Auratic Encounters with Posthumous Literary Celebrity in Henry James's Late Victorian Tales: Desiring the Dead

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Abstract

Henry James was well known for his anxieties about the Victorian celebrity industry, and his particular concerns about posthumous intrusions into the lives of literary icons. Yet, at the same time, he betrayed a necromantic fascination with the private affairs of those authorial greats who predeceased him. This fascination spills over into three of his late Victorian tales: 'The Aspern Papers' (1888), 'John Delavoy' (1898) and 'The Real Right Thing' (1899). Through their representations of affective objects, sacralised spaces, and living conduits to the dead, these stories explore the sensory and intellectual pleasures that arise from auratic encounters with deceased literary celebrities. Although the tales remain ambivalent towards the prospect of posthumous exposure, I argue that they nevertheless understand the allure of 'haptic fandom', and consequently demonstrate a tacit sympathy towards individuals' desires for communion with the illustrious dead.

Keywords: aura, fame, haptic fandom, necrophilia, relics, shrines

In his 1809 *Essay on Sepulchres*, William Godwin set out a proposal for erecting physical memorials to a range of celebrated individuals from the past at their burial sites, arguing that such commemorative markers would function as cynosures for 'the feelings and sentiments it becomes us to cherish respecting the Illustrious Dead' (x). Perhaps unsurprisingly given the deification of the author-figure in Romantic culture, literary icons were prominent among those singled out for this posthumous honour. Godwin argued that humanity might compensate for the loss of poetic worthies such as Shakespeare and Homer by

> mark[ing] the spot, whenever it can be ascertained, hallowed by the reception of all that was mortal of these glorious beings; let us erect a shrine to their memory; let us visit their tombs; let us indulge all the reality we can now have, of a sort of conference with these men, by

> repairing to the scene which, as far as they are at all on earth, *they still inhabit!* (28; original emphasis)

Notably, Godwin's fantasy of communion with the dead – a potent example of what Paul Westover has termed 'necromanticism' (49) – is loaded with auratic expectation: something of the famous author's original essence or spirit is assumed to permeate their burial place along with their physical remains, generating an impression of palpable presence that dissolves the boundary between the living and the dead.[1]

This essay considers the afterlife of such Romantic auratic expectations in the tales of Henry James, a writer who was both fascinated by and apprehensive about the fervent interest in posthumous literary celebrity in late Victorian culture. A Godwinian desire for conference with the dead features prominently, for instance, in James's 1903 short story, 'The Birthplace', which, as the title suggests, focuses not on the grave-site but the natal home of a canonical Shakespeare-type figure, identified in the text only as 'He'/ 'Him'. When former schoolmaster Morris Gedge and his wife are invited to take over custodianship of the Birthplace (now a museum and place of pilgrimage for literary tourists), they are temporarily overwhelmed by the thought of

> being housed with Him, of treading day and night in the footsteps He had worn, of touching the objects, or at all events the surfaces, the substances, over which His hands had played, which his arms, his shoulders had rubbed, of breathing the air – or something not too unlike it – in which His voice had sounded. (*Complete Tales* 11: 411)

Notably, the couple's guardianship of a space once occupied by literary greatness is framed here as a kind of cohabitation; every material artefact, every nook and cranny is assumed to be suffused with the author's 'mystic presence' (411). This illusion of intimacy generates both psychological and physiological effects, firing Gedge's imagination and stimulating his nerves into a state of sensory exhilaration. As he wanders around the Birthplace at night, Gedge attempts 'positively to recover some echo, to surprise some secret' of its '*genius loci*' (418). He feels that the time after closing '*ought* to have brought him […] nearer to the enshrined Presence, enlarged the opportunity for communion and intensified the sense of it' (418; my emphasis). However, his auratic expectations begin to evaporate as he gradually loses faith in what he terms 'the exhibitional side' of the

Birthplace: the carefully curated array of domestic objects and period furnishings that seem ‘consciously to offer themselves as personal to the poet’ (419). Gedge comes to realise that these assembled artefacts are only simulacra, incapable of inducting him into the secrets of the writer’s life. By the end of the text, he is merely performing the reverential attitude expected by the multitudes who flock to the Birthplace, privately convinced that ‘there *is* no author’ there for them to discover (439; original emphasis). He tells his wife, ‘I grant you there was somebody. But the details are naught. The links are missing’ (430).

The inspiration for ‘The Birthplace’ came from an anecdote told to James while he was staying at Welcombe, the country house of Sir George and Lady Caroline Trevelyan, near Stratford-upon-Avon, in 1901. In a notebook entry dated 12th June, James records

> the odd case of the couple who had formerly […] been for a couple of years […] the people in charge of the Shak<e>speare house – the Birthplace […] They were rather strenuous and superior people from Newcastle, who had embraced the situation with joy, thinking to find it just the thing for them and full of interest, dignity, an appeal to all their culture and refinement, etc. But what happened was that at the end of 6 months they grew sick and desperate from finding it – finding their office – the sort of thing that I suppose it is: full of humbug, full of lies and superstition *imposed* upon them by the great body of visitors, who want the positive impressive story about every object, every feature of the house, every dubious thing – the simplified, unscrupulous, gulpable *tale*. (*Notebooks* 306; original emphasis)

James, here, clearly reveals his disdain for the masses of nineteenth-century literary tourists who made pilgrimages to houses of the famous dead, suggesting that, so keen are they to perceive the author’s presence in every aspect of these once-inhabited spaces, they gullibly ingest any story (or ‘gulpable tale’) fed to them by curators and custodians. Literary fans, for James, are complicit in the fabrication of illusory connections between celebrated persons and innocuous things, helping to manufacture necromantic fictions around sites like the Birthplace, with scant concern for truth or authenticity. For the undiscriminating fan, *everything* is regarded as a revelatory sign, no matter how insignificant or false it may be.

