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Absence, Resistance and Visitable Pasts: David Bowie, Todd Haynes, Henry James

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I can remember welling up when, in 1990, I heard and saw David Bowie sing 'Space Oddity' (Space Oddity, 1969) in Edinburgh on his Sound and Vision tour. Via the warm intensity (so different to the show's steely visuals) with which Bowie sang the lines 'Ground Control to Major Tom/Your Circuit's Dead/There's something wrong', it was as if both the speaker and the song's addressee (Ground Control, Major Tom and, by analogy, the singer and the crowd) were in the process of becoming absent, fading. And this fading became an invitation. Registering and resisting, albeit in the 'fictional' scenario of the song, this imminent absence, the crowd could only push closer to the performer – and he could only intensify his bond with us. Absence was the generative energy of this performance.

Terms like 'production', 'consumption' and 'regulation' in Stuart Hall's circuit of culture presuppose processes whereby objects produced by subjects and institutions are consumed by other subjects, institutions and bodies. These processes both regulate and form subjectivity. 'Representation' and 'identification', two further terms in the circuit, entail encounters with gaps and absences. The most obvious gap would be that between representation and the 'real', the most powerful and productive would be perceived absences within and across selves for which, it is assumed, cultural consumption (and production) can compensate or remake into more bearable forms. For Hall's circuit to function, absence must be both motivating and deftly addressed so that the promise of overcoming it can always be felt while the deadening certainties of presence and plenitude are kept nimbly at bay. Three practices identified by Hall as central to the production of meaning – exchange, consumption, and fantasy

– all entail encounters with gaps and absences, whether between participants in an exchange, or in terms of the lack or longing that drives us to consume a cultural experience. (Hall, 1997, 3-4) Absence both brings fantasy into being and molds its shapes.

In this essay I explore Bowie's relationship to absence by reading two texts from which he is in different ways absent – Henry James's 1888 novella, The Aspern Papers and Todd Haynes's 'Bowie' film Velvet Goldmine (1998). Demonstrating how both texts are materially constituted so that they can touch across time, I aim to provide a fresh literary genealogy for Velvet Goldmine and to enable readers to see – and hear – Aspern in new ways. I will outline later on the specific ways in which Bowie is absent from Haynes's film (and how the film resists that absence). There is no David Bowie in The Aspern Papers for the simple reason that the story's publication preceded his birth by fifty-nine years. Yet, and this is my essay's major preoccupation, The Aspern Papers seems to uncannily provide not only a narrative structure but a very material sequence of situations, repressions, colours, things and relations to time that enables Haynes to excavate the affective economy of the glam rock's historical moment.

Absence, Bowie, Henry James

By simply not being there, making his presence an affective expression of his imminent disappearance, or his audience's, or of figures who stood in for him and for those who engaged with his work, Bowie achieved some unforgettable impacts. The 'killing' of Ziggy Stardust in 1973, while a career-risk in the short term, brutally created a space of longing and nostalgia towards which all of Bowie's subsequent work took his audiences. And it is this space that has powerfully motivated the luxuriant re-packaging and commodification of that work in tour after tour,

compilation after compilation, reissue after reissue. According to Philip Auslander, three 'intertwined tendencies' of the Ziggy era's mode of performance were Bowie's 'continual challenges to rock's ideology of authenticity, his desire to theatricalize rock performance and his engagement in complex representations of gender and sexuality' (Auslander, 2006, p. 138). All three extended beyond the Ziggy era and they were all enabled by different forms of absence – of performance, ontology, and desire. Built into the Ziggy Stardust phenomenon was nothing less than the impending absence of the entire world: 'Five Years' famously opens the Ziggy album.

The silent passage between one side of a vinyl album and another was something Bowie exploited brilliantly in the 1970s – most notably on Low and Heroes. The stage musical Lazarus (2015) was inspired by a film, The Man Who Fell to Earth (1976), in which Bowie was bodily present but fundamentally absent as a musician and songwriter. Lazarus is a play studded with Bowie's songs but one from which he is visually and physically absent.

