Manuscripts of Ashes: Parallel Readings of James’s The Aspern Papers and Muñoz Molina’s Beatus Ille

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The translation of Antonio Muñoz Molina’s *Beatus Ille* as *A Manuscript of Ashes* does not only come across as an editorial attempt to circumvent its original Latin title, but as a knowing allusion to its Jamesian source. The Spanish author has acknowledged three crucial influences on *Beatus Ille*: Max Aub’s *Jusep Torres Campalans* (an apocryphal biography that was passed off as non-fiction), the narrative device of false death and Henry James’s *The Aspern Papers*. The author even considered that this book’s influence would be so obvious that critics would censor him, though this was not the case. In this article, we aim to explore which fictional elements of James’s tale have made their way into Muñoz Molina’s novel and, more importantly, how they do so, so as not to miss each work’s uniqueness. Naturally, we do not attempt a definitive account of this subject, though we hope at least to make a case for the study of Muñoz Molina’s works in a wider literary context.

*Beatus Ille* (1986) is Muñoz Molina’s first novel and deals with the quest for roots undertaken by many Spanish youngsters in the seventies, after the schism brought about in the country’s collective memory and cultural history by the Spanish Civil War and Franco’s regime. In Muñoz Molina’s words:

> [Beatus Ille] had to do, among other things, with the search for a tradition, for a literary and political heroism buried under several decades of tyranny, under the silence of oblivion. It was not a search of archaeological interest, but of a practical kind. It was a matter of moral survival, of asserting life through desire.

Although the years 1936-1939 are portrayed in *Beatus Ille*, it is not a novel about the Civil War, but about the way the author’s generation relates to it, as Muñoz Molina has stated.

The past is revisited in *The Aspern Papers* too, though with different motivations and results, as James implies in his prologue to the New York edition. Here, James explains the
anecdote which suggested his tale to him: the discovery that he could have visited Jane Clairmont – half-sister of Mary Godwin and mother of Byron’s daughter Allegra – in Florence, had he found out in time and had chosen to do so – which he most assuredly would not. This, along with the attempt of an American scholar to become Mrs. Clairmont’s lodger, inspired James to write his novella.

The fact that Mrs. Clairmont survived until 1879 provides James with the right amount of temporal distance: “the case had the air of the past just in the degree in which that air, I confess, most appeals to me – when the region over which it hangs is far enough away without being too far”\(^5\). Mrs. Clairmont’s existence harked back to the beginning of the century – her daughter by Byron was born in 1817 – but, nonetheless, James could have called upon her during his stay in Florence in 1877:

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. The table is the one, the common expanse, [...]. That, to my imagination, is the past fragrant of all, or of almost all, the poetry of the thing outlived and lost and gone, and yet in which the precious element of closeness, telling so of connexions but tasting so of differences, remains appreciable. [...]. We are divided of course between liking to feel the past strange and liking to feel it familiar; the difficulty is, for intensity, to catch it at the moment when the scales of the balance hang with the right evenness\(^6\).

This nimble equilibrium is what most attracted James and what he most carefully tried to convey and preserve in his rendition of it. It also marks its main difference from Muñoz Molina’s treatment of the past in Beatus Ille.

**A palatial house under the spell of the past**

Inner spaces are rather similar in both narratives. Manuel’s house, and Miss Bordereau’s old palazzo take on an almost character-like role. Their past and regal dimensions are imposing forces on the characters inhabiting them. Their usual residents live in seclusion, speaking in spatial and temporal terms. They are as cut-off from the life going on beyond their walls – and even from the rooms which are not their own – as from the present. They are trapped in a time without succession: “We’ve no life”, complains Miss Tina. The characters at Manuel’s house are equally motionless: “We are isolated from everything here. We turn into statues”,\(^8\) wails Utrera. Juliana’s house has “impenetrable regions”; it is “so big that for each other we were lost in it”\(^10\). Likewise, Manuel’s house is both an island and a labyrinth\(^11\). Later on, Minaya reflects on the characters living there and relates their immobility to the house and Mágina itself\(^12\): “Shipwrecked people, [...], in a city that is now, and has been for three centuries, a motionless shipwreck [...]

