

'No absolute privacy': Henry James and the Ethics of Reading Authors' Letters

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Abstract: Authors' private letters play a significant role in Henry James's fiction, literary criticism and in his literary and authorial legacy. They are privileged discursive objects activating fundamental issues of privacy and publicity, canonicity and the material condition of literature. The letter is a contested discursive object in James's work, since it is at one and the same time a potent figure for authenticity and interiority, and consequently poses a threat to the author's desire to control his own literary corpus and his privacy. In this article, James's personal and private investment in designing his literary testament (his private letters and his definitive collected edition) is discussed in the context of his ethical and aesthetic concerns with reading the publications of authors' private correspondences.

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Henry James's career and literary afterlife display a sustained and multifaceted engagement with the changing material, cultural and literary conditions of authorship around 1900. In his own time, James took measures to manage his authorship, his own author figure, and the public's access to his private life by, for instance, destroying his private papers and manuscripts; by asking correspondents to destroy his own letters following his own example; and by revising, selecting and designing his own literary testament in the shape of a definitive collected edition of his novels and tales (The New York Edition, 1907–1909). Following his death in 1916, as Michael Anesko has recently shown, a veritable battle between biographers, editors, critics and James's heirs and friends ensued over the right to access and even monopolize the use of James's private papers.¹ The public's interest in authors' private lives that, to disillusioned authors like James, seemed to be outgrowing the interest in their literary works, as well as the

¹ Michael Anesko, *Monopolizing the Master: Henry James and the Politics of Modern Literary Scholarship* (Stanford UP, 2012). In recent years, a number of studies of Henry James's strategies for securing his literary legacy through the New York Edition and of his negotiations with the literary marketplace and new forms of publicity have appeared. See, for instance, Michael Millgate, *Testamentary Acts: Browning, Tennyson, James, Hardy* (Clarendon Press, 1992); Philip Horne, *Henry James and Revision: The New York Edition* (Oxford UP, 1990); David McWhirter, ed. *Henry James's*

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growing pressure on authors to compete for attention in an increasingly crowded literary marketplace, not only informed James's own approaches to the business of literature and career management but also to his fiction, particularly his short fiction, and his literary criticism, particularly his many reviews of published authors' letters. Henry James's authorship is rife with examples of how a canonized body of work is constructed, and it contains, in the literary and critical texts themselves, complex negotiations of both the aesthetics and ethics of the appearance and disappearance of the author figure in Modern literature.

While skeptical about the increasing commodification of literature and the professionalization of authorship towards the end of the nineteenth century, James continuously sought new ways to reach a more diversified readership through a variety of publishing formats. In his fiction and criticism, he represented and engaged critically with a reading public's desire 'to get at the author' and became, particularly through novels such as *The Wings of the Dove* (1902), *The Ambassadors* (1903) and *The Golden Bowl* (1904), a central figure in the realist aesthetic of authorial self-effacement.²

James's preoccupation with author figures and the changing conditions under which literature is produced, disseminated and received becomes apparent not only through his critical essays (e.g. 'The Art of the Fiction', 1884, and 'The Future of the Novel', 1900) but also in his many tales of 'literary life' from the mid-1880s and the 1890s, in which living or dead authors are subjected to biographic, material and erotic desires (e.g. 'The Author of Beltraffio', 1884, 'The Aspern Papers', 1888, 'The Lesson of the Master', 1892, 'The Middle Years', 1893, 'The Death of the Lion', 1894, and 'The Figure in the Carpet', 1896). Only on rare occasions did James engage directly with the new popular genre of the interview himself—a journalistic genre that perhaps more than anything signified and displayed the late nineteenth-century public's desire for the 'private' author. On the first occasion in 1904 James did not miss the chance to express his discomfort with being interviewed, as Florence Brooks reported from her interview with James in the *New York Herald*: "One's craft, one's art, is his expression, [...] not one's person, as that of some great actress or singer is hers. After you have heard a Patti singing why should you care to hear the small private voice of the woman? [...] Why should

New York Edition: The Construction of Authorship (Stanford UP, 1995); Andrew Nash, ed. *The Culture of Collected Editions* (Palgrave, 2003); Michael Anesko, *"Friction with the Market": Henry James and the Profession of Authorship* (Oxford UP, 1986) and Richard Salmon, *Henry James and the Culture of Publicity* (Cambridge UP, 1997).