Much of the grief that followed David Bowie 'not being here' had as its object a figure who traded in, and understood, the power of what was to come and the empty spaces between things. The intensities of that grief made it is easy to forget the extent to which he always trafficked in absence. For Shaun Keaveny, the BBC Radio DJ, Bowie's music 'reminds you of a time in your life when new ideas start to open up for you,' that is a past time in life whose power lay in its relationship to things that were to come, to ideas that, while absent, were being newly felt (Guardian, 2016). For Paraic O'Donnell, Bowie's identity 'wasn't just fluid, it was gaseous' (Doyle, 2016). For Bowie the power of what was not (yet) there extended beyond 'mere' absence: what was not there often had as much force as what was heard or seen.

Like the Japan that Roland Barthes celebrated and on which Bowie drew by

wearing the costumes of Kansai Yamamoto or by making pieces like 'Moss Garden' (1977), 'David Bowie' worked according to principles of precision, mobility, and emptiness (Barthes, 1982, p. 47). The richness of his work, like that of Barthes's Japan, emanated not always from its substance but from the modes of emptiness around which it was formed and its status as something that was, in Barthes's words, 'suspended between … disappearances' (Barthes, 1982, p. 68). For Simon Critchley, a relationship to the word 'nothing' that refused 'to reconcile the distinction between nothing and everything' was central to Bowie's career (Critchley, 2014, 63, 173). But a refusal to reconcile a distinction is not a serene acceptance. As I will go on to show, absence's centrality and power in the making of meaning are most illuminated when they are most resisted.

Writers on Velvet Goldmine more usually (and justifiably) connect it with George Orwell and/or Oscar Wilde than with James. They also acknowledge the film's great debt to Orson Welles's Citizen Kane (1941). A perhaps surprising link between The Aspern Papers and Velvet Goldmine is their shared fondness for erotic, corporeal images, words, memories. My copy of Velvet Goldmine has on its cover a newspaper quotation that reads 'One of the most explicit films ever made about sex, drugs and rock'n'roll'. We might not expect 'the explicit' to feature in a Jamesian tale but Robert Caserio has written of James's 'liberties of erotic range' in The Aspern Papers, hearing in its title alone 'aspiration', 'spurning', 'ashen', 'asperity' and 'ass-sperm' (Caserio, 2010, 11).

Criticism of James often emphasizes his writing's 'queerness … daring and risky weirdness, dramatic uncanniness, erotic offcentredness, and unapologetic perversity' (Moon, 1998, 4). Like Wilde, James argued for forms of writing and creation that were free of crushing moralism. He did so with a very explicit awareness

of what was at stake in such artistic liberty, especially in 'The Art of Fiction', an essay published in book form the same year as The Aspern Papers (James, 2001, p. 53). While Wilde is clearly a vital and attractive figure for a queer filmmaker like the Haynes of the 1990s, there is a density, gravity – and a preoccupation with the power to endure – about James's approach to questions of artistic freedom that preoccupied Wilde, and that the latter's aphoristic snap can sometimes lack. For a filmmaker who had lived through some of the worst years of the AIDS epidemic in the US (when powers to endure were so tested) and who had been involved in ACTUP, such gravity must have been both resonant and attractive.

A few days after Bowie's death, Pam Thurschwell wrote that his work enabled 'a vibrancy of political, creative sexual possibility; a version of glittery individual freedom that doesn't negate communal responsibility but feeds on it' (Thurschwell, 2016, 8). Every word in Thurschwell's sentence could apply not just to Velvet Goldmine but to any piece of fiction by Henry James, whose versions of freedom can be not only as 'glittery' as Wilde's (or Bowie's) but which derive their glitter-factor from the sense of unforeseen responsibility, and joy, that they assume freedom brings. If, for Julie Rivkin, 'James writes about the ways in which we become ourselves by becoming others,' then, as the tributes of recent months have shown, David Bowie, by enacting multiple processes of becoming multiple others, enabled many in his audiences to become themselves (Rivkin, 2010, 4).