And yet, despite James's evident scepticism here about the kinds of immersive fan experiences enjoyed by visitors to famous writers' houses, a number of his late Victorian short tales appear to invest in, and even to validate, the kinds of auratic encounters ostensibly disavowed in 'The Birthplace'. At the same time that they worry over the effects of nineteenth-century celebrity culture on posthumous privacy and authorial afterlives, texts such as 'The Aspern Papers' (1888), 'John Delavoy' (1898) and 'The Real Right Thing' (1899) can be seen to engage in a series of necromantic fantasies, betraying a sustained fascination with the possibility of communion with the celebrated dead. By scrutinising these stories' representations of sacralised spaces, affective objects and haptic fandom, this essay will explore the intricacies of the desire for the dead in James's short fiction, arguing that mediated encounters with posthumous literary celebrity are frequently legitimised as a source of pleasure – albeit transitory, ambiguous or incomplete - in his late-century works. Before turning to this analysis, though, I want first to contextualise this discussion by tracing the complexities of James's personal attitude towards the Victorian celebrity apparatus and its treatment of the eminent dead.

'The posthumous vulgarities of our day'

How much it might be appropriate for audiences to know about the lives of the famous after death was a matter of intense debate in nineteenth-century literary culture. The American essayist Henry T. Tuckerman contended that posthumous biography should contain 'such a revelation of personal facts as will throw light upon' not only the celebrity's career, but also their private character (172), arguing that the publication of 'personal memorials' is 'the best service which can be rendered departed genius' (446). The eminent historian J. A. Froude concurred: in the preface to his controversially frank biography of Thomas Carlyle, published only a year after Carlyle's death, he wrote that 'when a man has exercised a large influence on the minds of his contemporaries', it is entirely 'legitimate' for the world to want to know whether his private morals matched his public persona (*First Forty Years* 1: 2). Thus, the biographer's duty is to leave 'no materials unused' in the reconstruction of the dead celebrity's life; 'the sharpest scrutiny is the condition of enduring fame' (*Life in London* 1: 6, 3).

Others took quite a different view, railing against the craze for posthumous biographical disclosure. In a graphic image of literary fandom as evisceration, Alfred Tennyson argued that ‘the lives of great men’ were treated ‘like pigs to be ripped open for the public’ (*Letters* 2: 319), and complained that:

> … now the Poet cannot die,
> Nor leave his music as of old,
> But round him ere he scarce be cold
> Begins the scandal and the cry:
>
> ‘Proclaim the faults he would not show;
> Break lock and seal, betray the trust;
> Keep nothing sacred, ’tis but just
> The many-headed beast should know.’ (*Complete Poetical Works* 114)

The ravening demands of the Hydra-like public were of similar concern to Henry James, who feared ‘the open mouth of that apparently gorged but still gaping monster’ (‘She and He’ 21), and decried ‘the devouring *publicity*’ of modern literary life (*Notebooks* 82; original emphasis). A culture of exposure had been spawned by the new forms of journalism and biography that emerged in the late nineteenth century, and these became James’s particular ‘bêtes noires’, owing to their investment in celebrity gossip, sensationalism and posthumous revelation (Cutting 125). In an 1891 letter to Charles Eliot Norton, James fretted about the biographical fate of his friend, the recently deceased poet James Russell Lowell, noting that ‘the posthumous vulgarities of our day add another grimness to death’ (*Letters* 1: 188). Similar apprehensions about afterlife and legacy emerge in a 1903 letter to Henry Adams, where James describes the biographer’s art as a ‘devilish’ one, in the face of which ‘even the Immortal are so helpless and passive in death’ (*Letters* 1: 439).

James’s anxieties were catalysed by the posthumous publication of a series of controversial biographies, diaries and letters in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. The release of Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *French and Italian Note-Books*, less than a decade after the ‘reserved and shade-seeking’ author’s death, represented, for James, a gross defiance of ‘the artist’s presumptive desire to

limit and define the ground of his appeal to fame' ('Hawthorne's' 172). His concerns about the proper limits of public curiosity were amplified by the posthumous publication of William Ellery Channing's letters in 1875. Channing had explicitly requested that his correspondence be returned or destroyed, and the failure to comply with his wishes constituted a 'striking concession to the pestilent modern fashion of publicity', according to James:

> A man has certainly a right to determine, in so far as he can, what the world shall know of him and what it shall not; the world's natural curiosity to the contrary notwithstanding. A while ago we should have been tolerably lenient to non-compliance on the world's part [...] But now that knowledge (of an unsavoury kind, especially) is pouring in upon us like a torrent, we maintain that, beyond question, the more precious law is that there should be a certain sanctity in all appeals to the generosity and forbearance of posterity, and that a man's table-drawers and pockets should not be turned inside out. ('Recent Literature' 369)

If posthumous revelation is framed here as a kind of ransacking, a crime against property, in James's 1893 review of Gustave Flaubert's correspondence it is characterised in more heightened terms as a form of violence against the person. James protests that, having 'kept clear all his life of vulgarity and publicity and newspaperism', the privacy-loving Flaubert found himself 'dragged after death into the middle of the marketplace', with 'every weakness exposed, every mystery dispelled, every secret betrayed' ('Gustave Flaubert' 333). Posthumous publication is figured as a bruising assault on the author's memory, prompting James to enquire when it will 'cease to be a leading feature of our homage to a distinguished man that we shall sacrifice him with sanguinary rites on the altar of our curiosity' (333).

It was in order to avoid such an oblationary fate that James took pre-emptive measures to manage his own posthumous reputation. Keen to 'frustrate as utterly as possible the post-mortem exploiter', he committed large portions of his personal archive to a huge bonfire (qtd in Hamilton 220). This calculated act of destruction demonstrates Richard Salmon's point that 'James considered the publication of private texts to be a violation of the author himself' (84). Yet, if James-the-celebrity-writer had an 'utter and absolute abhorrence' of posthumous disclosure (qtd in Hamilton 220), James-the-literary-fan knew what it was to experience the 'voyeuristic thrill' of 'biographical

curiosity' (Hamilton 212). His response to the posthumous publication of George Sand's letters to her lover Alfred de Musset, for instance, is marked by a sense of guilty excitement. Despite his insistence that there are some secrets which demand 'privacy and silence' ('She and He' 22) – that there is a difference between airing 'clean linen and soiled' (21) – he cannot help but betray a prurient interest in 'the history of [Sand's] personal passions', which reads 'like a chronicle of the ravages of some male celebrity' (31). As he concedes elsewhere, when it comes to literary greats, 'to know is good, or to want to know, at any rate, supremely natural' ('Gustave Flaubert', 333).

James's enduring necromantic interest in Sand also manifested itself as an obsession with her home in the French village of Nohant. On learning that his friend Edith Wharton had journeyed there in 1906, he experienced an 'ache of envy' and begged that if 'you will be going there once more […] *do* take me!' (Powers 65, 67; original emphasis). His fixation with Nohant stemmed not only from an intellectual conviction that 'it *must* […] enlighten & explain' Sand's life and work, but also from a more numinous belief in its ability to enable sensory encounters with former inhabitants: 'How you must have *smelt* them all!' he exclaimed excitedly in a letter to Wharton (Powers 65, 66; original emphasis). When James eventually got to visit Nohant in 1907, he was 'fascinated by every detail of the scene', Wharton recalls: 'deeply moved by the inscriptions on the family grave-stones' and 'absorbed in the study of the family portraits' (Wharton 307-08). Even more potent than these material traces of the past, however, were the exhilarating *imaginative* connections sparked by proximity to Sand's private space. Wharton reveals that, during their walk through the grounds, James stood 'gazing and brooding' for a long time beneath a row of closed shutters, pondering, in thrilled contemplation, in which of the rooms beyond 'George' and her 'various famous visitors had slept' (308). This experiential absorption in Nohant, its objects and surroundings, can be read in terms of the phenomenon of 'haptic fandom', a type of fan engagement that is embodied, multi-sensory and participatory. As Rebecca Williams explains, haptic fandom foregrounds somatic sensations and tactile experiences, and 'accord[s] value and meaning to the immersion of "being there"' (13). It is precisely this elating sense of *hic locus est* ('this is the place') that lies at the heart of James's rapt enjoyment of Nohant.

James's desire to access the secret, inner-lives of dead literary celebrities through haptic encounters with places and things is mirrored in the three tales to which I will now turn. In 'The Aspern Papers', an unscrupulous, unnamed narrator (loosely based on real-life Shelley enthusiast, Edward Silsbee[2]) travels to Venice in a failed attempt to inveigle the personal papers of his literary hero, Jeffery Aspern, from Aspern's former lover, the reclusive Juliana Bordereau. The rather more honourable protagonists of 'John Delavoy' and 'The Real Right Thing' are similarly intrigued by the literary remains of their respective idols, John Delavoy and Ashton Doyne, but ultimately decline to surrender the privileged knowledge they acquire to the curiosity of the general public. Owing to their distaste for unsanctioned publication and collective refusal to satisfy the 'insurmountable desire to *know'* ('Gustave Flaubert' 333), these stories are conventionally read as part of James's broadside against the nineteenth-century celebrity industry. However, I will argue that, while hostile to the demands of *mass* culture, these texts are by no means unsympathetic towards the desires of certain initiated *individuals* for esoteric knowledge of, and confidential communion with, the dead. Through their representations of the sensory pleasures and exalted mental states that derive from contact with celebrity relics, significant spaces, and living proxies, 'The Aspern Papers', 'John Delavoy' and 'The Real Right Thing' tacitly endorse aspects of Victorian literary fandom, recognising the imaginative power and allure of necromantic attachments to posthumous fame.

