of our young woman's keeping crystalline her record of so many intense anomalies and obscurities – by which I don't of course mean her explanation of them, a different matter. . .We have surely as much of her own nature as we can swallow in watching it reflect her anxieties and inductions . . . she has 'authority'; which is a good deal to have given her, and I couldn't have arrived at so much had I clumsily tried for more. (p. xxxiii–xxxiv)

Similarly, James had written to H. G. Wells:

> Of course I had, about my young woman, to take a very sharp line . . . absolute lucidity and logic, a singleness of effect, were imperative. Therefore I had to rule out subjective complications of her own – play of tone etc., and keep her impersonal save for the most obvious and indispensable little note of neatness, firmness and courage – without which she wouldn't have had her data. [5]

4 Edmund Wilson, 'The Ambiguity in Henry James', in *The Triple Thinkers*, Oxford University Press, New York 1948, pp. 88–132

5 op. cit.

However, her first-person narrative exposes the workings of her own mind and the inconsistencies and ambiguities of her account. She is not merely a passive observer and raconteur but a vivid participant in the events which she describes. From the start James indicates her naïvety and impetuous romanticism – 'I remember the whole beginning as a succession of flights and drops, a little see-saw of the right throbs and the wrong'[6] – which contrasts with Quint's worldliness – 'Quint was so clever – he was so deep' (p. 30).

'Young', 'untried', 'nervous', it was the first time she had known 'space and air and freedom, all the music of summer and all the mystery of nature' (p. 17). This exposure to new experiences outside her previously limited, restrictive world releases unfamiliar emotions and energies which she perceives as dangerous and threatening. At first she had trusted in the innate purity of the children, observing '[there] was something divine that I have never found to the same degree in any child – his indescribable little air of knowing nothing in the world but love' (p. 16). However, alarmed by the children's precocity, she worries that their knowledge outweighs her own and comes to fear that their apparent guilelessness and physical perfection, 'their more than earthly beauty, their absolutely unnatural goodness', may in fact be a trap designed to deceive and ruin her. As the tale unfolds these doubts escalate and inhibit her vision and judgement. Consequently the reader begins to doubt the accuracy and veracity of her account of the paranormal events at Bly.

James's fascination with the supernatural was not surprising given his family's interest in spiritualism. His brother, William James, was an active psychical researcher and a member of the Society for Psychical Research, the reports of which appear to have provided James with the framework and some of the details of his story. However, this family obsession with the occult need not mean that James intended his phantoms to be objective presences, and Freudian interpreters can draw upon the evidence that William James was also an influential psychologist and that their sister, Alice, suffered from depression and neurosis of the kind they ascribe to James's governess.

James's comments in his Preface suggest that he was less concerned with the ghosts' 'actuality' than with the extent and nature of the 'evil' evoked by the potential presence. He writes:

6 Henry James, *The Turn of the Screw and The Aspern Papers*, Wordsworth Classics, 1993, p. 9. All subsequent references are to this edition and are given in parentheses in the text.

> Recorded and attested 'ghosts' are, in other words, as little expressive, as little dramatic, above all as little continuous and conscious and responsive, as is consistent with their taking the trouble . . . to appear at all . . . I had to decide . . . between having my apparitions correct and having my story 'good' – that is, producing the impression of the dreadful, my designed horror . . . They would be agents in fact; there would be laid on them the dire duty of causing the situation to reek with the air of Evil.
>
> . . . The essence of the matter was the villainy of motive in the evoked predatory creatures . . . Portentous evil – how was I to save that, as an intention on the part of my demon-spirits, from the drop, the comparative vulgarity, inevitably attending, throughout the whole range of possible brief illustration, the offered example, the imputed vice, the cited act, the limited deplorable presentable instance? . . . If *my* bad things . . . should succumb to this danger, if they shouldn't seem sufficiently bad, there would be nothing for me but to hang my artistic head lower than I had ever known occasion to do. (*pp. xxxiv–xxxv*)

What is this 'portentous evil'? Who has corrupted whom? And what is the nature of that corruption?

