

The Americanization of Aspern in Henry James's *The Aspern Papers*

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Abstract

This paper examines the Americanization of Jeffrey Aspern in Henry James's *The Aspern Papers*, with particular attention to James's creative vision of this fictional poet in the 1908 preface. Through a close reading of the novella and the preface, this paper examines Aspern's Americanization from the perspectives of his literary origins, character construction, and cultural significance. The study argues that Aspern is a carefully constructed literary figure shaped within the American historical context. It further suggests that Aspern's Americanization reflects James's engagement with literary traditions and American literary re-imagination.

Keywords

Henry James, *The Aspern Papers*, Jeffrey Aspern, Americanization

1. Introduction

The fictional poet Jeffrey Aspern raises a question worthy of further investigation: why did Henry James create an American poet within a narrative framework deeply rooted in European Romantic literary tradition? Although Aspern never appears directly in *The Aspern Papers*, he remains central to the novella's narrative imagination as a celebrated American poet whose reputation extends across the Atlantic. His legendary life, literary achievement, and surviving personal relics continue to shape the characters' fascination with his legacy. In the preface to the 1908 revised New York Edition of *The Aspern Papers*, James explicitly describes his original conception of the figure as "an American Byron" (James, "Preface": 166). This statement indicates that Aspern is not merely a fictional adaptation of a historical poet, but a deliberate literary construction through which James reshapes European Romantic conventions within an American literary context.

Existing scholarship has examined Aspern's persona from perspectives including literary ethics, Romantic intertextuality, and transatlantic cultural identity. These studies have illuminated the relationship between artistic legacy and private life, Aspern's connection with European Romantic figures such as Byron and Shelley, and the cultural tensions between American and European traditions. However, less attention has been paid to why James transformed a European Romantic anecdote into an American poet and what literary ideas and cultural meanings are embedded in this process.

This paper argues that Aspern's Americanization is not a simple replacement of a European model with an American one, but a creative reconstruction shaped by James's engagement with both Romantic traditions and American literary concerns. While retaining the legendary qualities associated with the Byronic poet, James redefines Aspern through an American context, presenting him as a writer whose artistic identity develops through interaction with European culture rather than isolation from it. Through this character, James explores the possibility of an American literary identity formed through cultural exchange.

This study adopts a close-reading approach to examine how James constructs Aspern as a fictional American poet through the interaction between Romantic literary inheritance and American cultural identity. The analysis focuses on Aspern's representation in the novella and James's reflections on his creative process in the preface. All quotations from *The Aspern Papers* are taken from Henry James's "The Aspern Papers" in *The Aspern Papers and Other Tales*, edited by Michael Gorra (Penguin Classics, 2014), and quotations from the preface are taken from *The Art of the Novel: Critical Prefaces* (Charles Scribner's Sons, 1934). Page references correspond to these editions. This paper focuses on three aspects. First, it analyzes how James reshapes the character relations, cultural setting, and narrative framework of the original European anecdote to construct Aspern's American identity. Second, it examines how Aspern combines European Romantic conventions with American ideals of individual talent and artistic independence, making him a figure that connects different literary traditions. Third, by revisiting the debates over Aspern's plausibility in James's preface, it explores how the character reflects James's understanding of literary imagination and fictional creation.

Through this analysis, this paper contends that Aspern's Americanization is not merely a change of national identity, but a process through which James reconsiders the relationship between literary inheritance, cultural exchange, and American literary development. Aspern represents James's attempt to imagine an American poet who emerges from dialogue with European traditions while developing a distinct literary identity of his own.

2. "An American Byron": Creative Generation and Americanization

The fictional character Jeffrey Aspern never physically appears in *The Aspern Papers*, yet every narrative thread orbits around the memories and cultural legacy

about him. An anonymous narrator journeys to Venice, camouflage himself as a tenant to gain access to Juliana Bordereau, and investigates Aspern's personal history, particularly his relationship with Juliana Bordereau, while seeking access to his private letters and manuscripts. Despite Aspern's centrality, the text provides sparse direct descriptions of his life and literary achievements. Readers encounter him not through direct characterization but through a gradual process of reconstruction, assembled from the narrator's accounts, Juliana and Tina's fragmented memories, and material relics including portraits and handwritten correspondence. The absence of a direct portrayal of Aspern therefore shifts attention from historical recovery to literary creation where he emerges as a fictional figure shaped through narrative mediation and imaginative transformation.