Affective Objects: Celebrity Portraits and Textual Relics

As Deborah Lutz argues in her excellent study of Victorian death and mourning cultures, by the early nineteenth century a humanistic fascination with the personal effects of dead celebrities had evolved out of an earlier, sacred practice of worshipping saints' relics and shrines (24). Just as religious relics had long gained meaning from their intimate association with venerated subjects, so celebrity artefacts derived value from their status as 'material vestiges', suffused with 'a lasting sediment' of the famous figures who once owned, touched, or inspired them (Pascoe 3). Owing to this potential for auratic transference, secular objects could themselves become 'in a sense, sacralized,' Lutz suggests, 'imbued with a passionate longing that gave them a strange sort of animation' (17).

In 'The Aspern Papers', a small, oval portrait of the Romantic poet Jeffery Aspern, owned by Juliana Bordereau and later gifted to the narrator by Juliana's niece, Miss Tita, is invested with just such a vitalising force. Blurring the boundaries between the secular and the sacred, the portrait is constructed as a kind of religious icon: the 'divine' figure it represents is a 'god' to both Juliana and the narrator (*Complete Tales* 6: 277, 321). For the latter, a significant part of the image's value derives from its rarity. As Judith Pascoe suggests, the Romantics were 'the last literary generation to go unphotographed' (12), meaning that their faces could be posthumously known only through art. While the narrator informs us that there are 'three other portraits' of Aspern in existence, none is of 'so early a date as this elegant production' (*Complete Tales* 6: 345), lending it a powerful sense of singularity. For Juliana, by contrast, the portrait's value resides more in its endowment with deeply personal, affective meanings. The object is a 'treasure' (345) with doubly resonant links to the past; not only does it preserve the features of her lost lover, it was painted by her father. So precious is the memento, the mere thought of parting with it generates an involuntary physical response; Juliana 'catch[es] her breath a little' at the prospect, the narrator tells us, 'as if she had had a strain' (345-6).

The narrator's own reaction to the portrait is similarly somatically charged: his hand tremors as he takes hold of the prized possession, and his face flushes as he recognises his idol in the painted image. When the time comes to return the 'precious thing' to its owner, he instinctively clings to it, reluctant to give it up (345). As Susan Pearce notes in her influential history of collecting, 'objects can have about them a glow of significance' that sparks 'the imagination of the beholder' and 'kindles a desire for possession' (172). This bewitching quality is by no means diminished when the narrator finally gains full ownership of the portrait; indeed, at this point, the reified Jeffery Aspern seems to come fully alive within his grasp, smiling at him, meeting his eye, and advising him on the romantic fix in which he has found himself. Although, at the end of the text, the narrator tells Miss Tita he has sold the object, he reveals to the reader that it in fact remains safely in his possession, hanging, in close proximity to him, above his writing-table.

An eloquent portrait of a dead literary genius is similarly framed as a 'great prize' in 'John Delavoy' (*Complete Tales* 9: 415). When the narrator of the tale undertakes to write an article on the 'immense novelist' (404) following the posthumous publication of his final work, he is excited to

discover a previously unknown pencil study of the writer, produced by Delavoy's sister a year before his death, a 'thing of real vision' and 'taste' (411). As in 'The Aspern Papers', the value of the artwork stems jointly from its encapsulation of the absent author's unique aura and its rarity. The narrator reports with some admiration that Delavoy was 'the most unadvertised, unreported, uninterviewed, unphotographed' of men (405), the 'sole of his species' to succeed 'in never, save on this occasion, sitting' for his portrait (412). His avoidance of the public gaze in life only heightens the desire for his likeness in death. The cynical magazine editor, Mr Beston, tells Miss Delavoy, 'It so happens that your brother has been really less handled than anyone, so that there's a kind of obscurity about him, and in consequence a kind of curiosity, that it seems to me quite a crime not to work' (432). In true Benjaminian style, though, the commercial reproduction of the portrait in Beston's periodical, *The Cynosure*, causes its aura to wane.[3] As the object morphs from personal keepsake, steeped in sentimental meaning, into public commodity for general consumption, so its valence changes from positive to negative: Miss Delavoy announces, 'I hate the drawing!', and the narrator agrees, 'So do I' (418). James draws a subtle distinction between the profound admiration of the true celebrity acolyte and the unthinking fandom of the mass consumer of 'anecdotes, glimpses, gossip, chat' (428). As the narrator observes to Miss Delavoy, their earnest appreciation of the novelist sets them apart from the common crowd; no one else '*feels* the whole thing' as much as they do (417; original emphasis).

