

"The Quarries are Silent": Notes on a Scandinavian Community in New England

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The North Shore has the same rugged coast as the part of Sweden I come from. Absolutely the same! When I came over here, that's the only thing I could do stay ashore: Cut stone.¹

Cape Ann, Massachusetts is a small and celebrated corner of New England with a complex ethnic composition.² Cape Ann's year-long residents, numbering about 45,000, have a solid local identity that is itself reinforced by their ethnic affiliations. Localism and ethnicity go hand in hand.

While colonial American imagery definitely keeps the edge over more recent ethnic enclaves (especially the Scandinavian and Mediterranean), the "new-comers," at the end of the nineteenth century, left their mark on the earlier Yankee society. The Sicilian and Portuguese fishing communities settled in the City of Gloucester, whereas Finnish and Swedish quarry and foundry workers tended to settle in the Pigeon Cove section of Rockport and in Lanesville, a small village on the "border" between Gloucester and Rockport. The Scandinavian immigrants lived as close to their workplaces as possible, and many of them used fragments from the quarries to build their own houses.

The new ethnic groups built homes, churches, and meeting halls that fit them better than colonial American architecture. The immigrants settled down on Cape Ann in the cultural and historical space that was allowed them by their antecedents. If Paul Lundberg, the Swedish quarry-worker quoted above, felt that his new home resembled his old, so too could a Portuguese fisherman notice: "When I come to Gloucester I really not realize this an American town."³

Cape Ann was separated from the rest of the North Shore – and the world perhaps – by a telling expression, "The Cut," a channel of the Annisquam River. Immigrants, however, had their own ways of keeping

connections with the "Old World" and, at the same time, digging a firm foundation in 'the New. For the Swedish quarry-worker, it was the rugged coast (*Skærgård*) that reminded him of his native land. For the Portuguese fisherman, it was the town of Gloucester itself – with a section called Portugee Hill – that made him feel at home.

By focusing on the Scandinavian community on Cape Ann, I shall ascribe to it the position of a keystone in the Cape's inter-ethnic structure. The "face" which Cape Ann presents to the outside world is one of a durable and confident community. Local loyalty and identity take shape from the various ethnic elements. It is difficult to say whether ethnicity there is "primordial" or "performed." My own observations have necessarily tended toward the latter. How is ethnicity expressed in ceremonies, festivals, and even in such trivial symbols as bumperstickers?

The silent quarry is a good image for reminding the Scandinavian community of its history on Cape Ann. Once the quarry was the typical workplace for Finnish and Swedish immigrants. Today the quarry is no longer a workplace – except for the occasional watercolorist. More permanent and more visible than a museum and archive, the silent quarry records the labor upon material, the pressure of culture upon nature. The aesthetic balance between "Nature" and "Culture" is present in the many silent quarries of Cape Ann, but more than any other group on the Cape, the Scandinavians feel their history closely connected to those quarries.

The aesthetic image then is a key symbol for the ethnic community's "remembrance of things past."⁴

*Ethnicity at Work: The Cape Ann Quarries, 1880–1930*⁵

The mining, cutting, and shipping of granite from Cape Ann date from the early years of the American Republic, but quarrying activity accelerated after the Civil War.⁶ The construction of banks, railway stations, university libraries, office buildings, and neo-Gothic churches tapped the granite of New England. Close to Boston, Cape Ann was one of the large suppliers. There were serious plans and even the beginning phases of a grand project that would make Rockport the largest man-made harbor on the Atlantic Coast. Rubble from the granite quarries would be used to form a breakwater. Rockport would become for Boston what Le Havre is for Paris. The dream project was dropped during the Depression, but nearly two hundred yards of the breakwater were completed and, of course, are visible from the town.

It is difficult to imagine quiet, picturesque Rockport as a rough and tumble mining town. The quarries are silent – places to take romantic walks, and for the bolder souls, dips into the cold, deep water. The kids from Cape Ann call the spring-fed quarries "the pits." Each group has

its favorite pit to swim in. Stu, a boy who works on a construction team, remembers hearing his Finnish grandfather tell about his workdays. Stu constructs stone walls and is highly skilled at cutting granite for foundations with the old hand tools. He says that he is following a family tradition, but he hopes to avoid the destiny of his grandfather: "He died of too much granite dust and too much whiskey."

The first Finnish and Swedish immigrants arrived in Rockport during the 1870s. There is some mystery about the arrival of the Finns. The ledgers of the quarry companies include "several strange names" that are thought to be Finnish. When hired, Finns were given Swedish-sounding names by the quarry time-keepers. These names usually "stuck," but some of their owners changed their names back to the Finnish originals. The employers' practice of simplifying the Nordic names perhaps helped to shape a generalized "Scandinavian" identity for the Swedish and Finnish immigrants, at least in the eyes of the New England community.

The Vasa Order in Rockport is a "Scandinavian Fraternal Society" which dates from 1906. Its membership joins both ethnic groups, though I think that the "Finnish Singers" hold a leading cultural position in the Lodge. Finnish ethnicity, to use a contemporary American phrase, is "up front" in the Cape's cultural life.

Until the closing of the quarry industry during the Depression, Finnish and Swedish workers predominated, but the quarry was not exclusively Scandinavian. According to John Kielinen: "The Finns did the mining, the Swedes the cutting, and the Italians did the fancy monument work." The typical workplaces for the Scandinavians were the quarries and the foundry. "We had to buy food in the company stores. It was like the coal mines in Appalachia," Kielinen said. I asked him if he had ever been a fisherman, and his answer was a definite "No." He "wasn't much for boats." Though some Scandinavians are fishermen – sometimes as part-time supplements to other jobs – their usual identification is with the "dry" workplaces on the Cape. The Mediterranean communities, on the other hand, are almost always identified as fishermen or workers in the fish plants. The team name for Rockport High School is significantly the "Vikings." For Gloucester High School the team name is "Fishermen." Rockport, moreover, is a "dry" town. Gloucester is "wet." Rockport remains "dry" long after the repeal of Prohibition, largely due to the momentum of the Finnish and Swedish temperance organizations that antedated National Prohibition in the 1920s.

The division between Rockport – a "Town" – and Gloucester – a "City" – gives Cape Ann a binary but asymmetrical structure. Social class is just as evident in this structure as ethnic identity. Rockport traditionally votes Republican, and Gloucester Democratic. Scandinavians on the Cape, who spoke proudly about their parents and grand-

parents who had been active in the labor and socialist movements, also admitted that they voted for Ronald Reagan in 1984.

Amnesia and nostalgia make strange bed-fellows, but it is, nevertheless, a frequently met couple in contemporary American culture.⁷

"The making of the working class" on Cape Ann cannot circumvent "ethnicity at work." The two large groups of immigrant newcomers from the South and North of Europe each took its position in the local labor force. A major difference is that the Scandinavians lost those workplaces and the Mediterraneans still have theirs.