The extraordinary proportions of the houses, their intricate distribution and their bonds with the past make them suitable hiding places for invaluable manuscripts. In fact, they resemble a museum more than a house. Similarly, both buildings comprise a kind of sealed chamber where the precious papers are concealed. Visitors’ entry into these all-but sacred rooms is somehow connected to the deaths of their guardians. In The Aspern Papers, the narrator is caught in such an indecorous position in Chapter VIII\(^14\). Though Juliana Bordereau recovers from this encounter, the narrator thinks that Miss Tina might find him guilty of her aunt’s death and thanks her inwardly for not doing so\(^15\). In Beatus Ille, Manuel cannot bear the vision of Minaya and Inés making love in his nuptial room.
and dies on the spot. Inés and Minaya leave the room and establish an alibi. Nonetheless, Utrera finds them out and accuses Minaya of murder: “Don’t be so sure you’ve deceived us the way you deceived poor Manuel. You killed him, last night, you and that hypocritical tart [...]”.

Miss Bordereau and Manuel’s acts make a deep impression on their beholders. Aspern’s critic cannot forget Juliana’s regard and demeanour: “her hands were raised, she had lifted the everlasting curtain that covered half her face, and for the first, the last, the only time I beheld her extraordinary eyes. They glared at me; [...]. I never shall forget her strange little bent, white, tottering figure, with its lifted head, her attitude, her expression [...]”.

The deaths of Juliana Bordereau and Manuel are linked to the invasion of their private chambers. Not only are their lives and memories stored there, but their lives and memories have become those rooms. Their guests’ intrusion is an unbearable offence and a reminder that they no longer fit in the present of the living.

The cunning old hostess

The frightful proprietresses appearing in The Aspern Papers and Beatus Ille, Juliana Bordereau and Doña Elvira Crivelli, are strikingly similar. They are certainly old, but not as extraordinarily long-lived as their bearings convey. The narrator of The Aspern Papers cannot precisely determine Miss Bordereau’s age. The treatment of Juliana’s age throughout the story suggests it has a certain supernatural quality about it. On the one hand, the narrator refuses to state Juliana’s age. On the other hand, his wording evokes an almost-ghostly nature in Juliana’s endurance. Thus, the narrator finds her “too strange, too literally resurgent”, and marvels at “the wonder of her survival”.

Though not so mystifying, Doña Elvira conjures up an extinct world too, but the narrator ventures a hypothesis: “I estimate that she must have been almost ninety, but Inés says there is not a single sign of decrepitude in her eyes”. Despite this, her severe seclusion and her long-established habits makes her appear as the embodiment of a whole era: “It isn’t the aroma of a woman, he thought, but of a century: this was how things, the air, smelled fifty years ago”.

The combination of longevity and shrewdness make both these women frightening interlocutors. The researchers in both narratives feel disarmed in the presence of their hostesses, since these ladies can learn so much by just one look. The Jamesian visitor has a material reason for his concern: “Then came a check from the perception that we weren’t really face to face, inasmuch as she had over her eyes a horrible green shade which served for her almost as a mask. I believed for the instant that she had put it on expressly, so that from underneath it she might take me all in without my getting at herself”.

Juliana’s seeing without being seen is a source of discomfort for his visitor. The shade over Juliana’s eyes symbolises both her acumen and her inscrutability. The visitor is only allowed to see Juliana’s eyes at the climactic moment in which she catches him red-handed, bending over her drawers. Although he will be unable to pry further into Juliana’s secrets, he will discover one more disquieting truth about her eyes: “ ‘Do you
think she can see?’ ”26, Miss Tina snaps. The narrator doubts it; albeit blind, Juliana sees through him perfectly well.