If the portrait turns out to be an unstable auratic medium, Miss Delavoy and the narrator can take consolation instead in the authorial spirit that continues to permeate Delavoy's literary output. Miss Delavoy identifies a continuity between the writing self and the printed page, insisting that her brother '*was* his work' (427; original emphasis).[4] This notion of an 'organic relationship' between author and text situates 'the textual corpus […] as a residual extension of the authorial body' and indicates that the literary work 'retain[s] the capacity to exude the "personality" of the artist, even after death' (Salmon 84). In James's tales, this apparitional quality is most intensively felt in relation to manuscript papers, produced by the writer's own hand. Lutz argues that chirographic remains, including letters, journals, diaries, and notes, have historically taken on special meaning because of their status as contact relics. Not only are they 'steeped in the details of time and place', and

authenticated by the author's unique handwriting, they are imbedded with the material traces of the physical body: the writer's 'actual skin swept the paper, handled it, inscribed it,' potentially smudged it, marked it with fingerprints and infused it with sweat (Lutz 5, 6). To touch such items in the present is to experience the electric thrill of a direct, haptic connection to the *poeta vate* from the past.

Given the textual relic's function as a cross-temporal thread that links the living and the dead, it is unsurprising to find that such artefacts arouse a particularly fervent excitement in James's tales. When George Withermore is invited to produce a posthumous biography of the celebrated writer Ashton Doyne in 'The Real Right Thing', and given unfettered access to all of the diaries, letters, memoranda, and notes inherited by Doyne's wife, he is overcome by a kind of archive fever. We are told that, 'more than once, when, taking a book down from a shelf and finding in it marks of Doyne's pencil, he got drawn on and lost' in his biographical quest (*Complete Tales* 10: 479). Doyne's marginal jottings – synecdoche for his writing self – exercise an emotional and libidinal pull on his entranced admirer. Indeed, his literary remains seem to facilitate a kind of mystical communion between the two men: as Withermore immerses himself ever deeper in his researches, 'he moved, as it appeared to him, but the closer to the idea of Doyne's personal presence' (477).

If tactile connections with textual relics stimulate fannish pleasure in 'The Real Right Thing', in 'The Aspern Papers' it is the *promise* of tactility that fuels the narrator's desire. We never get to see, and he never gets to touch, the contents of the secret archive in Juliana Bordereau's possession. Yet, despite its unsubstantiated status in the text, the narrator never doubts that this 'tormenting treasure' has a material existence (*Complete Tales* 6: 361), and can serve as a conduit to Aspern himself. The narrator delights in the knowledge that he is 'under the same roof' as the 'sacred relics', which *feel* as though they are 'under [his] hand', making his life 'continuous, in a fashion, with the illustrious life they had touched at the other end' (306). He also derives vicarious pleasure from the thought of Juliana touching the precious papers. He imagines her ritually 'read[ing] Aspern's letters over every night or at least press[ing] them to her withered lips', and confesses, 'I would have given a good deal to have a glimpse of the latter spectacle' (299). As Thomas Otten notes, 'the acts of touching (or reading) bodies and reading (or touching) papers come to substitute for' and 'be confused with each other' in the narrator's imaginative projections (94). This sensory fusion signals

the importance of both optics and haptics to the experience of celebrity fandom in James's tales.[5] The fantasy of posthumous 'touch' (be it oracular or cutaneous) is a recurrent source of desire in all three of the stories considered here, stemming not only from contact with textual relics and remains, but also, as the next section shows, from human bodies which retain a special connection to the departed literary icon.

Haptic Encounters and Mediated Touch

Chris Kamerbeek notes that, in the nineteenth century, 'fame became irrevocably attached to the famous person's body' (50). Little wonder, then, that the protagonists of James's tales of posthumous celebrity seem to crave, above all, an intimacy with their idols that is tactile, embodied. The physical absence of Jeffery Aspern, John Delavoy and Ashton Doyne from their respective fictional worlds would seem to render the realisation of such a longing impossible. Significantly, though, James's texts feature a series of proxy subjects on whom some 'esoteric knowledge' of the late author has 'rubbed off' (*Complete Tales* 6: 306), and who are consequently empowered as a kind of spirit-medium, or sensory channel to the dead.

In 'John Delavoy', it is Miss Delavoy who serves most notably in this capacity. When the narrator first spots her in a crowded theatre, he takes a vivid interest in her, owing to her close resemblance to his literary hero – a resemblance that goes beyond mere familial likeness. He explains that:

> She was the image of a nearer approach, of a personal view: I mean in respect to my great artist […] Was he not the man of the time about whose private life we delightfully knew least? The young lady in the balcony, with the stamp of her close relation to him in her very dress, was a sudden opening into that region. I borrowed my companion's glass; I treated myself, in this direction – yes, I was momentarily gross – to an excursion of some minutes. I came back from it with the sense of something gained; I felt as if I had been studying Delavoy's own face. (*Complete Tales* 9: 405-06)

Miss Delavoy is represented, here, as a portal – 'a sudden opening' – into the hidden recesses of John Delavoy's adumbrated personal life. Her ability to broker intimate access is what drives the narrator's

initial voyeuristic interest in her; not only is she personally attractive, something of her famous brother's essential nature is immanent in her own. Indeed, as he gets to know her better, the narrator becomes convinced that 'to be with her was still to be with [Delavoy] himself' (411). Both conduit and avatar, Miss Delavoy is able to ventriloquise her dead brother's thoughts and feelings: the narrator explains, 'It was not only that I could talk to him so; it was that he listened, and that he also talked. Little by little and touch by touch she built him up to me' (411). The language of haptics here is significant; the dead celebrity's living proxy renders his presence palpable, and the little 'touches' by which she revivifies his being have the effect of 'touching' his admirer emotionally.

