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The Henry James Review, Volume 45, Number 3, Fall 2024, pp. 266-273  
(Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/hjr.2024.a941313>



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# Cynthia Ozick Reframing Henry James: From “Publishing Scoundrel” to False Messiah

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**Abstract.** This essay invites a dialogue between Henry James’s “The Aspern Papers” and Cynthia Ozick’s *The Messiah of Stockholm* through the notion of literary speculation. In both texts, the relations between the experiential and the literary are explored via Paul Ricoeur’s theory of “threefold *mimesis*.” Jacques Derrida’s account of hauntology and secular messianism, moreover, underscores failures of justice, ethics, and hope. James’s poised tragi-comic narrative is juxtaposed with Ozick’s critique of imaginative self-indulgence. Both works culminate in the burning of manuscripts, figuring in turn the demise of personal or editorial yearnings, then the Holocaust’s merciless incineration of Jewish life and creativity.

Henry James’s “The Aspern Papers” (1888) and Cynthia Ozick’s *The Messiah of Stockholm* (1987) represent two intriguing cases of literary speculation in the double sense of seeking to profit from a risky investment and of formulating a theory without sufficient substantiating evidence. These texts tease and tantalize the reader with their ingenious shifts in focus, the vividness of their dialogical play, and their subtle projection of counterfactual possibilities. The connection between the novellas may seem oblique and even questionable, especially by comparison with Ozick’s considered recasting of *The Ambassadors* as her sharply satirical, yet moving, novel *Foreign Bodies* (2010). Nonetheless, a fruitful relationship emerges. Both works unfold

*The Henry James Review* 45 (2024): 266–273.  
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speculations about the material existence of literary documents, while suggesting an estimate of the achievement of their authors. Both bear the title of these desired literary documents, although Ozick also signals a role assigned to her protagonist. In their distinctive ways, both novellas refashion close associations with historical persons, adapting or disguising certain vital details to drive the narrative. Theoretically, both texts play with complicating referentiality and exploiting metaliterary reflections. In these ways, James and Ozick examine the boundaries between the experiential and the literary, probe claims to artistic achievement, and subtly foreground the unstable ethics of representation. Trying to live in and through the literary in its aesthetic constructedness is delineated as a simultaneously demanding and quixotic project.

This discussion will concentrate on two aspects of the latent conversation between James and Ozick. The first, which draws on volume 1 of Paul Ricoeur's *Time and Narrative*, engages with the relationship between lived experience and the production of literature—or, to coin a weary cliché, the bearing of life on art. Ricoeur's guiding premise is that “*time becomes human to the extent that it is articulated through a narrative mode, and narrative attains its full meaning when it becomes a condition of temporal existence*” (52). To test this assumption, Ricoeur postulates three interlocking stages of mimesis (54–70). Mimesis<sub>1</sub> is enacted within the milieu of temporally inflected, consciously motivated, and culturally encoded human action, as pursued with an awareness of appropriate circumstantial constraints. Such action by its very constitution gravitates towards narrative explication, sometimes following a trajectory of embryonic or “untold” stories (74–75). This is the phase of *prefiguration*. Mimesis<sub>2</sub> involves the formal processes of representation and structuration which transform experiential narrative into the mode of *as if* (or the literary); this stage is termed *configuration* (62–70). Lastly, mimesis<sub>3</sub>, or *refiguration* “marks the intersections of the world of the text and the world of the . . . reader; the intersection, therefore, of the world configured by the [literary endeavor] and the world wherein real action occurs . . .” (71).

The successive types of mimesis follow “an endless spiral” which carries “the mediation past the same point a number of times, but at different altitudes” (72). Literary texts speak of the world figuratively and by effacing descriptive reference. More broadly, Ricoeur argues that “for me, the world is the whole set of references opened by every sort of descriptive and poetic text I have read, interpreted, and loved” (80). For James, there is a particular pleasure in lighting casually on a romantically tinged story about charmingly accessible historical persons and transforming it into a polished fictional text that expands the reach of his world—perhaps the world at large, in Ricoeur's sense. Ozick is warier, more ambivalent. She is passionately drawn to *configuring* fiction in all its enticing potentiality, yet culturally and temperamentally attuned to the starker rhythms of narrative *prefiguration* with its unvarnished recording of suffering and injustice.