Doña Elvira is bare-faced, but her psychological insight is just as unsettling – if of a more earthly nature: “she had been observing Minaya since he came in, and even when he helped her to sit next to the tea table, she continued watching him in the closet mirror, clumsy, solicitous, bending over her, conscious of the silence he didn’t know how to break and of the cold, wise eyes that had already judged him”27. Doña Elvira is aware of her ability to outsmart those surrounding her and boasts about this to Minaya:

Look at those books. I spend entire nights over them, revising the accounts of the administrator, [...]. Since he knows my eyes are failing, he makes the numbers smaller and smaller, but I’ve bought a magnifying glass, and with it I can see even what isn’t written down. There never was a man who could deceive me, and I won’t permit it now, in my old age. Neither you can, but you know that. Tell me why you’ve come28.

Even Manuel warns Minaya about his mother’s piercing eyes: “‘Before you can see her’ [...], she will have looked you over from head to toe [...]”29. Both Juliana Bordereau and Doña Elvira know their disconcerting powers, and derive great pleasure from them. Juliana Bordereau enjoys herself immensely by tantalizing her visitor with an oval portrait of Jeffrey Aspern, in a sagacious manoeuvre to make him own up: “She was perhaps amazed at my assurance, but I was surprised at hers; at her having the energy, in her state of health and at her time of life, to wish to sport with me to that tune simply for her private entertainment – the humour to test and practise on me and befool me”30. The same malignantly playful spirit guides Doña Elvira when she summons Minaya to her room in order to ask him what she already knows – why he has come:

That was the question and the hidden challenge and the conclusion that all her words had led to, not a confession but a raw challenge in which she, after displaying her weapons, put simulation and words to one side like a gambler who clears the table to leave a single card and then turns it over with marked slowness31.

Callous remarks, cynicism, greed, and distanced body language add to the traits shared by Miss Bordereau and Doña Elvira. It is not strange that both visitors feel ill at ease when faced with their hostesses’ laughter: “it was so I first heard the strange sound of her laugh, which was as if the faint ‘walking’ ghost of her old-time tone had suddenly cut a caper”32. Minaya is similarly shocked by his hostess’ hilarity: “Doña Elvira’s laugh, [...], was a short, cold outburst that shattered like glass and gleamed for an instant in eyes unfamiliar with indulgence and tenderness [...]”33.

Nonetheless, Doña Elvira differs from Juliana Bordereau in a significant way. Juliana, as Aspern’s lover and muse, is somehow touched by the poet’s genius, even if her materialism belies it. Rapacious and impertinent as she is, Miss Bordereau is seen through a transcendent lens, while Doña Elvira absolutely evades idealization.

The mythic writer

At the beginning of both narratives, the reader is presented with a fine literary artist from a previous generation. In James’s tale, Jeffrey Aspern is a sublime poet, fervently worshipped by his critic: “today, after his long comparative obscurity, he hangs high in the heaven of our literature for all the world to see; he’s a part of the light by which we walk”34. In Muñoz Molina’s novel, Jacinto Solana is a legendary writer in the making, so to
speak. He is relatively unknown, partly because of his political ideas, which adds the allure of the clandestine to his persona: “Then someone came and talked to him about Jacinto Solana: dead, unpublished, renowned, heroic, disappeared, probably shot at the end of the war”\(^{35}\). This piece of information reminds Minaya of his hometown, Mágina, and of his uncle Manuel, a friend of Jacinto Solana’s. Under the pretence of a doctoral thesis, Minaya seeks refuge in Mágina, fleeing the repression in Madrid.

Aspern’s literary merit is unquestionable. Mrs. Prest’s attempt to belittle it is dismissed with militant indifference: “I took no pains to defend him. One doesn’t defend one’s god: one’s god is in himself a defence”\(^{36}\). Later on, the narrator eulogises Aspern’s lines – “(poems not as ambiguous as the sonnets – scarcely more divine, I think – of Shakespeare)”\(^{37}\) – and comments on his main literary contribution\(^{38}\). Even the reserved Miss Bordereau breaks her silence regarding the poet to confirm, through her niece, the enthusiastic vision of the critic: “‘She said he was a god’, Miss Tina reports\(^{39}\).”