As Michael Cooper points out, the 'triangular erotonomies' at work here are typical of James's stories of literary life, in which a male disciple's interest in his literary idol is often either facilitated or disrupted by an intervening female figure (70). The homoerotic possibilities of these triangular relationships have been extensively explored by James's critics. Less well-acknowledged, however, is the way such mediated modes of desire reveal the queer structures underpinning celebrity fandom. The desiring relationship between celebrity and fan is never straightforwardly linear, but vectored via a range of tertiary agents, which may include the celebrity industry itself, certain resonant objects, or other fans. Notably, when Miss Delavoy and the narrator marry at the end of the text, it is implied that their union is organised less around heteronormative desire than shared worship of John Delavoy. Indeed, Miss Delavoy tells the narrator that his posthumous connection to her brother is so great – 'You've entered so into him' – that the two now '[come] to the same thing' in her mind (*Complete Tales* 9: 436-7).

This kind of queer triangulation is also richly apparent in 'The Aspern Papers', where Juliana serves at once as impediment to and keystone of the narrator's desire for Jeffery Aspern. As Kamerbeek notes, 'in lieu of the letters' she withholds from the narrator, 'Juliana's body becomes an intimate archive unto itself', and is fetishised for the traces it bears of the dead poet (60). Not only is Juliana the living, breathing embodiment 'of some of Aspern's most exquisite and most renowned lyrics', she reifies and transmits the revered writer's aura: 'Her presence seemed somehow to contain his, and I felt nearer to him at that first moment of seeing her than I ever had been before or ever have been since' (*Complete Tales* 6: 290). Whereas the narrator's biographical research is usually

concerned with ‘phantoms and dust, the mere echoes of echoes’ (278), his encounters with Juliana are enlivened by a kind of necromantic, haptic possibility. He expresses wonderment at the thought that the ‘individual note’ of her voice once sounded ‘in Jeffery Aspern’s ear’ (291), and marvels at the idea that her eyes are the only pair still in existence ‘into which [Aspern’s] had looked’ (279). As usual in James’s tales, imagined sensory experience generates real somatic effects: as he comes face-to-face with Aspern’s muse, the narrator’s heart beats ‘as fast as if the miracle of resurrection had taken place’, and his body is overcome by ‘a curious little tremor’ (290). At one point, he feels ‘an irresistible desire to hold in [his] own for a moment the hand that Jeffery Aspern had pressed’ (296), a tactile longing that is charged with queer potential. Éamonn Dunne highlights the complex haptic nexus in operation here: ‘to touch Aspern is also to touch oneself touching […] The narrator wants to touch himself touching, to be touched by Aspern in an extraordinarily ecstatic onanistic moment of revelation and resurrection’ (11).

If the narrator’s desire for Aspern, here, is queerly autoerotic, it is also, of course, necrophilic. Challenging the narrow definition of necrophilia as the taboo act of sexual intercourse with a corpse, Lisa Downing points to the rich and intricate range of aesthetic and libidinal fantasies encompassed by the term in late nineteenth-century writing:

> Necrophilia hints at the imaginative collusion between life and death, an ambitious leap between the physical and the metaphysical. The obscure spark of desire in necrophilia lies precisely in the gap between the living erotic imagination and the object that is beyond desire. Fantasy operates by bridging the gap that is the threshold between the subject and the object of desire. (1-2)

It is precisely this kind of *imaginative* intercourse with the dead that underpins ‘The Aspern Papers’. Jeffery Aspern’s early death not only heightens his auratic appeal by placing him forever beyond the narrator’s reach, but also enables the latter’s erotic fantasies and projections. The narrator invents a series of what we might today call ‘fan fictions’ about the dead poet and his muse: he ‘hatche[s] a little romance’ about Juliana being the daughter of a painter to whom Aspern once sat (*Complete Tales* 6: 309), speculates that Aspern returned to Europe ‘for her sake’ (308), and inserts the pair into a *Romeo and Juliet*-style love story, in which ‘Juliana, on summer nights in her youth, […] murmured

down from open windows' at her *inamorato* (312). These proto-examples of the modern fan practice of 'shipping' offer the narrator a means by which to involve himself vicariously in the sexual relationship between Aspern and Juliana.[6] They represent a potent – and poignant – source of pleasure: the narrator confesses, 'there was something touching to me in all that and my imagination frequently went back to that period' (310). This language highlights the 'conceptual slippage' that exists 'between touching and feeling, between touch as cutaneous contact and a more metaphorical notion of being affected emotionally, being "touched"' (Paterson 6-7). Necrophilic yearning is vested here with a quasi-tactile dimension: through a process of imaginative identification, the narrator forges a series of haptic connections that promise to transcend the temporo-spatial gulf that divides the desirous living from the idolised dead. That the gap can never fully be bridged is itself a stimulus to desire. Death ensures that the relationship with the desired other can never be fully consummated, and thus perpetuates the cycles of longing, partial appropriation and loss that motivate the narrator's fictions of intimacy.