² For a survey of James's publications in various periodicals around the turn of the century, see Jakob Stougaard-Nielsen, 'Print Culture' in David McWhirter, ed., *Henry James in Context* (Cambridge UP, 2010), pp. 258-269. For the changing traditions of the reading public's interest in the Author, see Barbara Hochman, *Getting at the Author: Reimagining Books and Reading in the Age of American Realism* (U of Massachusetts P, 2001). See Anesko's *Friction with the Market* for a seminal discussion of James's engagement with the publishing business. For a discussion of James's views on the professionalisation of authorship, see Richard Salmon, 'Authorship' in *Henry James in Context*, pp. 105-114.

the public want him [James] to splash himself, reveal his person on paper?’”³ However, as the following discussion will show, James’s ethical and aesthetic understanding of ‘the right to privacy’ and authorial self-effacement, as figured in his reviews of published letters, is of a more complicated nature: in such posthumous publications the relationship between the public and the private, revelation and concealment, the author’s corpus and his corpse present a contingency found throughout James’s literary and critical work.

1. A Gigantic Bonfire

Suspicious of what future biographers, editors and readers would make of his private papers and the many letters he received, James took a pre-emptive strategy in 1909, the year in which the final volumes of the New York Edition would appear. In his garden at Lamb House he had made a ‘gigantic bonfire’ of incoming correspondence and other papers in compliance with ‘the law that I have made tolerably absolute these last years [...] of not leaving personal and private documents at the mercy of any accidents, or even of my executors!’⁴ At the time of his death, James had not only destroyed his received private correspondence, but also, according to Michael Millgate, ‘the vast bulk not only of his personal papers but also of such working papers as manuscripts, typescripts, proofs, and corrected copies of his books’, and only the many letters (more than 10,400) he sent to his friends, acquaintances and family, a few manuscripts no longer in his possession and his ‘explorer’s note-books’, mentioned in the preface to the revised edition of *Roderick Hudson*, did not perish in James’s garden fire – ‘such recording scrolls and engraved commemorative tables’.⁵

At first, James’s strategy of burning his private papers, and the wish that his correspondents would follow suit, seems at odds with his desire to regain a foothold on the literary market with the publication of his New York Edition. With this edition, James professed to offer the reader his ‘intimate’ recollections and two photographic frontispieces portraying his bust in profile and even his private home, Lamb House in

³ Florence Brooks, ‘Henry James in the Serene Sixties.’ *New York Herald*, 2 Oct. 1904. Reprinted in Pierre A. Walker, ed. *Henry James on Culture: Collected Essays on Politics and the American Social Scene*. University of Nebraska Press, 1999. p. 37. For a discussion of James’s interviews, see Olga Antsyferova, ‘Three Interviews of Henry James: Mastering the Language of Publicity’. *Henry James Review* 22 (2001): 81-92.

⁴ Letter to Annie Fields, 2. Jan. 1910. Leon Edel, ed. *Henry James Letters*, IV. Harvard UP, 1984. p. 541. It has also been suggested that James’s depression at the time played a role in his decision to commit his private papers to the flames; see for instance Jennifer Eimers, ‘A Brief Biography of Henry James, in Greg Zacharias, ed., *A Companion to Henry James*. Blackwell, 2008. p. 289

⁵ Millgate, p. 100. Greg W. Zacharias, co-editor of the *The Complete Letters of Henry James*, has estimated the total number of James’s extant letters at more than 10,400; see Greg W. Zacharias, ‘Timeliness and Henry James’s Letters’, in *A Companion to Henry James*, p. 261.

Rye.⁶ To the late-Victorian reader an author's portrait, his home and particularly his private correspondence were popular commodities. Letters offered exclusive access to the author, and the post-mortem publication of letters both suggested and furthered an author's canonization. According to Michael Anesko's study of James's 'friction with the market', a phrase Anesko borrows from one of James's letters to the sculptor Hendrik Andersen, James wished to satisfy the public's 'craving for novelty', and was 'eager to embellish his Edition with prefaces and frontispieces and to rework his earlier fictions. To captivate a publisher and the public, James was prepared to frame his artistic goals in distinctly marketable form.' He yearned for 'both artistic and economic rewards'. One way of ensuring these rewards was to satisfy the public's 'craving for novelty' by admitting privileged access to the author through his visual appearance (Alvin Langdon Coburn's photo-gravure portrait of Henry James as frontispiece to Volume I) and through prefaces of an 'intimate, personal character.'⁷

Instead of offering his 'authorial self' to a future reading public, thereby ensuring an interest in his work and career after his death, burning his private papers as an ethical gesture aimed at his correspondents was as a necessary step in order to limit the public's access to his literary remains.⁸ In James's authorial acts of burning letters and constructing the New York Edition, we find a tension between the desire to allow readers access to the author's private self, for the rewards of the marketplace and canonization, and the efforts to limit access by destroying the documents that most forcefully signified the desired intimate relation with the author, for aesthetic and ethical reasons.