Interviewed on Dutch TV in April 2015 about his involvement with the Lazarus project, the show's director, Ivo van Hove, described just how much the BBC's 'Starman' footage (1972) meant to him when he first viewed it: 'The fact that DB's flirtation with Ronson was shown openly on TV made him (van Hove) feel more comfortable about having feelings for other boys.' (Van Hove, 2015) Here I am

quoting an English-language account of this interview but, of course, the 'Starman' moment entailed far more than the 'showing' of a flirtation between young men on TV. That sense of comfort van Hove felt was surely enabled by the distance between aspects of the self enabled by Bowie, in his song's lyrics and in his performance: being someone else – speaking as a 'character' in the narrative of the Ziggy album – and so evidently and joyously signalling to his audience the theatricality and artifice of his performance.

Generative Absence: The Aspern Papers and Velvet Goldmine

Hugely renowned, enigmatic, perverse, and intricately composed, The Aspern Papers asks big questions about eros, culture, and time. It also gives space to the brutal and the unresolved, triggering different relations to times gone by, most notably the years of Byron and the Shelleys. Nearly everything I have written in the preceding sentence can be said of Velvet Goldmine which triggers different relations to times gone by and figures no longer present, most notably David Bowie. In the years preceding Velvet *Goldmine's* release, The Aspern Papers had a high cultural visibility. It was central to Susan Daitch's L. C. (1986), a novel about the mutually moulding relationship between affect, archives, the past and politics. In 1988, Dominick Argento turned Aspern into an opera and the story haunted Alan Hollinghurst's queer-archive novel The Swimming-Pool Library.

The brief IMDB plot outline for Velvet Goldmine reads: '1984, British journalist Arthur Stuart investigates the career of 1970s glam superstar Brian Slade, who was heavily influenced in his early years by hard-living and rebellious American singer Curt Wild.' More details of the plot of Haynes's film will emerge in the coming pages but, for now, here is an outline of what happens in Aspern.

The story's narrator is a biographer of Jeffrey Aspern, an 1820s American poet, who finds out that Aspern's former mistress, Juliana Bordereau, and her niece, Tita, both Americans, are living in obscurity in Venice and possibly in possession of a treasure-trove of Aspern's papers. The narrator inveigles his way into the women's Palazzo as a lodger. The older woman is resistant and exploitative. Tita, the 'niece' (James changed her name to Tina when he revised the story in 1908) is more ambivalent. Juliana offers to sell a small portrait of Aspern to the narrator for an exorbitant price. When Juliana falls ill, the narrator steals into her room and gets caught by her as he is about to rifle her desk for the papers. Juliana dies soon after Tita lets him know that if he should marry her he can have access to the papers. He doesn't accept and Tita tells him that she has burnt his treasured archive. She also gives him the miniature portrait of Aspern that Juliana has offered to sell him. The narrator never gets to touch the papers but he does send Tita money for the portrait, claiming that he has sold it. The story ends with his claim that he writes his narrative facing the miniature of Aspern: 'It hangs above my table as I write. When I look at it my chagrin at the loss of the letters becomes intolerable.' (James, 2014, p. 145). For the revised version, James put absence at the centre of its last sentence: 'When I look at it I can scarcely bear my loss – I mean of the precious papers' (James, 2013, p. 88). Absence is this story's generative energy.

Like the fake shooting of Velvet Goldmine*'s* glam superstar, Brian Slade (Jonathan Rhys Meyers), who is clearly based on Ziggy-era Bowie, Aspern's early death is a foundational absence. Aspern's papers are the things that everyone wants but their force comes not from their presence or their content but from a belief in their existence and their fantasised power to bring presence and plenitude to a state of absence.

Titled after a track that didn't make it to the final version of the Ziggy Stardust (Pegg, 2011, p. 228), Velvet Goldmine is nonetheless, as Haynes acknowledged, free of Bowie's songs:

> Bowie didn't feel he wanted to let his music be used in Velvet Goldmine. … I really respect his choice and I think it ultimately serves the film not to have Bowie's music … because while they are fantastic songs that can never be matched, I think their absence makes it easier to make Brian Slade his own character; there are new levels of interpretation. (Haynes, 1998, p. xv-xvi)

The film's complex musical palette consists of early Eno, earlier Roxy Music, T. Rex, Lou Reed, Cockney Rebel and versions of songs from the 1970s performed by cast members and Thom Yorke, along with songs from the 1990s performed by Pulp. This cluster of singers and sounds constantly reminds the listener that Bowie's associates, influence and, in the case of Reed's 'Satellite of Love', his presence as producer and backing vocalist, are everywhere while he, as a songwriter and performer, is nowhere. Spinning virtue from necessity, Haynes tries to make Bowie's absence an enabling virtue: no Bowie means a more clearly delineated and autonomous (anti-) hero, Brian Slade. The absence of Bowie's songs may generate 'new levels of interpretation' but the presence of which that absence constantly reminds us shimmers through the film's sound-world.