Sacralised Spaces and Posthumous Communion

If the fantasy of mediated contact generates a frisson of excitement in James's literary tales, even more alluring is the dream of direct, posthumous communion with the celebrated dead. While lodging at the Bordereaus' Venetian palazzo, the narrator of 'The Aspern Papers' becomes convinced that 'some note of [Aspern's] voice' abides there, some 'faint reverberation' (*Complete Tales* 6: 276). This ethereal echo later solidifies into embodied presence: the narrator perceives the great poet's 'revived immortal face' hovering before him, 'as if his bright ghost had returned to earth' (305). Interestingly, the narrator's auratic expectations are in no way diminished by the lack of an authentic connection between his hero and the palazzo; he freely acknowledges that 'Jeffery Aspern had never been in it that I knew of' (276). More usually in James's fiction, though, direct encounters with the dead take place in dwellings that enjoyed a special association with them in life. As Lutz points out, such resonant spaces 'took on an increasingly sacralized quality' in the nineteenth century, as the older, religious practice of 'veneration for the spaces infused by sainthood moved gradually to the worship of spaces associated with the illustrious dead' (107). Secular shrines, and the objects they

encompassed, were valued in Victorian culture for their ‘nebulous sense of metonymy’; not only did they bear witness to the ‘life events of the departed’, they also relayed and made tangible the spectral ‘presence of the now-lost other’ (Lutz 102).

The celebrity writer’s house, in particular, came to function as a hallowed site in which posthumous presence could be felt. When the narrator of ‘John Delavoy’ first enters the Delavoy home, he finds that ‘the place was still full’ of the absent author:

> in everything there that spoke to me I heard the sound of his voice. I read his style into everything […] his relics, his possessions, his books; all of which were not many, for he had worked without material reward: this only, however, made each more charged, somehow, and more personal. (*Complete Tales* 9: 411)

Miss Delavoy – the ‘guardian’ of this ‘temple’ (411) – is similarly convinced that her brother’s being still permeates every aspect of it. Tellingly, she positions him as a continued occupant of the space; as she and the narrator discuss their plans to commemorate his legacy in print, she suggests with a smile ‘My brother might hear!’ (417), as though he is a silent third party to their conversation.

Whereas John Delavoy’s posthumous presence is relatively unobtrusive, a much more active form of communion between the living and the dead is imagined in ‘The Real Right Thing’. When George Withermore is given privileged access to Ashton Doyne’s (apparently vacant) study, he is overwhelmed by a feeling of immanence: ‘The place was full of their lost friend; everything in it had belonged to him; everything they touched had been part of his life. It was for the moment too much for Withermore […] his heart beat faster and his eyes filled with tears’ (*Complete Tales* 10: 473). Withermore’s emotional response here neatly demonstrates the affective impact of resonant celebrity spaces. Doyne’s study is replete with his auratic presence; so much so, that Withermore is immediately overtaken by the uncanny sensation that the dead author is physically there, alongside him. As he comes to spend more time in the sanctified space while completing his biographical researches, this consciousness of co-habitation becomes ever more intense:

> There were moments, for instance, when, as he bent over his papers, the light breath of his dead host was as distinctly in his hair as his own elbows were on the table before him. There

> were moments when, had he been able to look up, the other side of the table would have shown him this companion as vividly as the shaded lamplight showed him his page. (478)

Sequestered away in the 'charmed stillness' (474) of Doyne's private study – separated from the outer world by the pleasing 'click' of the room's 'well-made door' (474) – Withermore luxuriates in Doyne's 'company and contact and presence', taking pleasure from 'the possibility of an intercourse closer than that of life' (475). At times, the relationship that develops between the two men is figured in apostolic terms: Doyne is the 'master' (474, 475) and Withermore the 'young priest of his altar' (478). At others, it takes on a more scholarly cast; Doyne is portrayed as a mystic research assistant, 'a hushed, discreet librarian' (478), who helps locate hidden manuscript materials and pinpoint the sections of old journals most useful to Withermore's task. Most significantly, though, the posthumous communion between Withermore and Doyne is figured in erotic terms; the former looks forward to the evenings when he can shut himself away in the latter's study 'very much as one of a pair of lovers might wait for the hour of their appointment' (477).