In their days, the quarry-workers organized several militant strikes. Barbara Erkkila has rendered the most memorable of those strikes in her history of the Cape Ann quarries. Her narrative deserves full citation, for it evokes both the local and the ethnic character of the labor movement:

The Rockport Granite Company suffered from labor troubles often during its existence, but one of the best-remembered strikes was the one on March 6, 1899, dominated by Finnish quarrymen. The strike was regarded as a test of strength for the Finns, the newest immigrant group to work in the quarries. They were viewed as an unknown quantity and time would show whether or not they also had staying power. Before the strike was over in June, the Finns proved the meaning of one of their own words, "sisu" meaning endurance. And they won for themselves and their fellow workers a nine-hour day, with time and a half for overtime.

During the strike, the Rockport Granite Company tried to use one hundred and fifty immigrant Italian laborers from Boston in their quarries, bringing them in at night and housing them in temporary shanties built near Blood Ledge quarry at Bay View. This was about a half mile up the track from the main office.

Each time the Finns heard about the scab labor force they tried to explain to the terrified Italians that workers were on strike there, for they suspected that no one had told the immigrants the true facts of the situation.

On April 20, 1899, a Thursday, muttering imprecations in their own language and shouting to each other, a mob of two hundred Finns poured through the paths leading up to the quarry from the village. One group hiked up the track direct from the main road at Bay View, and another met them, coming from the hills above "Dublin" in Lanesville. All had picked up rocks and clubs.

Meanwhile the Italians had rushed out of their flimsy shanties and taken refuge in the old boilerhouse, carefully closing all the big shutters and putting out all lights.

The Finns called out to the Italians, and had a fellow speak for them – a man who had been in this country from Italy for a few years. But no one appeared.

Craving action, one big Finn climbed up and tore at the heavy shutters with his bare hands, almost yanking the old wood from its iron bolts before being stopped by a patrolman with a billy club. Then a shower of stones and sticks rained down on the roof and sides of the boilerhouse. Finally a shot rang out. No one knew who fired the gun, but it was discovered that big Ruell Griffin of Lanesville, who had come along to see the excitement, had had his

shoe laces shot off. His foot was also slightly cut, his friends discovered, as they lit a match in the gathering dark. Griffin said he thought he was fired at because he resembled the quarry superintendent, Mr. James Vernon.

The mob finally broke up and straggled back down the hills toward home, leaving the Italians untouched. But they in turn were so frightened, they had crept out of the back of the boilerhouse in the dark and hidden in the woods. One small group spent hours in an abandoned hen coop not far away.

Despite the pleading by the padrone in charge of the Italian work group, at least thirty of them the next morning were packed up and waiting for the first streetcar to come down the hill. They were headed for the 6:30 train to Boston and safety. B. Erkkila 143–145.

The scenario of the strike has the Finns cast in the fearless and militant role, and the Italians in the weaker role of "Scabs." One should note, however, that the would-be Italian strikebreakers were brought in from Boston. They were not local men. However, there were strikebreakers in the management of the companies who were local, but Barbara Erkkila does not identify them as "Yankees." She writes:

Things came to a boil at Rockport on Monday, May 8, 1899, when two hundred Finns, wielding clubs, marched to the Rockport Granite Company wharf where they heard that a stone sloop was being loaded with paving by workers who were not on strike, being engineers and blacksmiths. Company officials were helping them, it was said.

Every striker had a stick about a yard long, and those who could, carried stones. They were a formidable mob and the company men, together with a small group of police on guard, immediately sent out a distress call to Rockport and Gloucester. B. Erkkila 145.

That the quarries were workplaces with a dramatic history is the main substance of Erkkila's book. The Finnish quarrymen no doubt made the greatest contribution to the class-conscious part of that drama. It was the Finnish character of *sisu*, sometimes translated into English as "guts," that carried the Finnish workers to victory over the imported Italians and the local Yankee management. Today one sees bumperstickers on Cape Ann with the Finnish ethnic marker, SISU, with blue letters on white background. Of all the ethnic markers on Cape Ann automobiles, the Finnish motto is the most obscure to non-Finns. (Other common bumperstickers include, "Swedes Have More Fun" and "Portuguese and Proud.")

Are there, then, three distinct ethnic histories on Cape Ann that live side by side? A Yankee, a Scandinavian, and a Mediterranean? Distinctions, as Pierre Bourdieu aptly represents them, are in some contexts differences on an apparent horizontal level. In most contexts, distinctions become positions on a hierarchy of power and prestige.' The Scandinavian community is at the center stage in the working-class history of Cape Ann. In the contemporary class hierarchy of Cape

Ann, the Scandinavians are situated between the Yankee elite and the Mediterranean fishing communities.

The manner in which Barbara Erkkila represented her Finnish quarrymen in their labor struggle puts the neighboring Italians in the shadows. The only redeeming quality of the Italians which saved them 'from total shame was that they retreated to Boston. They were potential strikebreakers who were frightened away by the rugged Finns. The local power structure on Cape Ann was not identified ethnically, or as WASP (which it obviously was).

The class struggle is thereby transformed into ethnic history, and nostalgia joins amnesia on the shelves of the town library. It is the Scandinavian community members who purchase and read Erkkila's *Hammers on Stone*.

I have been conventionally using the singular in referring to "the Finnish community." A community, like granite, can cleave along several laws. The Finnish community on Cape Ann – and in other Finnish immigrant communities – divided on at least three issues: religion, socialism, and temperance. The divisions were by no means predictable or symmetrical. In John Kielinen's witty comment: "If three Finns met, they would form two organizations out of it."

Because Rockport was the "dry" region of the Cape, it probably held more respectability in the eyes of the entire Scandinavian population. The choice of Rockport's Spiran Hall for the Scandinavian Order indicates the higher status of the small and alcohol-free town. The Spiran Hall had been housing barracks for workers in the cotton mill across the street in the center of town. When the cotton mill burned down in 1883, it was not rebuilt, and the housing quarters were turned into the Vasa Order at the opening of the twentieth century. John Kielinen noted that the membership of the Lodge was continually shifting, as were the other Finnish organizations, especially the temperance union "Valon Leimu" (Flaming Light).⁹

The closing of one industrial workplace after another, sometimes by accident, usually by design, has meant that Rockport, after 1930, became better known as an "artist colony" than a mining and mill town. Gloucester's fishing industry, though desperately threatened, has continued until the present.

Why did the quarry industry shut down? Barbara Erkkila gave two explanations in her study, *Hammers on Stone*. The major reason was the introduction of new building methods in the 1920s, especially poured, reinforced concrete. Granite blocks became, literally and figuratively, things for the graveyards. A second explanation has to do with the stubborn workers' movements that continued to press for better working conditions and wages in the 1920s – an epoch that was unfriendly to trade union organization. Thus, when the Great Depression arrived, the

quarries became silent. The Cape Ann owners withdrew their investments, and Rockport could reassume its "original" image of a white-washed Yankee town on the granite coast.

Ethnicity at Play: Scandinavian Folk Culture on Cape Ann 1985–86

The annual Santa Lucia Festival is held by the Vasa Order at Spiran Hall in Rockport on the Saturday that falls two weeks before Christmas. On sale are traditional Scandinavian Jule decorations and delicacies. I counted members of four generations of Scandinavian Americans who participated in the folk and Christmas music.

The day's festivities began with a Santa Lucia procession by small girls, the youngest of whom was three years old. Instead of carrying the traditional candles, the girls bore tiny flashlights in the procession. The girls, coached on the sidelines by their mothers and grandmothers, sang in Swedish.