The Aspern Papers is similarly marked by hauntings and traces. Eric Savoy has read it through Jacques Derrida's 'archive fever', emphasizing how, in the story, absence 'is simultaneously central to the biographical project and resonant with James's fictional poetics'. (Savoy, 2010, 63). In whatever form, of course, music only attains any intelligibility through processes of absence; only as one note or chord vanishes can others follow and can any structure emerge. This inherent ephemerality is a powerful aspect of pop music and it was knowingly celebrated by Glam (Hoskyns, 1998, 105).

(Homo)-eroticised fandom is a shared preoccupation of both texts. The equivalent of James's narrator in Velvet Goldmine is the young journalist Arthur Stuart (Christian Bale) who had been besotted with Slade in the 1970s and who is trying, a decade later, to gain access to the truth of Slade's life and 'death.' James's narrator and Arthur share an erotic fixation on their star-objects, one that compensates for and channels large forces of sexual constriction. Their fixations give both Aspern and Slade a vampire-like capacity to master, live through and devour their fans.

A sense of divine worship as an energising and destructive force also features in both texts. 'She said he was a god', Tita tells the narrator of how Juliana remembered Aspern. Of Maxwell Demon, Slade's Ziggy-like fictional creation, Curt Wild (Ewan McGregor) says that he 'thought he was God' (James, 2014 , 91; Haynes, 1998, p. 28) In both texts the god makes himself known by his voice. Wondering if, in the past, Juliana's 'singer had betrayed her?', the narrator casts Aspern as a singer, and potentially a treacherous one (James, 2014, p. 80). Aspern's poetry is compared to the sound-sensitive modes of Shakespeare's sonnets. The mingling of 'the man's own voice' with 'his song' also, in the narrator's fantasy, made all the difference to how Aspern's writing was received. (James, 2014, p. 53).

Rereading The Aspern Papers next to Haynes's film opens up how acoustically designed James's story is. 'Those clear bells of Venice' vibrate over the lagoon (James, 2014, p. 86). 'The voice of a man going homeward singing' sounds across the water. (James, 2014, p. 122). Such rereading also opens up an imaginative relationship to The Aspern Papers where a queer or bisexual 'betrayal' on Aspern's (or Juliana's) part may well be part of the backstory – and part of the narrator's investment in his idol. Such possibilities were also, as Barbara Johnson's work on Mary Shelley has shown, part of the affective life of Byron and the Shelleys (Johnson,

2014, 106).

We begin to read Aspern with our eyes and are taught, as we turn its pages, to prick up our ears. With Velvet Goldmine, we are compelled to read, then instructed to listen to before we see a thing. The film opens in silence with a black screen onto which emerge the words 'although what you are about to see is a work of fiction, it should nevertheless be played at maximum volume'. In this it echoes, Bowie's Ziggy Stardust album which has printed on its back cover the words 'to be played at maximum volume'. For Glenn D'Cruz such listening to the Ziggy album entails hearing in it 'a plethora of ghosts'. In a similar way, reading Velvet Goldmine with The Aspern Papers, entails hearing and seeing a plethora of ghosts, not least the ghost of James's novella in Haynes's film (D'Cruz, p.262). How such ghosts are made manifest through the senses and via resistance is my concern for the rest of this essay.