James's pervasive evil emanates from an indeterminate source. At times he implies that it is the governess herself who terrifies the children. Flora cries:

> 'I see nobody . . . I never *have*. I think you're cruel. I don't like you! . . . Take me away, take me away – oh, take me away from *her*!'
>
> 'From *me*?' I panted.
>
> 'From you – from you!' she cried. (p. 77)

The novella contains many instances of cross-identification between the governess and the ghosts. For example, Mrs Grose describes her predecessor, 'She was also young and pretty – almost as young and pretty, miss, even as you' (pp. 14). Likewise, after catching a glimpse of Quint through the mirror-like window, the governess remembers:

> It was confusedly present to me that I ought to place myself where he had stood. I did so; I applied my face to the pane and looked, as he had looked, into the room. . . She [Mrs Grose] saw me as I had seen my own visitant . . . I gave her something of the shock that I had received. (pp. 24)

Her identification with Miss Jessel intensifies as the novella progresses – 'I remember sinking down at the foot of the staircase . . . recalling that it was exactly where, more than a month before, in the darkness of night and just so bowed with evil things, I had seen the spectre of the most horrible of women' (pp. 63) – and climaxes when she enters the schoolroom and sees the spirit of the former governess bent over her own desk, writing a letter to her lover.

The struggle between the governess and the ghosts takes the form of a fight for 'possession' of the children, particularly Miles. The protagonists engage in a battle for the right to act as surrogate parent and teacher of the uninitiated and inexperienced children, who have been neglected by their legal guardian. At the preliminary interview James's governess is told 'of course the young lady who should go down as governess would be in supreme authority', yet on arriving at Bly she learns from Mrs Grose that Quint has previously assumed this authority:

> 'The master believed in him and placed him here . . . So he had everything to say. Yes' – she let me have it – 'even about *them*!'
>
> (p. 30)

> . . . for a period of several months Quint and the boy had been perpetually together . . . they had been about . . . as if Quint were his tutor – and a very grand one – and Miss Jessel only for the little lady. (pp. 39)

The governess and Quint are both desperate to control the children's access to 'knowledge', which as the novella proceeds is increasingly identified with sexuality and experience. Quint urges Miles to spurn the ignorance which is inexperience and to enter the world of knowledge and adventure, of instinct and natural desire. In contrast, the governess presumes that all knowledge not imparted by herself is untrustworthy and dangerous – even the school world is 'horrid', 'unclean' – and seeks to stifle his natural curiosity. From meagre evidence she construes a monstrous yet unspecified wickedness. Quint's crime is that he has been 'much too free' and inculcated this passion for 'freedom' in Miles, who declares, 'I've been ever so far; all round about – miles and miles away. I've never been so free' (p. 88). The freedom which Quint represents is simultaneously literal and metaphoric, imaginative and physical, innocent and sexual. To the governess such freedom represents the portentous 'unknown'; she attempts to force the young boy to speak out, to 'tell the truth', to shatter Quint's silent world with a 'confession' which will cleanse his soul of Quint's influence, and by so doing purge her own heart of her disturbing desires.

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The governess convinces herself that ignorance and self-denial are the only possible routes to salvation, yet does not comprehend that these negative energies will suffocate and destroy life. Following Miles's 'confession' and his climactic, ambivalent shriek, 'Peter Quint – you devil!' (p. 93), he collapses, lifeless, into the governess's arms – 'I caught him, yes, I held him – it may be imagined with what a passion' (p. 94). Her monomaniacal urge for 'possession' has resulted in Miles's 'dispossession' and death. In contrast, the ghosts' gift of knowledge might appear positively liberating, creative and life-giving.