Solana’s case is somewhat different. For the most part of the novel, the reader is better acquainted with his strife in creating a magna opus than withSolana’s texts themselves – excluding his articles and poems, mostly published in the press. Naturally, the mere existence of Solana’s manuscripts is one of the enigmas to be solved. Furthermore, two characters, Doña Elvira and Utrera, openly snub his works\(^{40}\). Though their negative portrayals make them come across as unreliable, they are proved right in the end.

The entrance of both researchers into a house somehow related with the writers they study stir in them the feeling that their authors are guiding them. This feeling is all the more intense in the case of Aspern’s critic, since he is not even sure that his writer has ever visited the palazzo\(^{41}\). Nonetheless, he almost feels Aspern working hand in hand with him\(^{42}\). Throughout his tale, Aspern’s critic delights in the opportunity to share the poet’s sensations, thus abolishing the temporal gulf dividing them: “The old lady’s voice was very thin and weak, but it had an agreeable, cultivated murmur and there was wonder in the thought that that individual note had been in Jeffrey Aspern’s ear”\(^{43}\).

Turning to Beatus Ille, and contrarily to Aspern’s case, we know that Solana visits Manuel’s house and even takes a room there for three months in 1947. Despite the fact that Minaya is not scholarly interested in Solana at the outset, he becomes increasingly engrossed in his life and works. When exposed to objects or landscapes that Solana might have enjoyed, Minaya tends to re-enact the poet’s sensations and think of him as a living presence. Like in James’s tale, sensory impressions merge past and present, thus bridging the gap between both times. Furthermore, both Aspern’s editor and Minaya feel that their revered authors gleefully observe their sentimental predicaments from their portraits: “I looked at Jeffrey Aspern’s face in the little picture [...]. He seemed to smile at me with mild mockery; he might have been amused at my case”\(^{44}\). Although Minaya’s situation is quite different – he is unable to follow his beloved Inés to her room – Solana’s mirth is as vivid as Aspern’s: “But he didn’t do anything [...], except to look at Orlando’s drawing and the photograph in which Jacinto Solana was smiling at him, Minaya, guessing, understanding everything, [...]”\(^{45}\). In a way, these remarks foreshadow the prank that both poets play on their devotees, as we will soon see.
The papers: two ironic quests with opposite denouements

Aspern’s critic and Minaya embark on literary quests – they endeavour to unearth certain manuscripts – which end in major befuddlement and disappointment. That said, their outcomes vary notably, as do the implications we can read into their paths as to the cognoscibility of the past.

The researchers in both stories differ in their professionalism and purpose. Aspern’s critic is an established scholar. He enters Juliana’s palazzo under a false name and the excuse of his penchant for gardening. As to his means, he states them clearly: “Hypocrisy, duplicity are my only chance. I’m sorry for it, but there’s no baseness I wouldn’t commit for Jeffrey Aspern’s sake”46. In a distorted way, if Aspern’s critic admits so openly to his willingness to commit any misdemeanour, it is because he turns it into a proof of his admiration for the poet. In his delusion, Aspern’s editor falls into a kind of hubris, if we are allowed to term his offence so:

I had invoked him and he had come; [...]; it was as if his bright ghost had returned to earth to assure me he regarded the affair as his own no less than as mine and that we should see it fraternally and fondly to a conclusion. [...] 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 light47.