The second aspect of this critical engagement with the two chosen novellas is inspired by James's Preface to the New York Edition of “The Aspern Papers”: his “delight in a palpable imaginable *visible* past—in the nearer distances and the clearer mysteries, the marks and signs of a world we may reach over to as by making a long arm we grasp an object at the other end of our own table” (AN 164). The attentiveness to “marks and signs” is salient since James's palpably imagined visitation and his willed double vision fracture any stable ontological apprehension of presence in the

present moment. Ontology gives way to what Jacques Derrida calls hauntology or the “*non-contemporaneity with itself of the living present*,” which has become “secretly” unhinged (*Specters* xix; compare Savoy, “Jamesian Hauntology” 238–44). For Derrida, such a disjuncture within temporality acquires an urgent ethical dimension, exacting responsibility to those who are not present (whether because they are dead or not yet born), as well as an absolute justice that exceeds all legal systems (*Specters* xix). And absolute justice is correlated with an absolute hospitality to the other as other. This thinking converges on Derrida’s arid or “desert-like” secular messianism (28), which proposes a waiting without expectation for the elusive future-yet-to-come; suspending the hope to see what is to come induces a near-despairing “taste of death” (168, 169).

“The Aspern Papers” and particularly *The Messiah of Stockholm* finely trace the force and pressure of a frustrated call to justice. Both novellas are redolent of loss and the optative modality of the might-have-been. Both also evoke for their affected characters (whether Miss Tina or Lars Andemening) the claustrophobia of waiting in self-deceiving hope pitted against the rational non-expectation of an idealized fulfillment that will never come. In “The Aspern Papers” such draining anticipation is treated as delicately poised tragi-comedy; in *The Messiah* it recklessly spawns an excess of conflicting and painfully constricting textual entanglements as Lars seeks to fend off his ultimate literary-biographical disappointment.

James scholars are thoroughly familiar with the rootedness of “The Aspern Papers” in the novelist’s record of his social activity in Florence in January 1887. A friendly exchange with the poet Eugene Lee-Hamilton demonstrates how readily anecdote and gossip may form the germ of fictional accomplishment. James learnt that the very old Claire Clairmont, a former mistress of Byron, and her middle-aged niece had until recently been living in the city. These ladies were believed to possess letters from Byron and Shelley which were of consuming interest to the Shelley fanatic, Captain Edward Silsbee. With the covert aim of acquiring these papers on the older woman’s imminent death, Silsbee insinuated himself into her home as a lodger. However, the scheme went disconcertingly awry; the unattractive niece set marriage as the price of the papers—and Silsbee fled. Serendipitously, the Countess Gamba (a relative by marriage of Byron’s last mistress, Teresa Gamba Guiccioli) appeared on the scene while James was visiting. It turned out that she had burned at least one of Byron’s letters in the custodianship of the family on the grounds that it was “discreditable to Byron” (CN 33–34).

James’s literary *configuration* of these enticing narratives obscures the experiential context by shifting the setting to Venice and transforming Byron into the fictitious American poet, Jeffrey Aspern. As he notes in his Preface, he has broken free of the encumbrance of surplus facts, delighting in seeing “the rich dim Shelley drama played out in the very theatre of our own ‘modernity’” (AN 163). Nonetheless, the tale is unavoidably imbricated with the biographical data of the Romantic poets’ residence in Venice, where Byron composed the final canto of the overwhelmingly popular *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* (1812–18) and, aptly, the opening of *Don Juan* (1819–24); his rash Venetian romances have become legendary. In his turn, Shelley wrote *Julian and Maddalo: A Conversation* (1818–19) to test and elucidate troubling philosophical differences between Byron and himself. Diane Hoeveler has persuasively proposed that the miniature of Aspern that Miss Bordereau calculatedly dangles before the narrator is modeled on Amelia Curran’s portrait of Shelley as etherialized poet. This

image was reproduced as a frontispiece to editions of Shelley's poetry that would have been easily available to James and his contemporaries (28). Reorienting the associations in an American direction, Millicent Bell links the figure of Aspern to Nathaniel Hawthorne and James's novella to *The House of the Seven Gables* (1851). Under a Bloomian anxiety of influence, James is deemed to have substituted Italy for New England, while borrowing a potentially Edenic garden, an elegant miniature portrait (once again), and some secretively concealed old documents. It is the happy ending of Hawthorne's fable in marriage that James skews and ironizes (Bell 192–93, see also 187–91). Literary *configuration*, then, may be construed as concertedly reshaping its foundational narrative *prefiguration* or an alternative fictional venture, whether by embellishing, diversifying, or cloaking their contours—yet the vividness of intense, lived experience steadily pulsates through the polished novella.