The Aspern Papers

The unnamed narrator of *The Aspern Papers* is a publisher and literary researcher who has travelled to Venice in order to locate the 'papers' of the deceased poet, Jeffrey Aspern, which he believes are in the possession of two elderly ladies, Juliana Bordereau and her niece, Tina. In this tale, 'literary scholarship' is posited as the means by which 'truth' may potentially be laid bare, although the futility of this method of questing is exposed by the events of the tale. The narrator engages in a struggle with his adversarial *alter ego*, Miss Juliana – a battle which recalls the confrontation between the governess and Quint – but his compulsive desire for 'possession' (a word constantly reiterated in the text) ultimately leads merely to his loss of 'self-possession'. At the conclusion his ambitions are unfulfilled, and the silences and gaps in knowledge – which are represented by the narrator's frequent lapses of memory and by the literal 'gaps' in literary history, as symbolised by the missing 'papers' themselves – remain.

However, initially the narrator is confident that he will acquire the papers. Prepared to perform any duplicity or crime ('there's no baseness I wouldn't commit for Jeffrey Aspern's sake' – p. 102) in order to secure the evidence which he believes will vindicate and support his faith in the poet he worships as a 'god', he engages in a struggle with the aging Juliana. He probes with his eyes – 'I turned an eye on every article of furniture' (p. 151), 'I turned my eyes once more all over the room, rummaging with them the closets, the chests of drawers, the tables' (p. 153) desperately striving to locate his 'spoils'. James emphasises the predatory nature of his quest: adopting a *nom de guerre*, when he first enters the palazzo, the narrator crosses the 'threshold', declaring, 'I felt my foot in the citadel' (p. 104). Similarly, after his disillusionment and the collapse of his hopes, he wanders about Venice, stopping to gaze at the statue of a past plunderer,

Bartolomeo Colleoni, 'the terrible *condottiere* who sits so sturdily astride of his huge bronze horse' (p. 172).

The narrator and Miss Juliana battle to control historical 'truth': each wishes to assert the veracity and authority of their respective versions of the past. It is interesting that in the Preface to *The Aspern Papers* James gives an account of his own attempts to control 'literary history', describing the genesis of his tale which had its origins in a real-life historical romance set in Florence involving Jane Clairmont, the half-sister of Mary Shelley and the mother of Lord Byron's daughter Allegra, who was believed by an American literary enthusiast to own personal papers belonging to Percy Shelley. James writes:

> Legend here dropped to another key; it remained in a manner interesting, but became to my ear a trifle coarse, or at least rather vague and obscure. [It] had flickered enough to give me my 'facts', bare facts of intimation, which, scant handful though they were, were more distinct and more numerous than I mostly *like* facts: like them, that is, as we say of an etcher's progressive subject, in a early 'state'. Nine-tenths of the artist's interest in them is that of what he shall add to them and how he shall turn them. (pp. xxvi)

In the novella the narrator stresses the 'artistry' of the literary and editorial skills by which he maintains his authority. He wonders 'by what combination of arts I might become an acquaintance' (p. 97) of the Misses Bordereau. (Similarly, in *The Turn of the Screw* the governess had described 'all the art' which she required in order to render the details of her tale distinct.) He experiences a sense of mystical fraternity with the spirit of Aspern, who he believes has 'returned to earth to assure me he regarded the affair as his own no less than as mine' (p. 119), and declares:

> My eccentric private errand became a part of the general romance and the general glory – I felt even a mystic companionship, a moral fraternity with all those who in the past had been in the service of art. They had worked for beauty, for a devotion, and what else was I doing? That element was in everything that Jeffrey Aspern had written, and I was only bringing it to light. (p. 119)

The researcher announces his intention to 'work the garden' (p. 103) as a means to gain access to the secrets enclosed within the dilapidated Bordereau palazzo. The garden is thus a pretext for, and displacement of, his real motives. Its vitality and fecundity contrast with the sterility and lifelessness of the green 'mystifying bandage' which conceals Miss Juliana's eyes and the green box in which he is certain the papers are

concealed. The enclosed garden is the physical manifestation of the narrator's desire to control history, an imaginative space which he creates for himself where his authorial skill and creative powers can bloom like the flowers with which he bombards the two ladies. He coaxes Miss Juliana into the garden in order to re-engage her in his own passionate historical narrative, and the garden is also the scene of his own, unintentional, seduction of Miss Tina.