Juliana and Mandy: Time, Fire, and Transfiguration

The narrator's first encounter with the 'strange figure' of Juliana takes place in her 'large shabby parlour' in Venice. He goes on:

> They come back to me now almost with the palpitation they caused, the successive feelings that accompanied my consciousness that as the door of the room closed behind me I was really face to face with the Juliana of some of Aspern's most exquisite and most renowned lyrics. I grew used to her afterwards, though never completely; but as she sat there before me my heart beat as fast as if the miracle of resurrection had taken place for my benefit … She was too strange, too literally resurgent. Then came a check, with the perception that we were not really face to face, inasmuch as she had over her eyes a horrible green shade which, for her, served almost as a mask. (James, 2014, pp. 63-64)

A very similar encounter takes place early in Velvet Goldmine between Bale's journalist Arthur and Brian Slade's ex-wife Mandy Slade (Toni Colette). This is how it is worded in the screenplay:

The *bar'*s front door opens and we enter the crumbling nightclub, approaching a lone *figure bent over a table, the only person in sight … Arthur nears her, feeling a pang of ill ease. … Mandy slowly lifts her head and squints at him.* (Haynes, 1998, pp. 49-50)

Mandy is clearly based, in part, on Angie Bowie, just as Brian is based, in part, on David. There are a few divergences from the screenplay in the film's final cut but the parallels with James's story are not difficult to see. Juliana is in her 'shabby parlour' Mandy is in her 'crumbling nightclub'. Both lone women are visited by a lone male with an erotically-charged relationship to the man (Aspern and Slade) whose absence is now as determining a factor in this woman's life as it is in that of the man wishing to extract her secrets. Both women obscure their eyes: Juliana's are covered with a 'horrible green shade' (her eyes remain covered for most of the story and their sudden revelation is one of its most shocking moments). Mandy's slow upward movement of her head, followed by the squint through which she views Arthur, has a similar obscuring effect. He himself feels, according to the screenplay, 'a pang of ill ease' (Haynes, 1998, 50). This is brilliantly realised onscreen through the corporeal, eroticised shame that Bale brings to his performance. James's narrator has an almost traumatic relationship to the 'successive feelings' and sense of palpitation he experiences as he enters Juliana's parlour. The 'check' he experiences as he realises her eyes are covered has, as a visual equivalent in the film, a large 'NO ENTRY' sign, visible over Toni Colette's shoulder. Like Juliana, Mandy is an American who had forgotten to be an American. And in forgetting her nationality, Juliana has also forgotten the temporal conventions that go with it. Named in part after the Roman emperor Julian, Juliana is masculine, imperious and – like her namesake – wishes to reverse Judaeo-Christian time and to breathe, as Edward Gibbon put it, 'the air of freedom, of literature, and of Paganism.' (Gibbon, 1993, Volume 2, p. 410). Mandy

too is at war with the temporalities of the 1980s. He unease in her historical skin, her 'place' in the world, is shared by nearly everyone in both texts. One massive link between Aspern and Velvet Goldmine is the idealisation of one period at the expense of another.

Fire is also a common factor. For Eric Savoy, The Aspern Papers is 'both apprehensive and anticipatory of its fiery end' (Savoy, 2010, 64). The story ends with an indirect representation of fire; Tita claims that she has burnt the papers 'one by one 'on the night before her last conversation with the narrator (James, 2014, pp. 144-45). The narrator doesn't directly witness anything burning. In Velvet Goldmine, fire is usually at a certain remove, connected always with performance and with the screen: film stock melts, fire erupts onstage as part of Curt Wild's performance of 'TV Eye' and is passed on to Brian Slade whose own 'Ballad of Maxwell Demon' film culminates in flame. Just before Mandy makes her final visit to Brian to get their divorce papers signed, his attention is split between the naked body of one of his Bijou entourage, a mound of cocaine and his repeated watching on video of the burning of his records and posters by an angry mob.

Though fire is a key factor at these moments of near-consummation, the ultimate climactic moment for both texts is a transcendent vision of a hitherto demeaned and dismissed person. In James's story, it is Tita who is the object of this new vision. She is endowed with 'a look of forgiveness, of absolution [that] made her angelic'. The 'optical trick' of this look gives her 'a sort of phantasmagoric brightness' (James, 2014, p. 144).