James's preface indicates that the genesis of *The Aspern Papers* originated from a story he encountered in Italy concerning Byron's former lover. Although this anecdote provides the initial stimulus for the novella, James does not simply reproduce a historical episode or fictionalize a recognizable Romantic figure. Instead, he transforms the materials of literary legend into a new fictional creation whose significance depends on James's own narrative design. Aspern, therefore, should not be approached merely as a disguised historical figure, but as a product of James's imaginative reconstruction of Romantic materials.

This core creative intent emerges clearly in James's retrospective revisions of *The Aspern Papers* between 1907 and 1909. During this period, James revised his complete backlist of novels for Scribner's twenty-four-volume collection *The Novels and Tales of Henry James*, widely known as the New York Edition. For the New York Edition, James composed new prefaces for eighteen works, envisioning these essays as a way to trace the genesis of his novels, explain their thematic origins and developmental processes, and situate them within his broader artistic vision. These prefaces therefore functioned not merely as retrospective commentaries on individual texts but as a comprehensive reflection on James's creative principles. As Thomas M. Leitch observes, "the eighteen prefaces are clearly planned as a unified series, the closest James would ever come to a systematic theory of fiction" (Leitch, 1993: p. 56).

The revised text of *The Aspern Papers* and its accompanying preface were produced within this editorial context in 1908. In the preface, James not only recounts the novella's biographical inspiration but also addresses contemporary critiques disputing the plausibility of Aspern's characterization. He clarifies that the Florentine rumour itself held minimal appeal; what captivated him was the narrative's latent artistic potential. James stresses that factual anecdotes derive value not from their historical veracity, but from their capacity to spark literary imagination. In "Preface to *The Aspern's Paper*", He prefers the myths with "a palpable imaginable visitable past" (James, 1934: p. 164), elaborating that real-life incidents serve merely as a jumping-off point for artistic labour, comparable to "the mere scant handful of bare facts" for artists (James, 1934: p. 163), and that a work's ultimate merit hinges on how the writer transforms raw source material.

For James, the anecdote about Byron's former lover and visiting American travellers was never intended to form the novella's core plot; it functioned only as a catalyst for imaginative construction. What seized his artistic interest was the enduring cultural power of a deceased canonical poet: how his relics, lingering memories, and personal connections continued to shape later generations, and how this persistent posthumous legacy could be converted into compelling narrative tension. As he writes: "my imagination preserved power to react under the mere essential charm—that, I mean, of a final scene of the rich dim Shelley drama played out in the very theatre of our own 'modernity.' ...the connexion that had drawn itself out, and convert so the stretched relation into a value of nearness on our own part." (James, 1934: p. 163)

It was upon this theoretical foundation that James systematically reworked the original European anecdote. For James, artistic creation is required to achieve narrative coherence and internal logic. Thus he continues to come up with "a question, in fine, of covering one's tracks" (James, 1934: p. 166), in terms of the transformation from real events. During this revision process, Jane Clairmont, Byron and Shelley's historical associate, was reimagined as Juliana. This shift in the female character demanded a corresponding reworking of the legendary poet tied to her history. James thus created "an American Miss Clairmont" paired with the complementary figure of "an American Byron". (James, 1934: p. 166)

Aspern is not merely a name substituted for a European poet; his American identity arises organically from the novella's internal artistic logic. When interpersonal dynamics rooted in European Romanticism are transplanted into a new cultural framework, the text requires a poetic protagonist capable of fulfilling the same narrative functions while embodying American cultural identity. Only this re-imagination allows the original story's core relational network, centred on poetic renown, intimate romance, manuscript archives, and posthumous veneration, to be built within an American literary frame.

In short, the Americanization of *The Aspern Papers* is beyond a mere transfer of European myth, closer to a cultural re-imagination. James preserves the original anecdote's meditations on literary fame, collective memory, and personal legacy, while redefining every core character's national identity to reframe these themes within American literary discourse. Juliana, reimagined as "America's Miss Clairmont," and Aspern, framed as "America's Byron," form the dual anchor of this cross-cultural retelling (James, 1934: p. 166). Aspern's American persona fulfils vital structural narrative demands, while also advancing James's stated creative goal of reimagining Romantic literary legends through an American cultural lens.