James's practice of thoroughly revising his own author-image and not least his novels and tales for the New York Edition may, however, also be considered a complement to 'letter burning' if the author portrayed in the tale 'The Middle Years' is an adequate delegate for James's author-figure, as many critics have indeed imagined:

Dencombe was a passionate corrector, a fingerer of style; the last thing he ever arrived at was a form final for himself. His ideal would have been to publish secretly, and then, on the published text, treat himself to the terrified

⁶ For a discussion of the New York Edition frontispiece author portrait, see Jakob Stougaard-Nielsen, 'Frontispieces and Other Ruins: Portraits of the Author in Henry James's New York Edition'. *The Henry James Review* 28 (2007): 140-158.

⁷ Anesko, *Friction with the Market*, p. 144.

⁸ In his novel *Author, Author* (Viking Penguin, 2004), David Lodge has dramatised a fictional conversation in which James expresses his desire for his own letters to be destroyed: 'You know I value our correspondence. But—may I make a suggestion? [...] That in the future we burn each other's letters after reading them.' Fenimore asks whether he thinks they will prove to be compromising. 'Don't be absurd, Fenimore, of course not. They are not in the least compromising. But they are [...] private. I hate the idea of people reading them after we are dead [...] And not only reading them, but publishing them, and making money out of them. It's the way things are going in this dreadful Americanised age of ours. There is no privacy, no decency anymore' (pp. 86-7).

revise, sacrificing always a first edition and beginning for posterity and even for the collectors, poor dears, with a second.⁹

Frustrating collectors of ‘posterity’ is an ideal equally reached through burning private letters and, as it is here suggested, sacrificing first editions of ‘published texts’ to revisions and republications. Where the revised ink of the published ‘letters’ precludes ‘a form final for himself’, a text that never arrives at a final form, burning the private correspondence allows the author to withhold the ‘form’ of himself from public scrutiny. These disciplinary acts, burning and revising letters, guard both the biographical author represented by private letters and the published paratexts from exploiters and collectors, and both seem, ironically, to resist James’s effort as a true collector of his own works. The inclusion of revised texts, if we follow the logic above, is at odds with the collected edition as a final authorial form for his own self and his work. In other words, one of the complexities or even ironies of the collected edition is that an aesthetics and literary practice of revision will never achieve authorial finality or completeness. Consequently, the author figure we gain access to is incapable of speaking with one voice and unwilling to pronounce any ‘private histories’ that may offer the reader clues to the relationship between the private and the ‘published’ Henry James.

James’s protection of privacy faced with the public’s desire to ‘know’ the person behind the author’s name was not only extended to the protection of his own privacy. The very nature of the letter is, of course, that when mailed it no longer belongs to the writer but to the recipient. The private correspondence in James’s possession possibly included duplicates of his own letters but, more important the letters of others. Therefore, his decision to burn the private letters in his possession was an ethical decision to protect the privacy of others. In 1909, for instance, James sent a letter to an editor who was chasing after his correspondence with the writer Sarah Orne Jewett, who had died earlier that year. In this letter James exhibits what Joseph Elkanah Rosenberg has called his ‘merciless approach to bookkeeping’:

I find our admirable friend’s occasional communications have submitted to the law that I have myself made tolerably absolute these last years [...] the law of not leaving personal and private documents at the mercy of any accidents, or even of my executors! I kept almost all letters for years—till my receptacle would no longer hold them; then I made a gigantic bonfire and have been easier in minds [*sic*] since—save as to a certain residuum which *had* to survive.¹⁰

⁹ Henry James, “The Middle Years,” in *The Figure in the Carpet and Other Stories* (London: Penguin, 1986), p. 246.

¹⁰ Edel, *Letters of Henry James*, p. 541; cited in Joseph Elkanah Rosenberg, “Tangible Objects: Grasping “The Aspern Papers.”” *Henry James Review* 27 (2006), p. 257.

It is evident that James distrusted any party besides himself to be given the power to determine the fate of his literary remains: authority bestowed on another would lead to his own 'execution'. What possible 'accidents' James had in mind, we can only conjecture, or turn to his tales from literary life for worst-case-scenarios, tales such as 'The Aspern Papers' or 'Sir Dominick Ferrand' (1892).¹¹