The narrator-editor of “The Aspern Papers” is alive to the complex merging of the experientially picturesque and the accumulation of literary resonances in Venice. As he waits in his already postlapsarian garden for his schemes for obtaining the papers to mature, he communes with the “bright ghost” of Jeffrey Aspern, who seems to have returned to earth to support him in his venture: “aren't we in Venice together, and what better place is there for the meeting of dear friends? See how it glows with the advancing summer; how the sky and the sea and the rosy air and the marble of the palaces all melt and shimmer together” (AP1 27). This “general romance,” “mystic companionship,” and “moral fraternity” shared with all who have served “art” (27) is intertwined with the editor's aesthetic worship of Aspern as his “god,” who “is in himself a defence” and “part of the light by which we walk” (4). Under such a spiritualized perception, Juliana Bordereau as proprietor of the letters comes to represent “esoteric knowledge” (28); this thrills the narrator's “editorial heart” (AP2 306). His wanting to shake hands with Juliana encapsulates “an irresistible desire to hold in [his] own for a moment the hand Jeffrey Aspern had pressed” (AP1 20). The editor's devotion to Aspern sensitizes him to the “non-contemporaneity of the living present,” to its haunted alterity, but responsive and responsible ethical alertness is uneasily displaced by a fanciful speculation soon amounting to a will to material—and intellectual—acquisition. This insensibility to more delicate impressions or personal reverberations almost justifies Juliana's taunt: “Do you think it's right to rake up the past?”; and then “Oh, I like the past, but I don't like critics” (55).

It is in such brushes with the recalcitrant vagaries of the experiential that the editor increasingly entrammels himself in his plot to “make love” to Miss Tina (AP1 10). Having shrewdly deduced his scheme, Juliana invites him to take her niece on an outing to the Piazza. “He'll show you the famous sunsets, if they still go on—do they go on? The sun set for me a long time ago. But that's not a reason.” Then the tone changes from the derisively reminiscent to the cruelly practical. “Let her look at the shops; she may take some money, she may buy what she likes” (45). Moved by pity for Tina's humiliation, the editor describes Juliana as a “sarcastic profane cynical old woman,” but the situation is disconcertingly complicated. As Tessa Hadley has noted, the editor is not listening as he might; Juliana's “epigrammatic coquettish *galanterie*” perhaps carries the “flavour” of Aspern's “more piquant, less prosing” era (322), thus delivering a desirable glimpse of the “*visitable* past.” Yet Juliana is also maliciously experimenting with the potentialities of narrative, playing adroitly across the phases of *prefiguration*, *configuration*, and *refiguration*. She observes acutely, then reads

Aspern's love poems back into the embarrassed (even ludicrous) relationship between the editor and her niece, rewriting sublime Romantic verse as parody and farce. The editor has already commented wryly that he and Miss Tina are scarcely Romeo and Juliet (*AP1* 32–33). The stage is now set for Tina's anguished marriage proposal—with the masculine and feminine roles mortifyingly reversed—the editor's precipitate flight, and the burning of the Aspern papers “one by one, in the kitchen” (88).

Adrian Poole aptly identifies “The Aspern Papers” as “amongst other things, a confession. It is also a defence, a self-justification” (xii). One might add that the text is suggestively a rueful reflection, possibly a plea for compassionate appraisal of the author's conduct—and even an indirect acknowledgment of guilt. The unnamed editor's misadventures in Venice are subsumed into literary form through a writer's familiar “process of *making story*” (see Hadley 320–21). Ignominiously caught, as in “the sudden drench” of a “flood of gaslight,” while rifling a dying woman's bureau for her treasured letters, the “publishing scoundrel” (*AP1* 72) struggles to accomplish some kind of reconciliation with the unappeased shade of Juliana Bordereau, the living reproach of a rejected Miss Tina—and himself. The glare of Juliana's “extraordinary eyes” crosses with a transfigured Tina's “look of forgiveness, of absolution” (72, 87) but also with the editor's “look[ing] away” in repudiation of a marriage proposal that simply “wouldn't do” (83). The multiply layered narrative comes to be haunted by regret for the incinerated archive, but equally by Tina, smiling “in her abjection” and evincing an unprecedented “force of soul” (87). Her gift of the coveted Aspern miniature concretizes the editor's ambiguous sense of loss, ratifying his failure of justice to an aging spinster's worth. As Derrida contends, a “taste of death” infuses the withheld hope of broken messianic time, shadowing both past and present with a yearning might-have-been.