Viewed from this angle, Aspern is foremost a product of James's literary imagination, rather than a direct copy of any historical personage. His Americanness is not an extraneous label tacked onto a European archetype; it is a defining trait forged gradually through James's cross-cultural reworking. As explored in the following section, Aspern's identity as an American poet does not sever ties with

European Romanticism. Instead, he emerges as a fully realized transatlantic cultural figure, shaped by both inheritance and deliberate artistic transformation. This dual heritage renders him a pivotal mediator bridging European literary tradition and American literary identity.

3. Aspern as Cultural Symbol: The Transatlantic American Poet in Europe

Beyond James's explicit references to Byron and Shelley in the preface, existing scholarship has noted loose biographical overlaps between Aspern and canonical American Romantic writers including Edgar Allan Poe and Nathaniel Hawthorne. Nevertheless, when read alongside James's creative theory and his preface's defence of imaginative freedom, Jeffrey Aspern cannot be reduced to a composite copy of any single real author. He must instead be interpreted as a synthetic literary archetype woven from disparate European and American cultural threads. As established in Section I, James refused to limit himself to the parameters of the original Florentine anecdote. Through rewriting character identities and reconstructing cultural contexts, he relocates a legend originating in European Romanticism to an American literary framework. Aspern therefore functions not as a replacement for any specific historical prototype, but as the embodiment of a transatlantic American poetic identity forged at the intersection of Old and New World literary traditions.

Since Aspern lacks a fully traceable biographical blueprint, his characterization carries inherent symbolic weight from the novella's opening pages. He is the ultimate absent protagonist: never physically present within the narrative space, but assembled piecemeal through the narrator's biased perspective, Juliana and Tina's fragmented reminiscences, and material artifacts including portraits and handwritten letters. James deliberately avoids compiling a complete chronological biography of Aspern, leaving deliberate gaps in his life story to fix him within a liminal realm of rumour, fragmented memory, and speculative imagination. As Kvartuč argues, Aspern himself constitutes a fluid living archive constructed from memory, relics, and hearsay; every competing interpretation of him represents a distinct narrative reconstruction, with no fixed, objective authentic Aspern existing outside textual mediation (Kvartuč, 2025).

Aspern's characterization is closely connected with the nineteenth-century European Romantic poet myth. As Hoeveler demonstrates, James draws upon the cultural legacies of Byron and Shelley to construct Aspern as an idealized figure of poetic genius and artistic creativity (Hoeveler, 2008). This engagement with Romantic traditions provides the foundation for James's transformation of the European poet archetype into the image of an American poet.

This romanticized idealism surfaces most vividly in the narrator's reverent framing of Aspern's legacy: "The world, as I say, had recognized Jeffrey Aspern, but Cumnor and I had recognized him most. The multitude, to-day, flocked to his temple, but of that temple he and I regarded ourselves as the ministers...we had

done more for his memory than any one else, and we had done it by opening lights into his life.” (James, 2014: p. 52). Here, Aspern transcends the status of mere poet to become a quasi-religious cultural icon. Yet James does not endorse this uncritical literary hero-worship unreservedly. The narrator’s obsessive fixation on Aspern’s private life satirizes a dominant late-nineteenth-century European aestheticist reading practice: a critical tendency to shift interpretive focus away from artistic texts themselves, instead mining authors’ personal biographies as the sole source of literary meaning. Mao Liang argues that this satirical narrative device critiques core aestheticist logic, which reduces literary works to mere gateways into authors’ private lives rather than self-contained autonomous artistic creations (Mao, 2007: p. 7).