Then, accompanied by a local *spillemandsorkester* (including myself), the children did a medley of Scandinavian folk dances. The well-known "Skomager Dreng's Polka" was performed, but omitted from the song were the lines "Skomagerdrengen er et svin/for han drikker brændevin." The children hummed the polka while they danced. In their home-sewn folk costumes, the children won the hearts of the entire audience, and a large photo of their dance appeared the following Monday in the *Gloucester Daily Times*.

In New England Santa Lucia is associated with Italian tenors, not with Swedish girls, and it must have surprised some of the Yankees in Spiran Hall to hear the little girls singing a Swedish text to the familiar Italian melody. Lucia was a Saint from Italy, but her name has also come to represent a Nordic (and probably pre-Christian) festival of lights.

Santa Lucia "emigrated" to New England from both Italy and Scandinavia, and it is the Nordic heroine who could mediate between the Yankee and the Mediterranean cultures and give legitimacy to "Old World" ethnicity.

Further evidence for my interpretation of Nordic folk culture's position on Cape Ann comes from the "Folk Life Festival," which was held in one of Gloucester's large, modern, school buildings in March 1986. It was the fifth consecutive year for the Folk Life Festival. It was a "new tradition" on Cape Ann, and one in which the Scandinavian community was very active.

Nearly 3,000 people attended the day-long series of events, all of which were intended as expressions of the local ethnic cultures in dance, music, food, and crafts. My observations were aimed at finding out how each of the ethnic groups represented itself to the general public. The

Scandinavian presence was very much felt, insofar as several groups performed instead of one large dance ensemble, which was the case in both the Sicilian and Portuguese groups. The two Mediterranean groups presented a folkloric display with full costume. While there was a Norwegian folk dance group that performed in such a way, there were several less formal Scandinavian music and dance groups which invited everyone to take part, young and old, Nordic and non-Nordic. The Scandinavian ethnicity seemed more flexible and open, less folkloristic, and no doubt more *folkelig*.

During the day the different ethnic groups performed their folk cultures simultaneously in the school's classrooms and auditorium. The grand finale of the Folk Life Festival was a professional group that performed and taught traditional New England contra dance. The group was not local to Cape Ann. It arrived from Cambridge on Saturday night where it was the single attraction. Contra Dance, New England's "ethnic" folklore, seemed to have a higher status than the other ethnic presentations. The ethnic plurality of Cape Ann had its hidden hierarchy with contra dance at its top.

Thus, three rather different presentations of ethnic culture could be discerned in the Folk Life Festival in Gloucester. My interpretation of ethnicity and class on Cape Ann situates the Scandinavians between the Old New England families and the Mediterranean ethnic groups. In the industrial history of Cape Ann, Finnish quarrymen were between the New England owners and Sicilian fishermen. In contemporary Cape Ann, Scandinavian culture enhances ethnicity in general. It can be performed freely and informally and assume an "Old World" respectability, now that the militant struggles are mere memories. Singing "Santa Lucia" in Swedish is, therefore, a useful landmark in the inter-ethnic structure of Cape Ann.

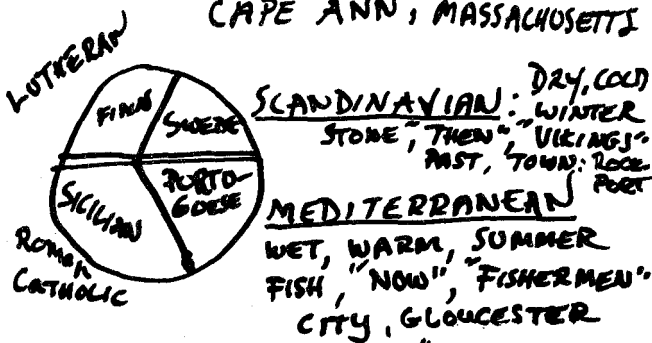
Cape Ann Poetics: the Voice of Charles Olson

As the people of the earth are now,
Gloucester is heterogeneous,
and so can know polis
not as localism . . .

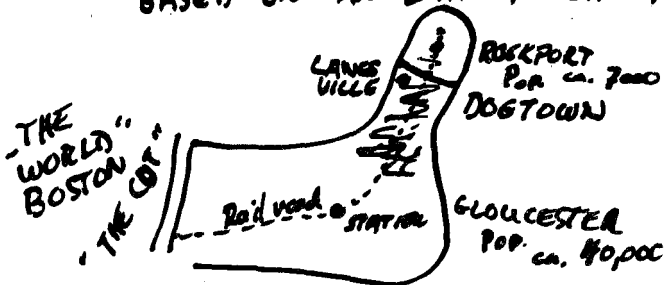
The Maximus Poems 1, 10--.

The paradox of Charles Olson's *The Maximus Poems* is that the book expresses an intense identification with a locality and an extensive, centrifugal movement towards globality. Gloucester was for Olson a "World" which all peoples had entered and created. The didactic voice of Maximus includes refrains from Micmac Indians (the first settlers),

"OLD WORLD" CULTURE ON
CAPE ANN, MASSACHUSETTS



"SANTA LUCIA COMBINES THE OPPOSITES: A SCANDINAVIAN WINTER FESTIVAL BASED ON AN ITALIAN SAINT."



Viking explorers, Puritan settlers, Sicilian and Portuguese fisherman, and Scandinavian granite cutters. Besides celebrating Gloucester, Maximus sometimes complains about it. Authentic politics must transcend the localisms and parochialisms of the constituents. Cape Ann in actuality could hardly live up to Charles Olson's poetic and politic image. His rendering of Cape Ann in its many rough fragments served though as a lyrical guide to the ethnic and social history of the place. As in William Carlos Williams's *Paterson*, Charles Olson's *The Maximus Poems* fills out a locality with place-names, persons, events, and references that remain intentionally obscure to the outsider and perhaps to the native as well. The very obscurity, however, helps to establish the intimacy and familiarity of the poets' "World." *The Maximus Poem!* does not give a perfect mirror image of Cape Ann, but the Cape is recognizable in its blurred forms.

Olson writes with special warmth and affection for "Dogtown Common," the rocky ascent between Gloucester and Rockport that was left wild, unsettled, and unexploited even for quarrying. It was called "Dogtown" because the settlers' dogs escaped their domestic habits on the Common. Dogtown is still famous for its blueberries. Especially the Finnish community – whose color is blue – refers to its traditional berry-picking grounds near and beyond the abandoned quarries. A book of mernoires by a Finnish–American from Massachusetts is entitled appropriately *Blueberry God*. For the Cape Ann Finns, Dogtown represents rustic freedom and abundance, and a link to "the old country."

The wild berries that grow on granite "upcroppings" and in the clearings around "notions" are key symbols in Charles Olson's verse. A "notion" is a peculiarly Cape Ann expression for an attempted quarry. A man "takes a notion" to do something in this case, to explore the extent of a granite bed. The "notions" are excellent places to pick blueberries. The "primitive" Dogtown was an important region in Olson's cognitive map of Cape Ann, lying as it did between the two "civilized" communities.

Olson's version of Cape Ann is definitely from the shore, not from the ocean. It is virtually a "dry" world he portrays. Olson has his feet firmly on land. Like his father, Olson worked as a postman.¹⁰ In at least one of *The Maximus Poems*, the stanza literally follows his path as a deliverer of letters! (I, 145).