The bold presumption of Aspern’s critic is threefold. Firstly, he treats Aspern as an ally and an equal in his quest. Secondly, he numbers himself among the ranks of the servants of art. Thirdly, he thinks he is capable enough to disclose Aspern’s secret, which should by no means be mistaken for the biographical details contained in his papers. However, this is the source of all his difficulties. At the beginning of the story, Aspern’s critic says that he would rather have access to the papers than know the “answer to the riddle of the universe”48. This statement reflects the confusion that will leave him empty-handed and baffled in the end. On the one hand, he prizes Aspern over anything else and would gladly renounce the key to the universe to further his knowledge on the poet. On the other hand, he underrates him, because he makes too much of the papers, while neglecting the ineffable quality of Aspern’s art, which is just as undecipherable as the origin of the cosmos. In order to illustrate this point more clearly, stricter definitions of the words ‘mystery’ and ‘enigma’ might be useful. We may describe them by opposition, according to their different levels of intelligibility. Hence, in this restricted sense, mystery cannot by definition be solved, because it escapes the intellect. Questions such as ‘who are we?’, ‘where do we come from?’ and ‘where are we going?’ fall into this category. Conversely, enigmas can be cleared up, as they deal with ascertainable subjects. With respect to The Aspern Papers, Aspern’s art and life are a mystery, while the existence and content of his papers are enigmas. In our view, Aspern’s critic’s fault is to confound these two notions and try to grasp Aspern’s genius through his letters, thus downgrading mystery to enigma. Like the endeavours of Hugh Vereker’s critics in James’s The Figure of the Carpet, his enterprise is doomed to failure, despite his last-minute willingness to marry Miss Tina. Eventually, Aspern’s mystery asserts itself triumphantly, since his critic is left, face to face, with the unreadable gaze of the poet in the little picture. He might stare at
Aspern’s eyes indefinitely, but to no avail – they cannot be summarized in a conclusive statement. Paradoxical as it may seem, poor and pitiable Miss Tina is the medium through which the poet’s will to protect his aura is fulfilled. Her revenge on the narrator by burning the genius’s letters shields it.

That said, the narrator of *The Aspern Papers* engages his reader in his quest for the papers and allures him to the enigma surrounding their existence and contents. It is not Aspern who joins him in his efforts, but the reader, who shares his curiosity and impatience with regard to the papers. The reader is enticed along a path of solvable questions – do the papers still exist? Where are they? Will they bring to light any obscure episode in Aspern’s biography? – only to confront him with an issue without solution – Aspern’s eyes. During his stay with the Misses Bordereau, the narrator experiences a crucial reversal of expectations – from enigma to mystery – and transfers it to the reader. He wants the reader to partake in his initial curiosity and excitement, as well as in his final bafflement. After much to-and-fro, the quest of Aspern’s critic results in a dustpanful of ashes and Aspern’s undecipherable portrait.

Moving on to *Beatus Ille*, Minaya is a young man of 26, scared by his recent, if brief, imprisonment in Madrid. Advice given to him by a fellow-student prompts him to write to his uncle Manuel under the pretext of an imaginary doctoral thesis on Jacinto Solana. Like Aspern’s critic, Minaya conceals his true motives in order to enter the house. Unlike him, Minaya is not pursuing the scent of infamy, as Aspern’s critic seems to be – however faintly⁴⁹. Minaya’s interest in Solana does not precede his stay in Máquina. On the contrary, it grows out of it, as he finds Solana’s scattered manuscripts among Manuel’s belongings, apparently by chance⁵⁰. Therefore, even if only on ethical grounds, it is understandable that Aspern’s critic and Minaya should meet different ends. However, Solana punishes Minaya’s curiosity, actively and purposely, by setting a trap for him. On a first impulse, Solana resents Minaya’s research and fools him by reinforcing the legendary proportions that he is gradually taking on in the student’s eyes. The title of the doctoral thesis planned by Minaya’s colleague, “Literature and Political Engagement in the Spanish Civil War: The case of Jacinto Solana”⁵¹, proves groundless after Minaya’s research: Solana has always lacked the faith of a true militant and has failed to write his long-planned book. The ashes found in *La isla de Cuba* correspond to blank sheets and are burnt by Solana himself, one by one, just as resentfully as Miss Tina sets Aspern’s letters on fire after the narrator’s rejection of her proposal⁵². Eventually, and in recognition of Minaya’s desire to understand the past, Solana makes him privy to his secrets. We find a displacement from enigma to mystery too in *Beatus Ille*, but of a significantly different nature: it is not the mystery about the demigod-like writer that is asserted, but Minaya’s desire for knowledge:

“You’ve written the book”, I told him, “for a few days you returned me to life and literature, but you may not be able to measure my gratitude and affection, which are greater than my irony. Because you are the main character and the deepest mystery in the novel that did not have to be written to exist [...][⁵³]”.