Many Bowie fans felt that his 1980s tanned, besuited, commercially successful, gender-normative and perhaps compulsorily straight persona was a kind of

betrayal. One of Velvet Goldmine*'s* weaknesses, for me, is the way it turns this presumed transition into a split, making Tommy Stone, its Bowie-equivalent 1980s manifestation, a star who vocally supports right-wing corporate culture and who has not just moved away from his earlier self but feeds off that self's staged murder. Haynes takes this to the extent of having a different actor (Alastair Cumming) play Stone, even though the film insists that Slade and Stone are the same person. 1970s Bowie was more corporate than this distinction allows and his 1980s manifestations were more queer and ironic than it can countenance. Like Tita, Tommy Stone is almost the Byronic hero's repudiated, unacknowledged, monstrous offspring. And, like her, he is the most demeaned figure in his narrative. Like Tita, he is also subject to a certain, albeit more demonic, transfiguration. In The Aspern Papers, the narrator suddenly sees Tita as extraordinary, glorious and intimately connected with Aspern the God. Shocked by Arthur's shouted question after his gig about 'recent allegations' connecting him to 'bisexual pop singer Brian Slade who staged his own assassination ten years ago', Tommy sees on TV a bright, phantasmagoric version of Brian, 'green-faced … in a white tuxedo' transfigured into an uncanny version of Tommy's 'self' and Tommy transformed into Brian/Maxwell Demon. Creating uncanny echoes between their 'divine' beings and their most repudiated figures, The Aspern Papers and Velvet Goldmine uncannily echo each other.

Colour and The Visitable Past

'I delight,' James wrote in the 1908 Preface to his story's revised version, 'in a palpable, imaginable, visitable past' (James, 2014, p. 323). Across Haynes's work too, as anyone who has watched Carol (2015) can testify, the past is open to sensuous recreation. Such Jamesian delight is part of the texture of Velvet Goldmine and is also

enacted through its plot. The past is powerfully open to visitation and touch. Why is Arthur given the Slade story by Lou, his newspaper editor? 'Because you remember', Lou tells him (Haynes, 1998, p. 20). The film firmly locates memory in Arthur's/Christian Bale's body. 'To remember' in this context means to have listened – endlessly – to Slade's music, to have congregated with other desiring bodies at this concerts, to have erotically caressed his records and their sleeves, to have masturbated over his printed image, to have been fucked by Curt Wild (who has himself fucked – or been fucked by – Brian) on a rooftop. Both texts have running through them a sense of what Carolyn Dinshaw calls 'a relation across time that has an affective or erotic component' (Dinshaw, 1999, 50).

This sense of somatic history is chromatically based. Continuities of colour across and through both texts create a sense of history's sensual proximity. You may not be able live or breathe the past but in seeing its colours you gain the most intense possible sensory access to past times. There are abundantly more colours in Velvet Goldmine but in The Aspern Papers two predominate – green and red.

Fewer colours are more intensely patterned in James's story. There is a smidgin of red at the start when the narrator is greeted by a red-headed maid on first approaching the Bordereau's palazzo (James, 2014, p. 58). After that, green predominates: Juliana's 'horrible green shade', 'the high-collared green coat' that Aspern wears in his tiny portrait, the trunk of faded light green in which the narrator believes the papers are hidden (James, 2014, p. 64, p. 112, p. 119).

Once the possibility of the papers being burnt is mooted, red predominates: red walls, reddened eyes, the red tip of the narrator's cigar, the statue of the terrible Bartolemeo Colleoni that seems to look through the Venetian sunset at 'the red immersion of another day' (James, 2014, p. 119, p. 130, p. 120, p. 142). It is as if not

just the papers but the story's entire world, like the earth of Ziggy Stardust, is journeying to imminent annihilation.

Oscar Wilde's green pin found on him in what Dana Luicano calls 'the futuristic fiction of Wilde's extra-terrestrial origins', becomes a vital object in the film with a vital hue (Luciano, 2011, p. 133). Green is important as a colour thereafter. When we first see the words 'Brian Slade' on a poster those words are printed in green. In the first shots of Bale's Arthur as an established Brian Slade fan, Bale wears a pale green suit. When Slade comes out (and outs Mandy) at the press conference, they also wear matching green outfits. In 'The Ballad of Maxwell Demon' sequence, Slade's sex-serpent persona (not a million miles from the reptilian 'asp' in 'Aspern') is also green.