Gloucester was, therefore, a workplace for Olson and a habitat. His Cape Ann imagery differs from T. S. Eliot's vision, "The Dry Salvages," in the *Four Quartets*. Eliot used Cape Ann as a retreat from the urban world. "The Dry Salvages" is an English modification of the French colonial cartographer's "Trois Sauvages." By chance the modification is homologous with my interpretation of Cape Ann's symbolism: Dry/Wet, North/South, Primitive/Civilized. I think that it is useful to contrast Eliot and Olson to find clues to Cape Ann's specificity. Olson strives always to render the momentary and the fragmentary of Gloucester's world. To my ear one of the best lyrical achievements in Olson's monumental collection is called "Snow at Evening." It tells how Olson sees a fishing boat in Gloucester harbor.

Snow at Evening

In the twilight snow for less than a minute
less than the time I proposed to write
that the green of the whiting dragger the *Santa Lucia*
was, two minutes ago, as worn & exact as the color
of that Saint's eyes as they lie as, three minutes ago
the color of the leaden sky too was the pewter of the plate
she holds her eyes out on in Zurburan's painting of her act
of life & its proposed loss

Wednesday January 20th 1966

It is Charles Olson's presence in this poem that enables him to catch the fleeting moments of a transformation and record them in a form that keeps the transitory state intact by identifying correspondences with other times, other places. It is in these moments of illumination or epiphany that one's humanity appears before one's very eyes. The name of the fishing trawler in a snow storm becomes the martyred and remembered Saint. A blurred image assumes an unexpected clarity. That "Santa Lucia" appears in the winter light may be coincidental to Charles Olson's own observation, but the poem caught for me an entire context of inter-ethnic and working-class memory on Cape Ann.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

An earlier version of this paper was presented at the Annual Meeting of the Dansk Etnografisk Forening, Copenhagen (23 May 1987). I am grateful to Niels Thorsen for his extensive comments on a draft of the paper. "The Quarries are Silent" should form part of a collection of essays, "In Defense of Homesickness," which I hope to complete in 1988.

I spent a memorable nine months (July 1985 to April 1986) on Cape Ann, where I held various laboring jobs in the construction, restaurant, and fishing industries. Substitute-teaching in the local high schools provided an extra dimension to the ethnicity of Cape Ann. Taking attendance in every class, I could get a rough idea of the ethnic composition in Rockport and Gloucester. The young people were more than willing to talk about their ethnic backgrounds, especially if it permitted them to deviate from the assigned lesson plan.

It was never my plan to conduct participant-observation research on Cape Ann, but quite unexpectedly the project that is sketched in the essay emerged from impressions and conversations at work and at play. My connection with Danish culture and society put me easily in touch with the members of the Scandinavian communities on Cape Ann. I am thankful to John Kielinen for his telling me about "the old days" in the quarry and foundry trades. An interview with John (22 November 1985) serves as the main fulcrum for the present essay.

NOTES

1. Paul Lundberg, as quoted in Peter Anastas and Peter Parsons, *When Gloucester was Gloucester: an Oral History* (Gloucester, 1972), p. 21. The title of the book makes explicit the tacit assumption that the past is more "authentic" than the present.
2. Celebrated in T. S. Eliot, *The Four Quartets* in *Collected Poems: 1909-1962* (New York, 1963), pp. 191-199. Also in Charles Olson, *The Maximus Poems*, edited by George F. Butterick (Berkeley, 1983). See also G. F. Butterick, *A Guide to the Maximus Poems of Charles Olson* (Berkeley, 1978).
3. Antonio Pata, from the Portuguese fishing town Ilhavo, emigrated to Gloucester. Quoted in Anastas and Parsons, *When Gloucester was Gloucester*, p. 44.
4. Marcel Proust, *Remembrance of Things Past* (Moncrieff translation, New York, 1934). Especially helpful for an ethnography of place are Proust's chapters, "Place-Names: the Name" and "Place-Names: the Place". Proust's account of Balbec, the coastal town where the grandson visited Grandmother presents the "nature" of the rocky coast merging with the "culture" of the medieval church (p. 294). The quarry of Cape Ann's Halibut Point evokes some of the same quality that Proust searches for in Balbec.

5. See Sandra Wallman, ed., *Ethnicity at Work* (London, 1979), which explores emigrant communities' affiliations at the workplace.
6. My chief source for the history of the quarry industry is Barbara Erkkila, *Hammers on Stone: the History of Cape Ann Grantie* (Woolwich, Maine, 1980). The Finnish communities in New England have been studied by two Finnish-American historians. Reino N. Hannula, *Blueberry God: the Education of a Finnish American* (San Luis Obispo, California, 1979) and Liisa Liedes, *The Finnish Imprint: a New England Experience* (Fitchberg, Massachusetts, 1982). Liedes estimates that 640 Finnish people were living on Cape Ann in 1909 (p. 391).
7. Christopher Lasch, "The Politics of Nostalgia: Losing History in the Mists of Ideology," *Harper's Magazine* (November 1984). See also Peter Kivisto, "The Decline of the Finnish American Left, 1925-1945", *International Migration Review*, 17, 1 (1983), pp. 65-94. Kivisto describes the "decline" in terms of "social amnesia": "From an ethnically based, socialist movement, there took place in twenty years an erosion of both ethnic and class consciousness. Over time, memories of their acrimonious past have faded and a social amnesia has shaped the consciousness of subsequent generations" (p. 90). The term "amnesia" hardly fits the Finnish Americans I met on Cape Ann. They remember very well their history of their workplaces, the quarries, which closed down in the Great Depression.
8. Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. Translated by Richard Nice (Cambridge, Mass. 1984).
9. Laura Porter of Rockport gave me a copy of her father's autobiographical sketch, re-telling how he arrived from Finland in Cape Ann. Her father, Hjalmar Johnson arrived on May 2, 1902 after hiking four months from Montreal where his ship landed:
 I immediately started to look for other Finns and while wandering around I heard the sound of hammering and soon after I discovered that the men were speaking Finnish. Even though it was late at night, men from the temperance union "Valon Leimu" ("Flaming Light") were building their new union house. I also saw a few women helping men by carrying timber for them. I asked one of the women: "Isn't it too late at night to be working?" She answered, "All these men are working nine hours a day at the quarry, but they also want to have their union house built". One of the other women added: "Together birds build their nests too". To me it was very touching."
 Hjalmar began working at the quarry and soon joined the temperance union.
10. Charles Olson, *The Post Office: a Memoire of his Father* (Bolinas, California, 1975). The Olson family lived in Worcester, Massachusetts, where Charles Olson Sr, worked for the postal service. He lost his job because of union activism. When Charles Sr. died soon after losing his job, his widow and son moved to Gloucester, where the entire family had spent their summers. Gloucester, then, was Charles Olson's "second home." Charles Jr. had occasional jobs delivering mail in Gloucester.