Notwithstanding Minaya’s entrapment, he is finally granted access to the unknown past, which automatically implies the destruction of Solana’s mythic dimension. Hence, Minaya is first warned against the risks of glamorizing the past and confusing fact and fiction, and then rewarded for his commitment to lucidity. In sharp contrast, Aspern’s critic leaves Miss Bordereau’s rooms none the wiser about his idol – beyond the indirect corroboration of one of his hypotheses on how Juliana and Jeffrey Aspern met each other.
54 –, while Aspern’s aura emerges not only unsullied, but heightened, since it successfully withstands the editor’s assault.

Conclusions

30 In this article, we have tried to show how certain fictional elements in The Aspern Papers have caught Antonio Muñoz Molina’s imagination and influenced his first novel. We do not imply that Manuel’s house, Doña Elvira or the quest for Solana’s manuscripts have been entirely based on James’s tale, though it might have helped the then-young author to render some traits of his fictional world more vividly.

31 However, even if the similarities seem sometimes overwhelming, the conclusions regarding the inferred cognoscibility of the past differ notably. In The Aspern Papers, as James states when talking about “old-time Italy”, the past he revisits is full “of things too numerous, too deep, too obscure, too strange, or even simply too beautiful, for any ease of intellectual relation” (1888, p. 159). The past is tantalizingly presented, like Juliana’s gaze, under a green shade. The ashes of Aspern’s manuscripts symbolise this ineffability of the past, which lingers in the air like a column of smoke or a question mark. This is more suitable for the realms of literary imagination than for the qualms of the conscientious historian. The quest undertaken by Aspern’s critic is soundly defeated – his intrusion is punished and the aura of the divine writer preserved. The enigma regarding the papers is meaningless in comparison to the mystery of Aspern’s life and art, which asserts itself powerfully at the end of the tale.

32 In Beatus Ille, though Minaya’s curiosity is initially chastised, it is finally rewarded. He chooses to know and dares to embark on a journey to the past that leaves him initially baffled, but eventually enables him to find his roots, thus enhancing his self-knowledge and his capacity to confront his future. Historical knowledge wins over romantic imagination, for the legend surrounding Jacinto Solana cracks under Minaya’s honest curiosity. The ashes of Solana’s manuscripts reveal both his failure as a writer – since it is Solana himself who sets them on fire and the sheets are mostly blank – and the falsehoods often underlying myth-making processes – as the ashes are initially taken as proof of the destruction of Solana’s fine compositions by his political enemies. The enigma surrounding his manuscripts is neatly solved, much to the detriment of Solana’s legendary dimension, while a mystery remains – Minaya’s desire to understand the past and find his place in his own time and space.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