Wilde's green pin links patterned colour with sensually apprehended history. Attached to the baby Wilde in 1854 it is worn to school by his eight-year old self (Luke Morgan Oliver) in 1862. A century later, it is discovered by the young Jack Fairy (Osheen Jones) when he has been kicked to the ground by school bullies. The pin is stolen from the adult Jack (Micko Westmoreland) by Brian on New Year's Eve 1969.

In the film's final bar scene, Curt Wild claims to Arthur that the pin had been given to him by a 'friend of mine who … kinda disappeared'. Just as Wild's surname phonetically links him to Wilde, so, at the film's end, the pin takes the viewer back to its opening futuristic origin-fantasy. 'It was Oscar Wilde's. Or so I was told by the person who gave it to me,' Wild says. Like Aspern's portrait, the pin is offered as a gift. Curt offers it to Arthur and when the latter says no, Curt, we can infer (though another level of magical causality may be in operation), slips the pin unnoticed into Arthur's beer bottle. When Curt leaves and Arthur swigs his beer, the pin goes into

his mouth, he nearly gags on it and, puddled in what the screenplay calls 'beer spittle', it is shot in close-up in his hand, (Haynes, 1998, p. 133).

This pin's trajectory is similar to that of Aspern's portrait. Repeatedly referred to as 'the little picture', the portrait is also dominated by green. It fits easily into Juliana's pocket and is usually cupped in a human hand. Like Wilde's and Fairy's pin, it is passed from hand to hand, from presumably, Juliana's father who, she claims, painted it, perhaps to Aspern perhaps to Juliana. It stands as an embodiment of their connection, their desire – and their potential (queer) betrayals. After Juliana's death it goes to Tita, who (eventually) gives it to the narrator. If, in the film, the pin is an object of subterfuge, then in James's story, the portrait is, as we've seen, an object of bargaining, seduction and deceit. Like Arthur at the end of Velvet Goldmine, the narrator is face to face with the small, green, erotically invested, object that, tinged with ambiguity and deception, makes the past tangible. At the same time, both the narrator and Arthur are confronted with the residue of their desires: the beer, so redolent of spit and cum, in Arthur's hand, the narrator's 'almost intolerable' chagrin or the loss he can 'scarcely bear'.

Resistance

But I can more than bear to return to Edinburgh, to 1990, and to my tears provoked by the fierce grandeur of Bowie's incantation to Major Tom. In Bowie's songs, there is often a figure who is addressed, a figure who, like the audience, is moving towards absence and a second figure who is fearfully becoming absent just because the first figure moves away. The call-and response structure of 'Space Oddity', allows both positions to be adopted – that of the figure on the verge of absence (Major Tom), that of the figure who witnesses and is overtaken by the approach of absence ('Ground Control'). Such lyrical scenarios were a consistent beat in Bowie's career and they

often concluded his albums in a way that often operated as a canny recycling of an affective, absence-based structure consolidating Bowie's familiarity and appeal as a product or a brand. We might think of 'Rock n' Roll Suicide' (1972), or 'Bring Me the Disco King' (2003), songs which end, respectively, Ziggy Stardust and Reality.

Of course, using absence to generate lyrical structure is not something that is unique to Bowie's songwriting. It's an intrinsic part of the lyric poetry that so coarsely energizes everyone in The Aspern Papers. Some of the most famous writing of the Romantic period employed the figure of apostrophe, defined by Barbara Johnson as 'the direct address of an absent, dead or inanimate being by a first-person speaker: "O wild West Wind, thou breath of autumn's being"' (Johnson, 1987, p. 185). Johnson's example is from Shelley's 1819 'Ode to the West Wind'. Like The Aspern Papers or 'Space Oddity', apostrophe is caught up with mourning and the elegiac, a capacity to articulate and direct grief. Accounts of apostrophe also emphasize its power to accomplish its own miracles of resurrection, to 'call up and animate the absent, the lost, and the dead' (Johnson, 1987, p. 187). To call up or animate the dead, to address someone who is absent as if they were present: these actions not only resist death or absence; they make absence manifest through resistance.