The Search for Identity – An Analysis of Henry James' "The Aspern Papers" and Carlos Fuentes' *Aura*

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1. Introduction

For the spiritual past has no objective reality; it yields only what we are able to look for in it. And what people find in literature corresponds precisely with what they find in life . . . The European writer, whatever his personal education may be, has his racial past, in the first place, and then he has his racial past *made available for him*. The American writer, on the other hand, not only has the most meager of birthrights but is cheated out of that . . . The present is a void, and the American writer floats in that void because the past that survives in the common mind of the present is a past without living value. But is this the only possible past? If we need another past so badly, it is inconceivable that we might discover one, that we might even invent one?

(Van Wyck Brooks, "On Creating a Usable Past", *The Early Years*, pp. 220-223)

In his very influential essay, "On Creating a Usable Past," from 1918, Van Wyck Brooks attacks contemporary American literary critics for interpreting American literature in the light, not of the creative but of the practical life. By reaffirming the values established by the commercial and moralistic tradition, instead of reflecting the creative impulse in American history and literature, he argues, these critics render it sterile for the living mind. As the spiritual welfare of America largely depends on the fate of its creative minds, the time has come, now, to discard the view of the past promoted by the literary critics as "unusable" and instead ask the question, "What is important for us? What, out of all the multifarious achievements and impulses and desires of the American literary mind, ought we to elect to remember?" The more personally

this question is answered, the better, for the past, with its richness of apt attitudes and adaptable ideals, opens up easily to anyone approaching it with a capacity for personal choices. To discover, and if necessary even to create, a past which is usable to the creative mind in its search for an American, New World identity is consequently one of the most important tasks of the American writer.

Chronologically, Brooks' essay appeared right between the two texts with which this paper is concerned, Henry James' "The Aspern Papers" from 1887, and Carlos Fuentes' *Aura* from 1962, respectively. In its preoccupation with the need for the New World writer to create for himself a usable past upon which an American – whether North or Latin American – identity can be built, it does, however, voice the central concern of both James and Fuentes. Just as James, in having his nameless narrator journey into a "visitable" past about which he invents glorious theories or "fantasticates," emphasizes the importance of personal and imaginative impressions of history, so Fuentes, in having his narrator-historian whose ambition it is to write the history of the New World become increasingly absorbed in a personalized and mythified version of reality, expresses the belief that often myth is more "real" than history. But whether the approach is called personal and imaginative, as in James' case, or mythical, as in Fuentes', the essential issue for both writers is that the past can be creatively (re)constructed.

II. Henry James: "The Aspern Papers"

Henry James wrote "The Aspern Papers" in the early summer of 1887 while visiting an American friend in Florence. The idea had come to him, however, before he came to live with his friend. He had set it down in his notebook as far back as January 1887. The "little" subject which "struck" James very much concerned the picture of "two faded, queer, poor and discredited old English women – living into a strange generation" as well as "the plot of the Shelley fanatic" who desired very much to lay his hands on some letters in the possession of the two women. The interest would be in some price that the man would have to pay – a price the younger woman, the survivor would set upon the letters. The drama of the story would be the hesitations and struggles of the Shelley fanatic, "for he really would give almost anything."¹

"The Aspern Papers" was an attempt on James' part to recreate the past. As he stated in his preface, he was interested in the "palpable imaginable *visitable* past . . . 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."² Choosing for his subject the Byronic age and the character of Juliana, the

former mistress and only surviving contemporary of the Byronic poet, an old woman living beyond her time in a decaying Venetian palace, James succeeded admirably in combining those elements of familiarity and strangeness, "closeness" and "difference" that he considered to be essential to the recapturing of the past. Though the narrator, suffering from a monomaniacal obsession with getting his hands on Jeffrey Aspern's letters to Juliana, is the latter's ruthless opponent, he does in many ways function as a perfect vehicle for the evocation of the Byronic age and of the Byronic poet's mistress. For, at the same time as his deep admiration for Aspern makes it easy for him to imaginatively put himself back into the age of Aspern and the younger Juliana, to capture the romance of the past),³ he is not at all blind to what is happening in contemporary life which he characterizes as "the age of newspapers and telegrams and photographs and interviewers" (p. 4), and of which he himself is very much a part. By combining, that is, a love of the past with a strong sense of the present, the narrator is able to convey to the reader his romantic vision of the younger Juliana as well as his sense of the strangeness of her survival into the present age of publicity. It is, in fact, as Ora Segal points out,⁴ precisely his possession of these two senses that enables the narrator to communicate to the reader the full ironic horror of the present state of the once so beautiful and attractive Juliana, the death-in-life motif she embodies, "she was too strange, too literally resurgent . . . it (i.e. the green shade over her eyes) created a presumption of some ghostly death's-head lurking behind it. The divine Juliana as a grinning skull – the vision hung there until it passed" (p. 15) – a motif which is sounded again in the later climactic scene in which the dying Juliana catches the narrator trying to steal her papers.

It is from the start made clear to the reader that the narrator does not have any solid facts upon which to build his hypotheses about Juliana and her past, or about the existence of Aspern's "literary remains." Even before gaining access to the decaying old house inhabited by the Misses Bordereau, the narrator admits to Mrs. Prest, who seems to doubt the very existence of the Aspern papers, that all he and Cumnor had to go upon was the latter's "strong presumption" and "the internal evidence of the niece's letter" (p. 7). And, later on, we are told how both critics, instead of "scientifically" attempting to reconstruct Juliana's biography, simply give free rein to their speculative imaginations.

The narrator is conscious – as is the reader – of his role as romancer and of the fact that in inventing his glorious theories, he is allowing himself "to fantasticate" the past in much the same way that James in his preface declares himself to be "fantasticating" in his projection of the Byronic age (p. xxxii).

Henry James' journey into the visitable past of the Byronic age is more than simply a re-creation of "scenes" or a quest for nostalgia. It is

an excursion, halted at various selected points to be embellished by both writer and reader, which is evocative, suggestive and incomplete, inviting the imaginative efforts of the reader to complete its meaning. The exterior forces (or 'reality') of impersonal history merely provided for James the frame for the deeper, more personal impression of history that he wanted to explore. Each individual must decide for him- or herself what vignettes of the past are worthy of reflection. Connections and associations are easily established, but James adds the element of imagination to this process to allow for a more creative reconstruction of the past – "history is never, in any rich sense, the immediate crudity of what 'happens', but the much finer complexity of what we read into it and think of in connexion with it."⁵ Thus, James' final answer to his friend who criticized him of "postulating for the purpose of my fable celebrities who not only hadn't existed in the conditions I imputed to them, but who for the most part (and in no case more markedly so than in that of Jeffrey Aspern) couldn't possibly have done so" (Preface, p. xxxiii), could only be the following,

What does your contention of non-existent conscious exposures, in the midst of all the stupidity and vulgarity and hypocrisy, imply but that we have been, nationally, so to speak, graced with no instance of recorded sensibility fine enough to react against these things? – an admission too distressing. What one would accordingly fain do is to baffle any such calamity, to create the record, in default of any other enjoyment of it; to imagine, in a word, the honourable, the producible case.

(Preface to "The Death of a Lion", p. xlii)

James's answer is a radical one, and it foreshadows the attempts made in the 1910s and 20s by men like Van Wyck Brooks and Waldo Frank ("The Seven Arts" Enterprise) to create a "usable past." If there is a need for a past, one must avail oneself of and select whatever elements one finds useful in order to create one.