NOTES

2. “Yo pensaba que resultaría tan obvia que los críticos me censurarían por ella. Luego resultó al parecer que los críticos no habían leído The Aspern Papers...” (email from the author, Aug. 30, 2005).
3. Antonio Muñoz Molina, “La invención de un pasado”, 187; our translation: “Se trataba, entre otras cosas, de la búsqueda de una tradición, de un heroísmo literario y político sepultados bajo varias décadas de tiranía, bajo el silencio del olvido, pero no de una búsqueda con intereses arqueológicos, sino puramente prácticos, de supervivencia moral, de afirmación de la vida en el deseo”.
6. Ibid., 164; James’s emphasis.
7. AP, 34. In order to avoid repetition, Henry James’s The Aspern Papers will be abbreviated as AP.
8. MA, 38. “Aquí estamos aislados de todo. Nos volvemos estatuas”, BI, 46. Hereafter, we will cite from Edith Grossman’s translation in the main text and place the original Spanish text as footnotes. Along the lines indicated above, A Manuscript of Ashes will be abbreviated as MA and Beatus Ille as BI.
9. AP, 14.
10. AP, 38.
11. “‘This house is too big [...], but it has the advantage of allowing you to lose yourself in any room as if it were a desert island’, says Manuel, MA, 25; “Ésta es una casa demasiado grande, [...] pero tiene la ventaja de que uno puede perderse en cualquier habitación como en una isla desierta”, BI, 33.
12. A comparative study of James’s Venice and Muñoz Molina’s Mágina as literary settings and spatial materializations of the past is both possible and interesting, but it is beyond the scope of this article.
13. MA, 67. “Náufragos, [...], en una ciudad que ya es en sí misma y desde hace tres siglos un naufragio inmóvil [...]”, BI, 75.
15. AP, 118.
17. AP, 112.
18. For brevity’s sake, we indicate only the pages where the references to Manuel’s gesture can be found in both editions: MA, 113, 116, 120 and BI, 121, 124, 127-128.
19. Andrés Soria Olmedo has referred to Benito Pérez Galdós’s Doña Perfecta as a possible source of Doña Elvira, Una indagación incesante, la obra de Antonio Muñoz Molina, 51. Another precedent
might be Federico García Lorca’s Bernarda Alba: both characters are authoritarian, hateful of the poor, and in constant defence of their family’s honour and estate. Antonio Muñoz Molina has confirmed this kinship: “the influence is unconscious. This character [Doña Elvira] is the least convincing to me. All too obvious. All too Bernarda” (email from the author, Aug. 24, 2005; our translation). The original reply reads: “la influencia es inconsciente. Ese personaje es el que menos me convence de la novela. Demasiado obvio. Demasiado Bernarda”.

20. “‘Why, she must be tremendously old – at least a hundred’, I had said; but on coming to consider dates I saw it not strictly involved that she should have far exceeded the common span”, AP, 3-4. Miss Tina jokes about Juliana’s age and banters: “‘Well, [...] my aunt’s a hundred and fifty’, AP, 61. The narrator states that Aspern died “a hundred years ago”, AP, 61, that Juliana’s relations with him take place “in her early womanhood” AP, 4, and that she “had been in Europe nearly three-quarters of a century”, AP, 44. James deliberately leaves a blank in regard to Miss Bordereau’s age, though, if we turn to her historical source, she should not be over 81.