Beneath the outward trappings of European Romantic legend, however, within the narrator’s representation, Aspern’s most significant cultural association is his American identity. James does not craft a simplistic “American Byron”; instead, he retains the structural conventions of Romantic poetic mythology while infusing the figure with foundational American individualist ethos. As the narrator says, “his own country after all had had most of his life, and his muse, as they said at that time, was essentially American.” (James, 2014: p. 81) Compared with European cultural tradition and atmosphere, American literature were still in the primitive stage, while Aspern’s literary renown stems solely from innate personal talent and independent creative labour. “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, understand and express everything.” (James, 2014: p. 82)

The narrator’s description of American literature as culturally underdeveloped reflects his own attempt to define Aspern as an independent American genius rather than providing an objective account of nineteenth-century literary history. In James’s broader reflections on American literary culture, he likewise recognizes the distinctive cultural conditions in which American writers developed. As Michael Peters observes in his discussion of James’s “Hawthorne”, James acknowledged the American cultural condition is monotonous for wrighting and creation but he also pointed out that the relative absence of established forms could sharpen their perceptions and stimulate their sense of creation (Peters, 2013). Though Aspern carries unmistakable Byronic romantic flair, his identity never relies on European aristocratic heritage. Instead, he embodies early American literary aspirations for unmediated individual artistic talent and cultural self-determination.

Meanwhile, Aspern’s transatlantic life story deepens the complexity of his dual cultural positioning. As an American poet who resided in Europe for decades, his literary reputation was forged simultaneously within American and European cultural spheres. When reflecting on Aspern’s European sojourn, the narrator articulates a nuanced dual cultural perspective: while acknowledging European influence on Aspern’s craft, he prioritizes the poet’s enduring spiritual allegiance to his

American homeland:

“It had happened to me to regret that he had known Europe at all; I should have liked to see what he would have written without that experience, by which he had incontestably been enriched... I tried to judge how the old world would have struck him. It was not only there, however, that I watched him; the relations he had entertained with the new had even a livelier interest.” (James, 2014: p. 81)

This passage distills the central cultural contradiction animating nineteenth-century American letters: American writers sought to elevate their national literary standards by absorbing European artistic traditions, while simultaneously striving to prove American literature’s capacity for autonomous, original development. Aspern’s life encapsulates this very tension: born in America yet aesthetically raised within European cultural spaces; absorbing Romantic literary conventions yet retaining an unbroken American core identity. He is neither a mere heir to European Romanticism nor a fully isolated native writer untouched by foreign influence. Instead, he occupies an interstitial transatlantic space defined by constant cultural flux and negotiation. In the dedicated analysis of *The Aspern Papers*, Nicole Waller further points out the cultural predicament of Aspern, Juliana, and other American expatriates in Europe. This geographic displacement mirrors the pervasive cultural anxiety of nineteenth-century American intellectuals, who strove to build a mature, distinctive national culture identity by drawing upon European cultural resources (Waller, 2011).

Therefore, Aspern’s transatlantic duality represents James’s deliberate artistic response to nineteenth-century American cultural conditions instead of serving as a decorative character solely. He synthesizes European Romantic archetypes and American individualist ideology; he belongs to American literary history yet resists confinement within narrow national cultural boundaries. Through this figure, James constructs a portrait of an American poet positioned at the crossroads of European and American civilization, reflecting the layered psychological tension of nineteenth-century American writers engaging with Old World traditions that they were eager to inherit European artistic riches yet desperate to transcend them, conscious of cultural divides yet committed to pursuing cross-cultural synthesis.

4. Literary Re-Imagination and Cosmopolitan Vision behind Aspern’s Characterization

After examining Aspern’s textual genesis and transatlantic cultural significance, this section raises a further question: why did James imagine an American poet whose identity was shaped through both European Romantic inheritance and American literary aspiration? Aspern functions as more than a necessary structural device within *The Aspern Papers*’ plot; rather, the fictional construction of Aspern through the narrator’s perspective crystallizes James’s sustained meditations on literary creation, national cultural identity, and the untapped potential of American literature. Read through this lens, the objections concerning Aspern’s

plausibility discussed in the preface gain heightened interpretive significance, as they concern not merely the credibility of a fictional character, but broader tensions between artistic authenticity, national literary identity, and the boundaries of literary imagination in the nineteenth century.