Like “The Aspern Papers,” Ozick's *The Messiah of Stockholm* is steeped in the literary in shifting tension with the experiential. The protagonist, Lars Andemening, is fascinated by the building housing the Swedish Academy, “more sacred to him than any cathedral.” The premises are freighted with “rows and rows of superannuated encyclopedias,” cases filled with “many-stanzaed Eddas” and the works of Nobel Prize-winners ranging from Bernard Shaw and Thomas Mann to Saul Bellow and Elias Canetti (16–17; see Strandberg 127). The novella frequently deploys the register of fairy tale too. Lars's confidant and seeming friend, the bookshop owner Heidi Eklund, is figured as “a thick globular dwarf of a woman,” while her window display gives prominence to a glossy volume evoking the magical existence of the Swedish royal family. And the shop itself bulges with books from various European and American traditions (20–21; see Strandberg 127).

Lars's professional activity draws him into the sphere of literary reviewing by contrast with the editorial role of the narrator of “The Aspern Papers.” If James is wary of the vulgarly intrusive curiosity that seeks to unearth the most intimate details of a writer's private relationships, Ozick is skeptical of the mediocrity and cynicism of newspaper journalists who churn out *refigurations* of popular publications, measuring their success by receiving further *refigurations* of their columns as fanmail. The afternoon gathering at the *Morgontörn's* “stewpot,” for instance, thrives on intrigue and mildly scurrilous invention, banal speculation and satisfying *exposés*, such as the fortuitous uncovering of Olof Flodcrantz's cheeky plagiarism in passing off an entire collection of filched poems in translation as his original work. The absorbing

question then becomes whether Flodcrantz will be fired by his paper or celebrated as a “culture hero” (70–72).

Lars deliberately braces himself against the self-serving pragmatism of his journalistic colleagues. Rescued from Nazi-occupied Poland as a baby and smuggled into Sweden, he believes himself to be the son of Bruno Schulz, a Jewish writer and artist shot dead by a Nazi officer in the small Polish town of Drohobycz in 1942. Schulz’s stories are bizarre and transgressively fantastic, conceiving an oddly malign universe of Kafkaesque transformation and counterpoised entropy. Lars is enchanted by the “crafty nouns and verbs” which are “set on a crooked road to take on engorgements and transmogrifications: a bicycle ascends into the zodiac . . . wallpaper hisses. . . . In one of the stories, the father turns into a pincered crab; the mother boils it and serves it to the family on a dish” (35–36). Under the inspiration of his father’s “murdered eye,” Lars fervidly produces his finished reviews for the *Morgontörn* as a kind of ritualistic automatic writing (6–7). Eschewing the expediency and cultural pretension of his fellow reviewers, his predilection is for the fraught existentialist struggles of central European authors—for Milan Kundera and Hermann Broch—even at the cost of journalistic success. In allied fashion, his mantra is Schulz’s claim that “reality is as thin as paper and betrays with all its cracks its intuitive character” (42). Heidi taunts him, not without justification, with thinking that “the world is made of literature. You think reality is a piece of paper” (107–08). If James’s editor worships Jeffrey Aspern and walks in his light, Lars aporetically erodes any borders between literature and tangible experience (see Derrida, *Aporias* 20) in a wild access of perversely burgeoning textuality.

The climax of the novella arrives not with stratagems and appeals to secure coveted editorial material but with a calculated literary fraud. Heidi (herself a refugee from Nazi Germany) and two former-refugee accomplices connive to maneuver Lars into endorsing a probably fake manuscript of Schulz’s lost masterpiece, *The Messiah*. Their transparently orchestrated seduction parodically mimics the Christian narrative of the birth of the messiah, complete with pseudo-Magi and Lars as the willed agent of a literary annunciation (see Strandberg 131–32). This *refiguration* of the Gospel narratives folds onto and is re-configured as a typically Schulzian imagining of “phantasmagoric transfiguration” (Ozick, “Phantasmagoria” 227). His native Drohobycz has been emptied of people and occupied by idols of all shapes and descriptions, “from miniature Egyptian figurines” to “mammoth Easter Island heads,” all dominated by the ancient Canaanite deity Moloch with his appetite for the regular sacrifice of babies (Ozick, *Messiah* 125). In the absence of human adherents to bring sacrifices, the idols begin to prey viciously on one another, with the strong destroying the weak. This nightmarish practice at once offers a visual metaphor for Nazi insistence on an idolatrous conformity to their rigid ideology and exposes the lure of the aesthetic in substituting unrestrained imaginative extravagance for ethical reflection. So, Ozick deploys an outlandish sequence of literary figures, seeming to revel in their exuberant volatility, even as she confronts the anxiety that her fictional play must fall short of sober responsiveness to unconscionable violence.