James' excursion into the past – visitable and/or usable – may thus ultimately be seen as an attempt to create an American record, an American identity. It is significant that while the narrative in "The Aspern Papers" followed the original Silsbee–Shelley anecdote in its essentials, James transformed the aunt and niece, the Misses Bordereau, into faded old American women, and that the poet-lover became Jeffrey Aspern of New York, an American Byron. That city is never mentioned, but James tells us in the 1907 preface that "I admit that Jeffrey Aspern isn't even feebly localised, but I *thought* New York as I projected him" (p. xxxiii). Moreover, when after having been "spinning theories" about Juliana and her past, the narrator gets back to his favorite subject of contemplation, his beloved poet Aspern. It is the latter's essential American quality that chiefly preoccupies him,

His own country after all had had most of his life, and his muse, as they said at that time, was essentially American. That was originally what I had prized him for: that at a period when our native land was nude and crude and provincial, when the famous "atmosphere" it is supposed to lack was not even missed, when literature was lonely there and art and form almost impossible, he had found means to live and write like one of the first; to be free and general and not at all afraid; to feel and understand and express everything. (p. 33)

From the very opening of "The Aspern Papers," the narrator is deeply appreciative of Aspern's heroic character and poetic genius. "One doesn't defend one's god: one's god is in himself a defense" (p. 2), he thinks to himself when Mrs. Prest pretends to make light of Aspern's genius. The reader thus gets the impression that the narrator's interest in Aspern's biography goes deeper than that of a mere sensation-hunting critic, it is intimately connected with his love, personal and professional, of Aspern's poems which he finds comparable in beauty to Shakespeare's sonnets. Indeed, his narrative voice seems, in his more perceptive reflections on the case of the American poet, to be indistinguishable from James' own – or, as Leon Edel puts it, "in Aspern, James evokes himself as he would have liked to be."⁶ As an American artist with but few native literary precursors and traditions to look back upon, pursuing his career and solidifying his identity amid the richness and decay of the old world, James wanted, like Aspern, to "live and write like one of the first; to feel, understand and express everything" (p. 33). In thus identifying himself with his Byronic poet-character, James may be said to regard himself as a precursor figure of the American tradition or identity that he attempted to create.⁷

"The Aspern Papers" is a variation over the well-known theme in James of the conflict between art and life, observer and observed, seeing and being – the conflict, in other words, between active participation in and passive, vicarious observation of life. We witness the unfolding of this conflict in the narrator's hunt for Aspern's letters. When finally, after Juliana's death – and there is a fine twist of Jamesian irony in the fact that as a result of the only active move on the otherwise passive narrator's part to possess himself of the precious papers, he actually becomes the agent of or brings about Juliana's death – the narrator finds himself within reach of the papers, he is unable to pay the price for them. For, what stands between him and the papers is Miss Tina; the price – what she asks for them – is love, active participation in life. For a while, he does play with the possibility of marrying Miss Tina – "Why not, after all – why not? It seemed to me I could pay the price" (p. 95) – but when her remarkable transfiguration into a young and beautiful woman vanishes, and he once again sees her as "a ridiculous old woman"

(upon learning that she has burnt the letters!), he retraces his steps, seeking refuge in his study. In the closing passage of the tale, we see the narrator *sitting* at his writing-table, looking at the portrait of Aspern hanging above the table. In sharp contrast to Miss Tina whose development throughout the story has been one from passivity to activity – what gives her her "force of soul" in the end and thus brings about her wonderful transformation, is her having actively burnt Aspern's letters – the narrator's development is *away* from activity. The fanatic who would give almost anything to lay his hands on the papers, never does succeed in breaking anything open or reading the papers. What he does succeed in giving, however, is the story of his failure – he never gets to read the Aspern papers, but he succeeds in writing "The Aspern Papers." The renouncement of love, of life, has, that is, turned him into a kind of (second-best) artist; he has indirectly become active through his writing.

As a result of the use on James' part of first-person narration, the nameless narrator of "The Aspern Papers" is not only an observer of others, a literary historian, but also his own historian – he is both the subject and the object of the story, as it were. The project on which James has his first-person narrator embark is thus remarkably similar to the one he himself embarked on in "The Aspern Papers" and the literary tales which followed. And what this seems to indicate is that James identifies himself as strongly with his narrator-observer, the literary critic, as with the object of his narrator's literary criticism, the precursor-poet Jeffrey Aspern – that James, in other words, displays a certain duplicity in his sympathies for his fictional characters. A look at some of the later literary tales furthermore indicates that James gradually changes his emphasis from the central character, "the Master," to the observer. Indeed, in "The Lesson of the Master" (1892), it is the observer rather than the artist-hero who supremely embodies the dilemma. There seems in this later work to be a total obliteration of the distinction between observer and observed, an obliteration which is hinted at in "The Aspern Papers" in the sense of "mystic companionship" and "moral fraternity" that the narrator feels with Jeffrey Aspern and with "all those who in the past had been in the service of art" (p. 28). James seems, in other words, to acknowledge that however creative and innovative a writer he considers himself to be, he is at the same time a literary critic, a historian evaluating and "bringing to light" (ibid.) the element of beauty in the works of other writers, or precursors of the past. The meaning of the artist in history, that is in life as he lives it, in the conditions under which he worked, is thus ultimately for James like the meaning of history itself. In seeking to learn the meaning of American history, in so far as that history is visitable and thus inseparable from his own memories, he seeks the meaning of himself – his journey into the visitable past, that is, culminates in self-discovery.

III. Carlos Fuentes: Aura

In the plot of Carlos Fuentes' short novel, *Aura* from 1962, we recognize the basic components of "The Aspern Papers" – an old witch, a younger woman who is the ward of the witch, and a young stranger who falls victim to the old woman. Only, the setting and the mutual relationship between the characters differ somewhat from those of James' story. *Aura* is set, not in the Venice of the 1880s but in the city of Mexico City of the 1960s, and the protagonist, Felipe Montero, is a young historian who is hired through a newspaper advertisement by an indescribably old woman, Consuelo Llorente to edit the memoirs of her late husband General Llorente. Together with her niece, Aura, a beautiful young woman of twenty, Consuelo inhabits a decaying shadowy old house in the old part of Mexico City; the only other inhabitants of the house are Consuelo's pet, a huge rabbit, and some cats and rats of whose existence Felipe is never quite certain as he never sees but only hears them.

From the very beginning of *Aura*, it is clear that though set in contemporary Mexico the novel does not deal so much with the recognizable world of Mexico City in 1962, as with the decaying Mexico of the past. Thus, we are told how Felipe Montero on looking up the address mentioned in the advertisement is surprised "to know that anyone lives on Donceles Street. You always thought that nobody lived in the old center of the city" (p. 6). Much like the old part of Venice in which the Misses Bordereau lived, this old part of Mexico City belongs to the Mexico of the old days of privilege upon which today's modern and insolent Mexico is being reconstructed. The very moment Felipe walks into the trap set by Consuelo and baited, first by money (his need for the salary of four thousand pesos) and secondly by Aura and her enchanting green eyes, the normal world of today begins to fade rapidly. In Consuelo's darker, more shadowy and dream-like house of the past, the daylight world of modern Mexico is already becoming somewhat unreal and irrelevant.