In the latter half of the preface to *The Aspern Papers*, James retrospectively considers possible objections concerning the plausibility of his fictional creation of Aspern. Such objections, as James presents them, concern whether a figure possessing Romantic refinement and literary celebrity could plausibly emerge from American cultural circumstances. Within this critical framework, Aspern's characterization lacked realistic grounding, as one critic voice goes: "Where, within them, gracious heaven, were we to look for so much as an approach to the social elements of habitat and climate of birds of that note and plumage?" (James, 1934: p. 168). James further recalls similar objections directed at his fictional treatment of exceptional figures elsewhere in his works, revealing his awareness of the tension between imaginative invention and demands for social plausibility: "my vicious practice...of postulating for the purpose of my fable celebrities who not only hadn't existed in the conditions...but who for the most part couldn't possibly have done so... an air definitely unfavourable to certain forms of eminence." (James, 1934: p. 166).

The issue James addresses reflects a broader nineteenth-century concern regarding the relationship between fictional invention and observable social reality. As R. W. B. Lewis observes, nineteenth-century American literature developed within a cultural context marked by the absence of established European traditions, as writers sought to define a distinct national literary identity (Lewis, 1955). Similarly, Matthiessen emphasizes that nineteenth-century American writers were engaged in establishing an independent literary tradition through a negotiation with European cultural inheritance (Matthiessen, 1941). Within this historical context, questions concerning literary authenticity were closely connected to debates over national experience and cultural legitimacy. From James's perspective, however, such expectations rest upon a conception of literary authenticity largely grounded in social verisimilitude, which privileges recognizable experience as the basis of fictional legitimacy. Within such a framework, literary credibility depends on the compatibility between fictional characters and the cultural possibilities afforded by observable social reality.

James's response to these objections challenges this narrow definition of artistic reality. Rather than attempting to prove that an Aspern-like figure had existed historically, he defends the legitimacy of literary imagination from the foundational perspective of artistic creation itself. For James, novels are not obligated to mechanically replicate observable reality; instead, imaginative writing excavates latent, unfulfilled possibilities latent within real life. Within James's fictional theory, Aspern is not presented as a substitute for a real historical individual, but as an artistic conception whose significance emerges from the narrative and thematic structure of the novella.

In “The Art of Fiction,” James challenges the idea that novel-writing should be confined by predetermined rules, arguing that “the good health of an art which undertakes so immediately to reproduce life must demand that it be perfectly free” (James, 1948: p. 8). As Dai Xianmei notes in her study of James’s literary theory, romantic narrative serves as a core formal device for both James to confront “absence”: to depict spiritually resonant possibilities absent from tangible social reality through the power of literary imagination (Dai, 2006). James’s theory of fiction thus touches the subtle relationship between imagination and reality: literary creation is not confined to reproducing existing social experience, but can give form to possibilities absent from empirical reality. Through this process, fiction does not escape reality; instead, it reveals dimensions of human experience that remain inaccessible through mere observation.

This principle of imaginative freedom is also embodied in the narrative structure of *The Aspern Papers*. Unlike a conventional biographical reconstruction, the novella never provides direct access to Aspern himself; instead, his identity emerges through the narrator’s pursuit of his manuscripts and his attempts to recover the poet’s literary legacy. The absent figure of Aspern becomes meaningful precisely because he exists through processes of remembrance, interpretation, and imaginative reconstruction. Moreover, the narrator’s transatlantic journey from America to Venice demonstrates that Aspern’s literary significance is not confined to a single national context. His papers, preserved within a European cultural environment, become the site where American literary identity encounters European artistic traditions. Through this narrative arrangement, James transforms Aspern from a historically verifiable individual into a figure whose meaning is produced through cross-cultural circulation.

In this sense, the fictional construction of Aspern reflects James’s concrete artistic vision of the romance. Even if no direct historical counterpart to a Byron-like poet could be identified within nineteenth-century American society, this absence does not prevent American literature from imagining such a figure. On the contrary, James’s invention of Aspern directly confronts a pervasive anxiety within American literary tradition: whether American letters were confined to documenting only existing lived experience, forced to accept permanent limits imposed by its comparatively young cultural history. Through the fictional creation of Aspern, James responds to the question of whether a figure shaped by European Romantic traditions could belong within an American literary context. Rather than proving the historical existence of an American Byron, James uses imaginative creation to expand the possibilities through which American literary identity can be conceived.