By surprise, the Messiah appears in the shape of a sensuously luscious rose from one of Schulz’s tales before mutating into a tattooed booklike entity. This reified representation of enshrined dogma or compulsive allegiance to the literary disintegrates while giving birth to a frail bird. In its beak, the bird clutches a shred of hay from the

Messiah's stuffing; it touches the idols in turn, the lurid sacrificial fires are extinguished, and the predatory idols dissolve into sparks (129). An apocalypse has been effected by calmly appropriating and demystifying Schulz's imaginative metier. The frail bird clearly recalls the dove, symbol of spiritual vitality and hope, that returns to Noah's ark with a freshly plucked olive sprig (Genesis 8:11; see Strandberg 134). Its strand of hay is a tiny remnant of the merchandise traded by the ancient Moses the Righteous One, who used to live in the basement of the synagogue and give everything he owned to beggars (127). These deftly placed Biblical references underscore a transition to the ethical and incipiently redemptive, especially as the Jewish messianic age (unlike the Christian) is believed to follow catastrophe. Yet the hope proffered by the little bird seems fragile and contingent. Derrida suggests that Abrahamic messianism might be "an exemplary prefiguration, the pre-name [*prénom*]" of his own sparse, secular variant (*Specters* 167). The dubious Schulz manuscript indeed promises justice as a release from extreme brutality and horror, but absolute hospitality to the other and care for the future are not even implied as a trace.

Through reading *The Messiah*, Lars undergoes a species of conversion that has already been anticipated by the fraudsters' prior—and patently clumsy—efforts to ensnare him. He accepts that their text is a fake and burns it, purposefully incinerating his orphan's impossible desire for known paternity together with the forger's speculative ambition to coin a profit. He renounces his self-election as "the Messiah of Stockholm" (74), who is attuned to the crushing existential *angst* of Middle European authors or to resurrecting an assumed work of genius long since lost or destroyed during the Holocaust. Instead, he matures into surpassing mediocrity, outdoing his reviewing rivals by earning three newspaper slots a week and harvesting a huge crop of fanmail. Epiphany has turned to hard-headed common sense—but not quite. Regret and yearning linger. Lars is afflicted by intimations that the text of the Stockholm *Messiah* might just have been genuine. Alternatively, he sees, in the "narrow hallway of his skull," a precious manuscript borne towards the fires of the crematoria by one of Schulz's admirers, a Drohobycz Jew. Then "he grieve[s]" for his irrecoverable loss (167).

So, the burning remains, for James and for Ozick. Eric Savoy has convincingly argued that the incineration of Aspern's archive is "prospective," encompassed from early in the narrative by the editor-narrator's recurrent apprehensions and subliminally desired as inseparable from the drive to preservation ("Aspern's Archive" 64). Ozick's novella is permeated by burning and anticipations of burning. As Lars hurries towards Heidi's bookshop in the middle of a freezing Scandinavian night, he registers "That burning. He listened for fire engines. O the chimneys" (18). And again "O the chimneys of armpits, moist and burning under wool" (19). Lars's consciousness is traced by the Holocaust and its crematoria as an ineluctable subtext. Stockholm itself carries the odor of "something roasting," "of baking zebra" (166), with the animal's striped hide perhaps reflecting lines of black words on the white manuscript sheets of Schulz's *Messiah*. Ozick imagines burning on a scale that James could never have contemplated or foreseen, despite his revelation in 1910 that he had chosen to consign all his correspondence to a "gigantic bonfire" (Monteiro 35). If Miss Tina's steady, stealthy disposal of Aspern's letters seals the shamed renunciation of a lonely spinster, *The Messiah of Stockholm* becomes a covert elegy for six million Jews, whose annihilation is allusively commemorated through fiction. For them, justice

and ethics have failed; the apocalyptic has subsumed the messianic, confirming the taste of death. From this perspective, Ozick's preoccupation with burning and its resultant ashes gravitates towards Derrida's "'up to date' phrase" for "cinders," perhaps the "only one worth publishing; it would tell of the all-burning, otherwise called the holocaust and the crematory oven, in German in all the Jewish languages of the world" (*Cinders* 39).

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