Like Juliana Bordereau, Consuelo Llorente is an unspeakably old woman living beyond her time, a fragment of the past. "She's thin, even emaciated, like a medieval sculpture" (p. 25), and on reading her late husband's memoirs, Felipe gradually figures out that "she must be 109" (p. 45). Unlike Juliana, however, who jealously guarded the Aspern papers against any attempt made by "publishing scoundrels" to have them published, Consuelo wants her papers, her husband's unfinished memoirs to be put in order and published. There is, in other words, an interesting reversal on Fuentes' part here of the roles in "The Aspern Papers" of pursuer and pursued. It is Consuelo who takes the initiative in advertising for a young historian who can help her publish the

memoirs, and it is Felipe who is trapped more or less against his own will into accepting the editing job and its ensuing consequences.

The extent to which the past, in the form of Consuelo and her late husband's memoirs, reaches out towards and eventually engulfs the present, the young Felipe Montero, is foreshadowed in the very first encounter between the old woman and the young historian. Telling Felipe about his new job, Consuelo remarks how "you'll learn to write in my husband's own style. You'll only have to arrange and read his manuscripts to become fascinated by his style" (p. 12), and how her conditions are "that you have to live here. There isn't much time left" (p. 14). At this point, it gradually dawns on Felipe that what initially to him was but another job, another way of making enough money to enable him to carry on with his own work on the Spanish discoveries and conquests in the New World, may turn out to be considerably more demanding than he had anticipated. And finally, the full truth is brought home to him; while working on the general's memoirs, he has lost touch with the outside, contemporary world to such an extent that he has himself in fact become the general. The past has become not only metaphorically or imaginatively, but literally, indeed even unavoidably visitable:

In the third photograph you see both Aura and the old gentleman . . . the photograph has become a little blurred: Aura doesn't look as young as she did in the other picture, but it's she, it's he, it's . . . it's you. You stare and stare at the photographs, then hold them up to the skylight. You cover General Llorente's beard with your finger, and imagine him with black hair, and you only discover yourself: blurred, lost, forgotten, but you, you, you. (p. 70)

Felipe's first reaction upon understanding that he has in fact become the general is one of horror and repulsion. After a while, however, he seems to accept without a struggle his psychic identity with the general – "you lie there . . . waiting for what has to come, for what you can't prevent" (ibid.) – and starts speculating on the nature of time and fate which have given him this identity out of the past. The shadowy, dreamlike atmosphere of the place and its inhabitants combined with the shadow of fate or inevitability, prevalent in the above-mentioned quotations, has made the borderline between real life and the world of dreams tenuous.⁸

In an interview with Emir Rodriguez-Monegal from 1966, Fuentes comments on this mythic aspect of his writing. What the realm of the Mythical means to him, he says, is "a possibility of choosing this past, of leaving this past which is just history, vagrant history, and to fashion it out of Myths" (my emphases).⁹ At this point in his career, it seems,

Fuentes has come to distrust history proper as a tool for understanding man and to regard myth as often more "real" than history. "Through myth we *reenact the* past, we reduce it to human proportions" (my italics),¹⁰ he says in the interview, predicting that his own work will be increasingly influenced by the mythical approach. Fuentes' view of history, as expressed in the interview with Rodriguez-Monegal, is remarkably similar to that expressed by Henry James in his preface to "The Death of a Lion," quoted above. Whether the approach is called mythical, as in Fuentes' case, or personal and imaginative, as in James', the essential issue for both writers is that the past is visitable or usable and can be – and indeed should be – creatively reconstructed.

At first sight, *Aura* seems to be rather different from the politically committed writings and pronouncements of Fuentes' earlier works – *Where the Air is Clear*, *The Good Conscience* (both 1959), and *The Death of Artemio Cruz* (1962) – and whereas some critics (e.g. Harris and Dohmann) have almost dismissed it as a sort of ghost story, others have expressed bewilderment at what they consider to be an escape on Fuentes' part away from reality and its social problems. As Rodriguez-Monegal has pointed out, however, the theme of *Aura* may be seen, on the level of historical symbolism, as a social allegory of the takeover of the new by the old, the reconquest of modern Mexico by the ghosts of her past,¹¹ a theme that was already present in *Where the Air is Clear*. Yet, there is an apparent ambivalence or dichotomy in Fuentes' position as an advocate of the left and his artistic interest in a non-realistic genre. The problem that emerges is, in other words, the problem of the relation between art and life, seeing and being. Unlike Henry James, Fuentes seems, on a theoretical level, to minimize the problem. He does so by first rejecting the doctrine of socialist realism which, if literally interpreted, would require his work to have a specific and easily recognizable political emphasis, and secondly by assigning to the writer a dual task: that of the critical intellectual and that of the artist. These are complementary, and by choosing such modes as fantasy and parody, the artist is able to portray and effectively expose the demonic and unhealthy elements in bourgeois society and culture.¹²

In *Aura*, the conflict between seeing and being, art and life, manifests itself in various ways. Like the narrator of "The Aspern Papers," Felipe Montero is both the prime agent in and the narrator of his own story, and for Felipe, love, the ability to love another human being, plays as crucial a role as it did for his counterpart. For both narrators, love becomes the one means of achieving fusion with something or somebody outside themselves, the one means of ensuring active participation in life. Unlike his counterpart in James' story, however, Felipe cannot exactly be said to be afraid of loving; from the moment he sees *Aura*, he is deeply attracted to her and starts pursuing her, and we soon see

the two of them making love to each other in Felipe's room. Also, Fuentes presents us and his protagonist with a twenty-year-old heroine who is infinitely more sensuous and attractive than the faded, middle-aged Miss Bordereau, who achieves vitality and beauty in but one brief moment towards the end of "The Aspern Papers." Indeed, the whole atmosphere of *Aura* is much more sensuous and physical than that of James' story. Unlike James, Fuentes makes sex an important issue throughout the novel by emphasizing and playing with Felipe's physical attraction to Aura.¹³

There is, however, another aspect of Felipe's communion with Aura than the mere physical one. In commenting on *Aura* to Harss and Dohmann, Fuentes repeatedly uses the word, "ghost." "Every story is written with a ghost at your shoulder." The ghost in *Aura* is Woman, "the keeper of secret knowledge, which is true knowledge, general knowledge, universal knowledge."¹⁴ If we compare this statement to the quote attributed to Jules Michelet at the very beginning of *Aura* - "Man hunts and struggles, woman intrigues and dreams; she is the mother of fantasy, the mother of the gods. She has second sight, the wings that enable her to fly to the infinite of desire and the imagination . . ." - it becomes clear that Fuentes attributes two different, yet interrelated qualities to woman: witchcraft and imagination.