The controversy surrounding Aspern also resonates with a broader tension in James’s own literary career about the relationship between American identity and transnational artistic experience. Having resided abroad for decades and written extensively about encounters between Europe and America, James was often viewed by some American critics as a writer whose transnational experience com-

plicated his relationship with conventional definitions of American literary identity. Some American critics, as Mao Liang documents, questioned James's relationship with American cultural identity, portraying his long residence in Europe as a potential source of distance from domestic experience (Mao, 2015).

Similar concerns appear in Van Wyck Brooks's criticism of James's aesthetic orientation, which viewed his engagement with European artistic traditions as a departure from authentic American experience (Brooks, 1940). Although the objections directed at Aspern differ from these broader debates over James's literary identity, they share a related concern about whether literary authenticity depends upon close correspondence with established national experience. James's response to such concerns in the preface, however, suggests that American literary identity need not be defined through isolation from foreign traditions. As Wang Qing argues in his study "Henry James and Cosmopolitanism", James's cosmopolitan vision treats reciprocal cultural exchange as a source of artistic possibility rather than the replacement of American identity by European models (Wang, 2010).

This perspective provides a useful framework for understanding Aspern's characterization, in which American literary identity is imagined not through cultural separation but through engagement with transatlantic traditions. The fictional construction of Aspern within the novella reflects this cosmopolitan vision as well. Through the narrator's idealized reconstruction of the poet's legacy, Aspern emerges as a figure whose literary identity is shaped by both American origins and European cultural experience. Rather than belonging exclusively to a single national tradition, Aspern's significance arises from the interaction between different cultural contexts.

Returning to the critical concerns articulated in the preface, James's defense of Aspern ultimately concerns not whether such a poet could be historically verified, but how literary imagination can produce figures whose cultural identities exceed existing models. Through the creation of Aspern, James shifts the discussion from historical plausibility to the imaginative construction of American literary identity within a transatlantic context.

Viewed comprehensively, the figure of Aspern is not merely an American poet imagined through European Romantic traits; rather, his construction within the novella reveals James's negotiation between literary inheritance and national identity. Through the narrator's idealized reconstruction of Aspern's legacy, the poet emerges as a figure whose significance is produced through the interaction between American origins and European cultural traditions. Aspern's ultimate significance, therefore, does not lie in proving the historical possibility of an American Byron, but in demonstrating how American literary identity itself can be imaginatively constructed through transatlantic exchange.

5. Conclusion

Taking James's generating process of "an American Byron" in the preface to *The Aspern Papers* as its starting point, this paper reexamines the construction of Jef-

frey Aspern and argues that he is neither a direct imitation of a historical figure nor a simple reproduction of the European Romantic poet myth. Rather, Aspern is a carefully created literary figure shaped through James's selective transformation of biographical materials, literary traditions, and transatlantic cultural experiences.

At the level of artistic creation, James transforms a European Romantic anecdote into an American literary narrative by reshaping character relations, cultural context, and narrative structure. The idea of "an American Byron" does not indicate a mere transfer of European Romantic conventions to American literature. Instead, James preserves the legendary qualities of the Romantic poet while giving them a new American identity. Through Aspern, James explores how literary imagination can transform historical materials into new artistic possibilities.

As a character, Aspern combines European Romantic traditions with American cultural ideals. His fame, travels, and dramatic personal history recall the image of the Byronic poet, while his independence and artistic freedom reflect James's understanding of American literary development. Living between Europe and America, Aspern becomes a figure that connects different literary cultures rather than belonging exclusively to either one.

The controversy over Aspern's realism in the preface also reveals James's broader view of fiction. Against the demand that literature should strictly reproduce existing reality, James emphasizes the creative power of imagination. Aspern does not represent a forgotten American poet who must be recovered from history; he is a fictional creation through which James demonstrates that literature can imagine forms of cultural identity beyond existing models.

Therefore, Aspern embodies James's approach to character creation and his vision of American literature. By combining European Romantic inheritance with American artistic aspirations, Aspern shows that American literature develops not through isolation from European traditions, but through continuous engagement with wider cultural experiences. He ultimately stands as a distinctive literary figure created at the intersection of European and American traditions.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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