A Counterargument to Purves's "'A Warning to the Curious': The 'Nicely Managed' Mind of M. R. James"

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Maria Purves, in her article, cites many behavioral examples to support her thesis that author M. R. James suffered from high-functioning Asperger's Syndrome. However, the more I read of James's behavior, the more it seemed to me that a stronger argument could be made for him having had obsessive compulsive disorder or some sort of anal fixation.

For instance, James's personal reticence could be explained by a withholding personality that is symptomatic of an anal fixation. His inability to share feelings could have been caused by murderous and dangerous emotions which he was compelled to repress; therefore all emotions would be repressed. Other personality traits such as James's desire for overcontrol, his fussiness and his pedantry all could be symptoms of an anal fixation.

Anality is marked not only by the modality of withholding and retention, but also of expulsion. James was retentive emotionally, but expulsive in his work ethic, a scholar far more productive than his colleagues, turning out reams and reams of paper (=feces). His favoring of "economy and fragmentation" (Purves 13) in his narrative style is indicative of anality, the economy representing anal retention and the fragmetnation representing, perhaps, his own splintered personality as well as the fragments of feces expelled from his body.

James's research, which Purves tells us, consisted of "note-making, collecting, labeling and cataloguing: taxonomical rather than analytical" (5) is typical of anal fixation. In "Character and Anal Erotism," Freud tells us that orderliness is one of the

three primary character traits of this syndrome. The fact that James collected "fragments and scraps" further implies an anal fixation, the fragments and scraps being substitutes for feces (17).

Purves, referring to James's ghost stories, says, "His implied plots, endings and explanations make sense in this context: impatience with lengthy extraction. . .(17). This description of James's personality in relation to his style of writing has an anal sense to it, that he wanted to get everything out quickly, further tying into his expulsive work ethic.

The fact that James gave his ghost stories the "authentic foundation they need to project a sense of security, which is then whisked away by the nasty epiphany"(Purves 18), can be explained by the bifurcation of the anal fixation into activity, coinciding with sadism, and passivity, coinciding with anal erotism (LaPlanche and Pontalis). The sense of security would be associated with passivity and anal erotism; and the nasty epiphany would be associated with activity and sadism.

Purves mentions that James suffered a breakdown when he was a student at Eton. This would not be readily explained by him having Asperger's, but would more likely be related to an emotional disorder, which could have been an anal fixation.

Finally, James did not seem to have a fascination with "systems, lists, and patterns" as Purves describes the Aspberger personality (7). He did make lists, but he did not show a fascination for systems and patterns. His scholarship, as Purves says, was more taxonomical than analytical.

James's personal reticence; his overcontrol, fussiness and pedantry; his scholarly over-productivity; his scholarly style (note-making, collecting, labeling and cataloguing); his writing style (economical and fragmented); his plot form (security shattered by a

"nasty epiphany"); his breakdown at Eton and, finally, the description of Aspberger's

Syndrome that does not quite fit James's intellectual style, altogether make a strong case

for anal fixation rather than high functioning Aspberger's Syndrome.

Works Cited

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