In the character of Aura, Fuentes gives us a fine example of a woman who embodies both these qualities in addition to her physical beauty and attraction. From the very beginning of the novel, it is indicated that her presence is linked, somehow, to the presence of the rabbit Saga. Historically, the function of the rabbit has been that of the witch's assistant, a function which is hinted at when Consuelo describes the rabbit as "my companion" (p. 13).¹⁵ The very name of the rabbit, Saga, does, however, draw the reader's attention to the other, and for the purpose of this paper more interesting quality of Aura, man's imagination and by implication his ability to tell stories, or sagas. Interestingly enough, Felipe Montero is a historian who has embarked on the rather pretentious project of writing the history, the saga of the New World. In the beginning, Felipe is able to get at least some work done on his "great inclusive work on the Spanish discoveries and conquests in the New World" (p. 34), but very soon he becomes so absorbed in the reading of the general's memoirs and in the general timeless and mythified atmosphere of the old mansion that it is impossible for him to carry on with his own work. When furthermore, as he nears the closing pages of the memoirs, he finds himself in much the same peculiar situation as for example Aureliano Buendia in Gabriel Garcia Marquez' novel *One Hundred Years of Solitude* upon reading Melchades' chronicle of the Buendia family, namely that he is reading his own story, he realizes that if he does not regain his "creative liberty," he will be trapped

forever in the manias of the old house and of the old woman. But if, on the other hand, he succeeds in freeing himself from the suffocating clutch of the old woman and her house of memories by regaining his poetic freedom, there is still hope. For, unlike Melchiades' chronicle in which Aureliano reads about his own destruction, the general's memoirs are unfinished, open-ended, waiting for Felipe to conclude them. When, therefore, throughout the novel Felipe talks about "your Aura," and how "you want to set her free; you've found a moral basis for your desire" (p. 39), and again, how "you're planning to take away Aura with you, when you finish the job" (p. 43), I take it as an indication that his pursuit of Aura is both physical and metaphysical. Just as Felipe himself, when simultaneously reading and writing his own story, literally embodies the seeing-being duplicity, so Aura embodies both art and life.

When viewed in this light, even the closing passage of *Aura* may take on a somewhat more positive or hopeful meaning than most critics have ascribed to it. Thus, Felipe's embracing Consuelo, as well as the latter's words, "She'll come back, Felipe. We'll bring her back together. Let me recover my strength and I'll bring her back . . ." (p. 74) may indicate an acknowledgement on Felipe's part that only by embracing the past, only by coming to terms with Consuelo and her "house of memories" can he regain his Aura, his "creative liberty" which will enable him to finish not only the general's memoirs, but also his saga of the New World. – Likewise, the use of a second person narrator, the fact that *Aura* is addressed to a second person, may be interpreted not so much as a fatalistic repetition of a past experience, but as a play with time, and especially with the future tense in which the narrator frequently speaks. Although normal concepts of time are counterpointed and sometimes even suspended in this world of myth, one does find in the "you," in the second person point-of-view a certain tone of prophetic imminence, a latent futurity. Furthermore, Fuentes' use of a second person narrator adds to the seeing-being duplicity another dimension. On this structural level, also, the narrator is at once actor and spectator, protagonist and reader, and by literally talking to himself, by having a dialogue with his alter ego, Felipe Montero underscores the fact that he is his own observer and historian.

IV. Conclusion

In the stories of the nameless narrator in "The Aspern Papers" and Felipe Montero in *Aura*, Henry James and Carlos Fuentes, respectively, explore the need for the New World writer to create for himself a usable past upon which an American identity can be built. Both narrators journey into the past – the former in search of the Aspern Papers that he will do virtually anything to get his hands on, and the latter in order

to edit and finish general Llorente's memoirs – and both present us with a personalized and "fantasticated" version of the past. Whereas the search for the past takes James' narrator to the decaying city of Venice, however, Felipe Montero's journey into the past is concentrated around Mexico City. In contrast to James, that is, for whom the past is intimately related to the Old World – it is to Europe that James and his characters have to go to find the culture of the past – Fuentes perceives and writes about the past as something distinctly Mexican, distinctly New World. Or, to put it in a different way, Fuentes sees the past of his own country as 'sufficient'; the history and the traditions of Mexico are such that there is no need, as it were, to look to the Old World for inspiration and material. Along with such differences as the reversal on Fuentes' part of the roles in "The Aspern Papers" of pursuer and pursued, the highly sensuous atmosphere and the political and social realistic overtones of *Aura* which do not exist in James' work, this difference in the two writers' conception of the past may be attributed to or express the different historical periods in which they lived as well as the different geographic and cultural circumstances under which they grew up as a North American and a Mexican.

These differences notwithstanding, we find in the story of Felipe Montero, the historian who, attempting to write the saga of the New World finds himself increasingly absorbed and interested in a personalized and mythified version of reality, and who acknowledges the need to come to terms with the past to regain his creativity as a writer, many similarities with the story of the nameless narrator of the "The Aspern Papers." In the stories of both narrators we recognize the concerns of their respective authors – concerns that have to do not only with their own problem as writers and literary critics/historians, but also with their identities, personal as well as national, as New World writers. And underlying both "The Aspern Papers" and *Aura* is the belief that "art makes life," as James once put it, a belief that points to both the duty and the potential of the artist. The prime business of the "painter of life" is for Fuentes as for James, in an act of almost existential affirmation, to evoke and construct past relations and future possibilities. Thus, it is not only in Fuentes' thematic portrayal of a close, claustrophobic, decadent world built around the immortal, malevolent Consuelo Llorente that it is possible to recognize the presence of James' story; it is in the existential search for identity and in the affirmation of the power of the artist and his art as well.

NOTES

1. *Notebooks of Henry James*, p. 72.
2. Preface, p. xxxi.

3. James stated in his preface that he saw the story "somehow at the very first blush as romantic." What was romantic about it, was partly that it was based on a "legend", and partly that it "overlapped" with his own time. It intrigued him, "that Jane Claimont should have been living on in Florence, where she had long lived up to our own day, and that in fact, had I happened to hear of her but a little sooner, I might have seen her in the flesh" (p. xxix).
4. *The Lucid Reflector*, p. 80.
5. *The American Scene*, p. 182.
6. *Henry James, The Middle Years*, pp. 222–223.
7. That the American theme was a predominant one throughout James' middle years, his comment in relation to *The Bostonians* (1885) that "I wished to write a very American tale", "to prove that I can write an American novel", clearly shows. Quoted in Dupee, p. 148.
8. This shadow of fate is seen from the very beginning of *Aura*. Thus, we read in the third sentence of the novel that the newspaper advertisement that sends Felipe to the old mansion, "seems to be addressed to you and nobody else" (p. 3).
9. Quoted in Duran, p. 22.
10. *Ibid.*
11. Article in "Numero," 2nd ser. 1 (1963), pp. 144–159.
12. Cf. the declaration of Latin American writers published in Havana in 1966, of which Fuentes is a cosignatory and in which the following wording occurs: (the task of the writer is) ". . . to participate as an intellectual in the struggle for basic change in Latin America, and as an artist to remain responsible to his art by whatever techniques and approaches to reality that will serve his creative aims." Quoted in Duran, p. 37.
13. Felipe's carnal contact with *Aura* is a communion in more than one respect, in that the description of the sexual act itself is full of religious undertones: "You fall on *Aura's* naked body, you fall on her naked arms, which are stretched out from one side of the bed to the other like the arms of the crucifix hanging on the wall, the black Christ with that scarlet silk wrapped around his thighs, his spread knees, his wounded side, his crown of thorns set on a tangled black wig with silver spangles. *Aura* opens up like an altar" (p. 56).
14. Harss and Dohmann, p. 302.
15. For an interesting study on woman as witch, see Duran's book.

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