When, early on, Arthur briefly takes over the film's voice-over narration, he addresses someone who may be dead or absent: 'Why was it,' Bale's gorgeous Mancunian voice intones, 'suddenly up to me to figure it out when clearly there was something, something from the past spooking me back? I didn't realize at the time that it was you' (Haynes, 19998, p. 20). In the example I've given from Bowie's lyrics we are somewhere between apostrophe and direct address. It's not necessarily an absent, dead, or inanimate being that is being addressed but, often, a being (or

sometimes a world) who is moving towards absence, death or transformed animation, that is someone who may (or may not) deliver on the hope that absence can be effectively resisted.

If we believe Haynes's claim that he accepted the absence of Bowie's songs from his film, we need to think again. Because the songs' absence is resisted through the film's use of camera work, film stock and pacing. Velvet Goldmine*'s* soundtrack gestures at such resistance but the film's visual styles actively engage in it. Bowie may only be a slight presence as a singer in the film and he is not at all present as a songwriter. But the modes that captured his image and generated his styles – especially on the big screen – are *Velvet Goldmine's* vital materials.

An early scene where a hand-held camera follows Slade from the dressing room to the stage replicates D. A. Pennebaker's shooting, in Ziggy Stardust The Motion Picture, of Bowie's 1973 post-costume-change journey along an identical route, to sing 'Changes'. Mandy's dreamy recollections of her initial meeting with Brian and what she calls the 'the most stimulating and reflective period of our marriage' echo the substance and shooting of the love scenes between Bowie's Thomas Jerome Newton and Candy Clark's Mary-Lou in Nicolas Roeg's The Man Who Fell to Earth (1976).

Velvet Goldmine unforgettably intercuts Arthur's masturbation over a copy of the NME, specifically a photo of Slade and Wild kissing, with Slade's live performance of 'Baby's on Fire'. This performance culminates in the film's replication of Ziggy-era Bowie going down on Mick Ronson's guitar (with Slade going down on a lead guitar played by McGregor's Curt Wild). In turn, this is intercut with an orgy involving Slade's 'Bijou' entourage that culminates in Slade and Curt Wild sleeping, and running away, together. These inter-cuttings owe much to the

rapid editing of The Man Who Fell to Earth. The particular connection is a stretch where Bowie's Newton watches a violent, theatricalized Japanese dance in a New York restaurant while, thousands of miles away, his future employee Professor Nathan Bryce (Rip Torn) has violent sex with one his undergraduate students, an event the latter photographs with a camera of Newton's designing. James Lyons, *Velvet Goldmine's* editor and Haynes's collaborator on the story, clearly made, in 1998, choices that replicated Graeme Clifford's editing of Roeg's film. Both put the audience into a strange space where we wonder if we are simply switching from one world to another or if in some way these massively distanced activities (Arthur's wanking in Manchester, the Bijou Orgy, Bryce's rough sex with his student, the ritualized Japanese entertainment, the onstage guitar 'fellatio') enjoy more magically causal relationships to each other. This is one of many instances of what Luciano has described as Velvet Goldmine's fondness for both the styles of 1970s film-making and for indeterminate temporal and causal relationships. (Luciano, 2011, p. 136, p. 142). More fundamentally, this sequence is one of many instances where the styles of Haynes's film contest his serene claim that he accepts Bowie's absence.

This essay has documented the structuring (and galvanizing) impact of two different absences: The Aspern Papers is 'absent' from Velvet Goldmine yet almost predicts in an embodied way how Hayne's film frames desire, celebrity and the period of Glam. As I claimed at the start of this essay, for Hall's (Hall, 1997) circuit to function, absence itself must be both motivating and deftly addressed, allowing fantasy to be called forth into being while molding its shapes. For different reasons, 'David Bowie' is absent from Velvet Goldmine but, like *Aspern's* 'absence', Bowie's structures and energizes. This scenario is gorgeously indebted to songs by David Bowie (which, in theory, we can hear until we vanish) or live performances by him

which, now, can only touch us, across time, through our screens.

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