Notably, the pleasurable feelings experienced by Withermore derive not simply from 'the idea of Doyne's personal presence' (477), but from the thrill of the chase, the pursuit of clandestine knowledge inaccessible to the ordinary fan of his work. As he 'dip[s] deep' into 'Doyne's secrets', Withermore learns

> many things that he had not suspected, drawing many curtains, forcing many doors, reading many riddles, going, in general, as they said, behind almost everything. It was at an occasional sharp turn of some of the duskier of these wanderings 'behind' that he really, of a sudden, most felt himself, in the intimate, sensible way, face to face with his friend. (478)

The intimate act of biographical uncovering is implicitly sexualised in this passage. Withermore's epistemological quest to 'know' the dead author morphs into an erotic one, as signalled by the metaphors of penetration ('forcing', 'going behind') he uses to describe his investigative endeavours. If, as suggested earlier in this essay, sacralised spaces and textual remains function as surrogates for the authorial body, the phallocentric thrust of James's language here evokes a coded necrophilia. It also signals the interplay of power, pleasure and resistance at work in Jamesian celebrity-fan relationships. Up to this point in the text, Doyne has consistently been represented as the willing

subject – indeed, the ghostly supporter – of Withermore's researches. The references here to physical and hermeneutic barriers ('curtains', 'doors', 'riddles') introduce a subtle note of resistance, however. Such obstacles can of course serve to amplify, rather than thwart, the desire for intimate understanding; as Salmon, channelling Foucault, reminds us, power 'takes pleasure, not merely in the pursuit of "knowledge", but in the resistance which this pursuit engenders' (88).

Eventually, however, Doyne appears to tire of this erotically charged game of biographical hide-and-seek. He reverses his initial 'consecration' of Withermore's 'enterprise' (*Complete Tales* 10: 477) and instead works to baffle and check his now despondent devotee at every turn. Withermore's growing suspicion that Doyne is against the prospective Life on which he is working receives confirmation when Doyne appears to him one final time, 'guarding' the 'threshold' to his study (485). Critics have interpreted this ending as proof of James's hostility towards the Victorian culture of posthumous publicity, with Kamerbeek also claiming that it exposes Withermore's 'felt intimacy as delusion' (59). However, while concurring that 'The Real Right Thing' expresses James's ambivalence towards post-mortem exposure, I want to challenge the idea that it positions haptic fandom as deluded or naïve. Although the text comes explicitly to disavow unauthorised publication (the specific source of Doyne's horror), it presents the intimate communion and spiritual rapport that develops between deceased celebrity and ardent enthusiast as both thrilling and emotionally authentic. As Withermore asserts, Doyne '*wanted* to communicate', to reach forward 'out of his mystery' (*Complete Tales* 10: 484, my emphasis). However, his desire for communion extended only towards a chosen, individual acolyte; he disdained the gossip-hungry masses who would have gone on to consume Withermore's biography.

A similar tolerance towards individualised, personally meaningful acts of celebrity-worship can be found in all three of the tales studied in this essay. Although their protagonists' fandom may at times seem excessive, misguided or even (in the case of 'The Aspern Papers') self-regarding and avaricious, the texts never seek to deny the underlying legitimacy of the desire for intimate contact with departed genius, instead representing the physical and intellectual pleasures that stem from auratic encounters with dead literary celebrities as genuine and plausible. It matters little that those encounters are largely imaginative, mediated via emotionally freighted spaces, people and things;

James's fictions of posthumous fame blur the dividing lines between 'presence' and 'absence', 'touching' and 'feeling', to show that affective bonds can arise from a felt proximity that is distinct from actual tactility. Haptic connections in these tales are as much about being *emotionally* as physically touched, and it is through this paradox of distal intimacy that James ultimately sanctions his protagonists' desire for the dead.

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[1] My use of the terms 'aura' and 'auratic' in this essay are indebted to Walter Benjamin's notion of aura as 'a peculiar web of space and time' ('Short History' 20); an ineffable quality of uniqueness and authenticity that suffuses certain subjects and objects. Though Benjamin's concept of aura is most popularly associated with the singular work of art, it also describes the air of inimitability and mystique that attaches to the Romantic celebrity-as-genius, as well as to the artefacts with which she or he is connected. In his 'Short History of Photography' (1931), for instance, Benjamin suggests that the coat of the philosopher Schelling is imbued with something of the aura of the man himself: 'One has only to look at Schelling's coat; its immortality, too, rests assured; the shape it assumes upon its wearer is not unworthy of the creases in the latter's face' (17).

[2] Edward Silsbee (1826-1900) was a Boston sea-captain and passionate collector of memorabilia relating to the Romantic poet, Percy Bysshe Shelley. In a notebook entry dated 12th January 1887, James relates how Silsbee 'laid the plan of going to lodge with the Misses Claremont' (that is, Byron's former mistress, Claire Clairmont, and her niece, who were living in Florence) in order to get hold of certain 'interesting papers' they possessed: 'letters of Shelley's and of Byron's' (*Notebooks* 71).

[3] According to Benjamin, 'that which withers in the age of mechanical reproduction is the aura of the work of art' (*Illuminations* 215).

[4] The notion that the author is continuous with his work also appears in 'The Real Right Thing': the biographical philosophy espoused by Ashton Doyne (and eventually George Withermore) is that 'the artist was what he *did* – he was nothing else' (*Complete Tales* 10: 475; original emphasis).

[5] While vision and touch are often opposed to one another (the former being associated with distance and the latter with proximity), Mark Paterson, in his study of haptics, argues for the intermodality of these senses. He points out that looking at visual objects, such as artworks, can be 'a touching experience' that affects us 'in a palpable way' (79, 80).

[6] 'Shipping' describes the phenomenon in which fans imagine, desire or advocate for real-life celebrities or fictional characters to form relationships (which may be platonic, romantic or sexual in nature).