Throughout the novella the narrator struggles to reconcile the literal image of Miss Juliana with his imaginative vision of her as the passionate lover and muse of his idol, Jeffrey Aspern. His perceptive myopia is matched by her literal 'blindness'; James describes the deathly effect of the 'horrible green shade which served for her almost as a mask' which 'created a presumption of some ghastly death's-head lurking behind it. The divine Juliana as grinning skull – the vision hung there until it passed' (p. 108–9). Miss Juliana 'preserves' her magnificent eyes, effulgently eulogised by Jeffrey Aspern, obsessively scrutinising the publisher – 'I want to watch you – I want to watch you!' (p. 150), while he is denied a comparable vision – 'I look at you but don't see you' (p. 150). He appreciates the incisiveness of her gaze:

> She listened to me in perfect stillness and I felt her look at me with great penetration, though I could see only the lower part of her bleached and shrivelled face . . . the old woman remained impenetrable and her attitude worried me by suggesting that she had a fuller vision of me than I had of her. (p. 110)

The fight between the two protagonists reaches a climax when the narrator is apprehended by Miss Juliana as he rifles her desk where the papers are lodged:

> . . . she had lifted the everlasting curtain that covered 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. (p. 160–1)

It is the awful force of Juliana's eyes, the green eyeshade which has concealed them finally removed, which compels the narrator to open his own eyes and to acknowledge his own dubious motivations. Interrupting the narrator in his criminal act, Miss Juliana, cries, 'Ah, you publishing scoundrel!' (p. 161), and her words act like a bolt of light, momentarily enabling his perceptive faculties which are illuminated by a flash of self-knowledge – she has experienced the very passions which he has so determinedly repressed in his pursuit of the papers.

The narrator's relentless pursuit of the Bordereau ladies is in some ways a sexual pursuit, since the papers which they possess encryptically encode his own latent sexual desire. As in *The Turn of the Screw*, the moral issues are complex, but we might deduce that the 'horror' in both texts – represented by inexplicable, monstrous apparitions or visions – is related to the narrators' fear of their own sexuality and the exposure of their subconscious desires. Contact with the ghoulish old woman has revived within the narrator the living presence of both her and Aspern when they were united in youthful, romantic love, and has subconsciously awakened his own sexuality. Previously he had sought to ignore rumours that Aspern had 'treated her badly' or that 'he had "served" . . . several other ladies in the same masterful way' (pp. 99). Now the narrator is confronted with the inadequacies and disingenuousness of his own reading of the past and with the awareness of his previously repressed sexuality.

He is shortly to be faced with the consequences of his irresponsible and self-delusive 'strategems'. Although he jests to Mrs Prest that in order to gain his spoils he will 'make love to the niece' (p. 103), he underestimates the effect that his presence and behaviour will have upon Miss Tina, whose romantic sensibilities are emancipated by his behaviour. Although she has been deprived of social interaction, the narrator senses that 'a grateful susceptibility to human contact had not died out, and contact of a limited order there would be if I should come to live in the house' (p. 107). 'Artless', without guile and incapable of deceit, Miss Tina has a 'candid', 'clear' gaze, but the narrator stubbornly refuses to acknowledge the evidence of his own eyes, even reverting to the impersonal pronoun in his efforts to avoid acknowledging his sexuality:

> . . . this poor lady's dull face ceased to be dull, almost ceased to be plain, as she turned it gladly to her late aunt's lodger. That touched him extremely and he thought it simplified his situation until he found that it didn't. (p. 163)

The actions of the unscrupulous publisher not only hasten the death of Miss Juliana, but also thwart his own ambitions, for Miss Tina's response when her affections are rebuffed is to burn the Aspern papers. This destructive act implies the failure of 'reading' and 'knowledge' in the absence of human and social love. The narrator is essentially asocial: he is unable to connect the public and private worlds and his yearning for the papers is abstract and intellectual. Thus he is wilfully blind to the very passion which has produced the letters in the first place. He is granted only a brief illuminating vision, as Miss Tina is transformed before his eyes:

> She stood in the middle of the room . . . and her look of forgiveness, of absolution, made her angelic. It beautified her; she was younger; she was not a ridiculous old woman. (p. 174)

However, this metamorphosis is merely transitory and she reverts to 'a plain dingy elderly person'. At the close of the tale he is forced to seek consolation in the portrait of his deceased hero; however, his final words, 'When I look at it I can scarcely bear my loss – I mean of the precious papers' (p. 175), illustrate the extent of his disillusionment and frustration. His words echo the governess's at the close of *The Turn of the Screw* – 'With the stroke of the loss I was so proud of he uttered the cry of a creature hurled over an abyss . . . ' (p. 94). Both have 'lost' narrative authority and the potential for human love.

James's Prefaces

> There is . . . no eligible *absolute* of the wrong, it remains relative to fifty other elements, a matter of appreciation, speculation, imagination – these things, moreover, quite exactly in the light of the spectator's, the critic's, the reader's experience. Only make the reader's general vision of evil intense enough, I said to myself – and that already is a charming job and his own experience, his own imagination . . . will supply the rest.

Like the absent master in *The Turn of the Screw*, or the deceased poet, Jeffrey Aspern, in *The Aspern Papers*, James retains possession of narrative and historical authority while occasionally abdicating responsibility for the elucidation of 'meaning' to the reader. The reader is cast in the same position as the nameless governess and publisher, overwhelmed by contradictory and confusing information, challenged to unravel and resolve the mysteries of the text for themselves. Just as the governess longs for renewed contact with the master in order to aid her understanding, so we inevitably go to James's Prefaces for solutions to the unanswered questions in James's fictions.

In these Prefaces, James describes in detail the historiographical origins of his tales and presents himself as the sole possessor of the knowledge required for a true understanding of the texts. He establishes himself as the ideal reader of his own fictions, but refrains from disclosing the secrets of his texts. For example, the reader of the Preface to *The Turn of the Screw* is told, 'There is not only from beginning to end of the matter not an inch of expatiation, but my values are all positively blanks . . .' (p. xxxvi) In this way the Prefaces

become examples of the kind of fiction James is attempting to introduce: as he repeats the quests of his tales, searching for 'truth' in his papers and finding only ambiguity, the boundaries between fiction and criticism become blurred.

In much of James's writing, knowledge is assumed but unarticulated. In this way, James's Prefaces are comparable to the many unread, unsent, lost and diverted documents and letters which appear in his own texts. These letters stubbornly retain their secrets and withhold meaning and thus emphasise the subjective nature of the relationship between reading, or 'seeing', and 'knowing'. Thus in *The Turn of the Screw*, which is itself an untitled 'letter' whose story has remained undisclosed for twenty years, the headmaster's letter of expulsion does not reveal the nature of Miles's crime. Similarly, the governess confronts Miles about the theft of her letter to his guardian:

> 'You opened the letter?'
> 'I opened it.'
> . . .
> 'And you found nothing!' (p. 91)

Finding 'nothing' Miles, like Miss Tina, burns the letter. Likewise, in *The Aspern Papers*, John Cumnor's first letter to Miss Juliana is ignored and the second 'had been answered very sharply, in six lines, by her niece' (p. 102), while the poet's own papers remain unread and are ultimately burned.

In his Preface to *The Aspern Papers*, James employs a pertinent metaphor to describe the inaccessibility or 'unreadability' of the past:

> 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 . . . With more moves back the element of the appreciable shrinks – just as the charm of looking over a garden-wall into another garden breaks down when successions of walls appear. The other gardens, those still beyond, may be there, but even by use of our longest ladder we are baffled and bewildered – the view is mainly a view of barriers.
>
> (pp. xxvi–xxvii)

In the novella, when the narrator approaches the Bordereau palazzo, with its 'impenetrable regions' and 'motionless shutters', he remarks the:

> . . . high blank wall which appeared to confine an expanse of ground on one side of the house. Blank I call it, but it was figured over with

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