22. AP, 42.
23. MA, 33. “Calculo que tendrá ya casi noventa años, pero dice Inés que no hay en sus pupilas ni un solo signo de decrepitud”, BI, 41.
24. MA, 72. “‘No es el olor una mujer’, pensó, sino el de un siglo: así olían las cosas y el aire hace cincuenta años”, BI, 80.
25. AP, 21.
26. AP, 99; James’s emphasis.
27. MA, 72. Doña Elvira “había estado observando a Minaya desde que entró y aun cuando él la ayudaba a sentarse junto a la mesa del té siguió mirándolo en el espejo del armario, torpe, solícito, inclinado sobre ella, consciente del silencio que no sabía cómo romper y de los ojos fríos y sabios que ya lo habían juzgado”, BI, 80.
28. MA, 75. “Mira esos libros. Sobre ellos paso las noches enteras revisando las cuentas del administrador, [...] Como sabe que estoy mal de la vista, hace los números cada vez más pequeños, pero yo he comprado una lupa y puedo ver con ella hasta lo que no está escrito. Nunca ha habido un hombre que pueda engañarme, y no lo voy a permitir ahora, en la vejez. Tampoco puedes tú, pero lo sabes. Cuéntame por qué has venido”, BI, 83.
29. MA, 76. “–Antes de que tú hayas podido verla [...], ella te habrá mirado de la cabeza a los pies, [...], BI, 84.
30. AP, 90.
31. MA, 76. “Ésa era la pregunta y el reto escondido y el punto final a donde conducían todas sus palabras, no una confesión, sino un crudo desafío en el que ella, después de mostrar sus armas, apartaba a un lado la simulación y las palabras igual que un jugador limpia la mesa para dejar un solo naípe y darle luego la vuelta con brusca lentitud”, BI, 83.
32. AP, 67.
33. MA, 74. “La risa de doña Elvira, [...], una carcajada corta y fría rompiéndose como una copa de vidrio y brillando por un instante en aquellos ojos que ignoraban la complacencia y la ternura, [...], BI, 82.
34. AP, 3.
36. AP, 3.
37. AP, 46.
38. AP, 47-48.
39. AP, 61.
40. “I thought that thank God he had been erased forever from the world, and now you come to tell me you’re going to write a book about him, as if one could write about nothing, about a
fraud”, says Doña Elvira, MA, 77; “Don’t make me laugh. Solana’s manuscripts, his famous work of genius [...]” retorts the has-been sculptor, MA, 270. The Spanish text is as follows: “Pensaba que gracias a Dios ya se había borrado para siempre del mundo y ahora vienes tú a decirme que vas a escribir un libro sobre él, como si se pudiera escribir sobre nada, sobre un fraude”, BI, 84; “No me haga reír. Los manuscritos de Solana, su famoso libro genial [...]”, BI, 280.

41. AP, 3.
42. AP, 40.
43. AP, 23.
44. AP, 125.
45. MA, 92. “Pero no hizo nada, [...] sólo mirar el dibujo de Orlando y la foto donde Jacinto Solana le sonreía a él, Minaya, adivinando, entendiéndolo todo [...]”, BI, 100.
46. AP, 9.
47. AP, 40-41.
48. AP, 3.
49. “His early death had been the only dark spot, as it were, on his fame, unless the papers in Miss Bordereau’s hands should perversely bring out others”, AP, 4, says the narrator of The Aspern Papers.
50. This point cannot be extended here, but every clue Minaya picks up has been intentionally planted by Inés, the maid-servant, along the lines of Nemo’s ruse in Jules Verne’s The Mysterious Island.
52. Miss Tina delights in her thorough destruction of the papers: “I burnt them last night, one by one in the kitchen. [...] It took a long time – there were so many” ”, AP, 137. Solana tortures himself for his inability to write in the same fashion, according to Frasco: “The floor was full of burned papers everywhere, even under the bed, [...] They didn’t burn all the papers at the same time, in a bonfire; it seems they burned them one by one”, MA, 109; “El suelo estaba lleno de papeles quemados, por todas partes, hasta debajo de la cama, [...]. No quemaron todos los papeles al mismo tiempo, en una hoguera, parece que los hubieran ido quemando uno por uno”, BI, 117.
53. MA, 302. “Usted ha escrito el libro’, le dije, ‘usted me ha devuelto por unos días a la vida y a la literatura, pero es posible que no sepa medir mi gratitud y mi afecto, que son más altos que mi ironía. Porque usted es el personaje principal y el misterio más hondo de la novela que no ha necesitado ser escrita para existir [...]”, BI, 312.
54. AP, 92.
55. James, “Preface to The Aspern Papers” ”, p. 159-160.

ABSTRACTS

This article presents a comparative study of Henry James’s The Aspern Papers (1888) and Antonio Muñoz Molina’s Beatus Ille (1986; Eng. trans. A Manuscript of Ashes, 2008). Firstly, I discuss a number of fictional elements in Beatus Ille, partly modelled upon James’s novella, such as the interior setting, certain characters and the main plotline. Secondly, I argue that, though both narratives deal with ironic literary quests, their outcomes nevertheless suggest divergent standpoints regarding the past and its retrieval.

**AUTHOR**

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