In the latter tale, a bundle of letters belonging to a recently deceased public figure is discovered in a secret compartment in a writing table. The finder of the letters, though offered a large sum by a publisher, declines to publish them and finally they are committed to the flames. In 'The Aspern Papers' the private papers of the dead author are kept hidden by his 'heirs' and are never revealed to the biographer. In both tales the content of the letters is never revealed explicitly to the reader. In the case of 'Sir Dominick Ferrand' the incriminatory nature of the letters revealed to the hero and publisher brings about his ethical decision to destroy them. As such, this tale is more cautionary in nature than the complex narrative of 'The Aspern Papers'. This more well-known tale expresses a similar ethical defense of the author's right to privacy, but, as Richard Salmon has articulated it, 'the text itself reveals the difficulty of maintaining such a stance.'¹² The story suggests that the narrator's claim to hold a public position as disinterested biographical investigator in relation to the papers is undermined by the narrative's exposure of his deeply private desires for the author, his papers, and their keepers (the Bordereaus): "It isn't for myself,' he informs Miss Tina, 'It's simply that they would be of such immense interest to the public, such immeasurable importance as a contribution to Jeffrey Aspern's history.'"¹³ The tale reveals that questions of the public's right to knowledge and the protection of privacy are entangled and unstable positions. 'The Aspern Papers' suggests that James's conception of authorial 'privacy' is of a more complicated nature than his attempt to frustrate his own executors will let us believe. This conception might even prove his own 'mode of interpretation' a fallacy comparable to the narrator's, who, as Salmon has it, "reads Aspern's 'work' as if it were merely a transparent expression of his 'life', but also in his assumption that the 'life' is itself nothing more than an accumulation of textual traces."¹⁴

2. Post-mortem exploiters

In the letter cited above, James reveals himself as a self-consciously ruthless archivist who is concerned with the integrity of his 'receptacle' that 'would no longer

¹¹ 'The Aspern Papers' first appeared in the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1888 and was revised for inclusion in volume XII of the NYE, 1908. 'Sir Dominick Ferrand' was not included in the NYE. It was first published as 'Jersey Villas' in *Cosmopolitan Magazine* in 1892 and appeared in *The Real Thing and Other Tales* as 'Sir Dominick Ferrand' published in New York and London by Macmillan in March 1893.

¹² Salmon, p. 97.

¹³ James, 'The Aspern Papers,' p. 55.

¹⁴ *Ibid.* p. 96.

hold' the documents. He is, of course, first and foremost concerned with the possibly incriminatory secrets hidden within the personal papers. James is his own executor. He decides which 'documents' should be thrown on the fire and saves 'a certain residuum which *had* to survive.' Among these latter 'survivors' we should count his notebooks. James used the notebooks in his documentary work for his prefaces. They also contained ideas and outlines for future novels and tales such as *The Ivory Tower* and *The Sense of the Past*. The notebooks have since been published and annotated by F. O. Matthiessen and Kenneth Murdoch (*The Notebooks of Henry James*, 1947) and expanded without critical commentary by Leon Edel and Lyall Powers (*The Complete Notebooks of Henry James*, 1987).

Though James attempted to limit access to his private papers, he was by no means naïve about the possibility for exploitation and about the unceasing public interest in an important author's private and unpublished life. Some papers, he recognized, *had* to survive, some "'private' characters", as he noted in the preface to *Roderick Hudson*, were indeed to be considered as inherent to his literary works as a record of the author's expanding experience and the growth of his 'operative consciousness'. His private letters were, of course, no longer his own private property since they had been dispersed to his friends, family members, publishers, his agent, and others, and were owned by more than a thousand individuals to whom he wrote more than ten thousand letters—letters that are today, for the most part, contained in public libraries and collections.¹⁵

James was aware there would be public interest in his literary remains and knew it was impossible to prevent the publication of his private papers, as he noted in a letter to his 'literary heir & executor', Harry James, in 1914:

My sole wish is to frustrate as utterly as possible the post-mortem exploiter—which, I know, is but so imperfectly possible. Still, one can do something, & I have long thought of launching, by a provision in my will, a curse not less explicit than Shakespeare's own on any such as try to move my bones. Your question determines me definitely to advert to the matter in my will—that is to declare my utter & absolute abhorrence of any attempted

¹⁵ James's private life has been subjected to much public scrutiny in the century following his death, not least in the extensive biographical work of Leon Edel, *Henry James: A Biography*, published in five volumes between 1953 and 1972. This monumental biography was followed and revised by Fred Kaplan's *The Imagination of Genius: A Biography* (1992). About one tenth (approx. 1000) of James's 'private' letters have been made public in Edel's *The Letters of Henry James* (published in four volumes, 1974–1984); Michael Anesko's extensively commentated publication of James's correspondence with William Dean Howells (*Letters, Fictions, Lives: Henry James and William Dean Howells*, 1997) and Philip Horne's *Henry James: A Life in Letters* (1999) add to the growing corpus and elucidate many of their bibliographic and biographic implications; Susan E. Gunter and Steven H. Jobe's *Dearly Beloved Friends: Henry James's Letters to Younger Men* (2001) offers one hundred and sixty-six of James's letters to Andersen, Dudley Persse, Howard Sturgis and Hugh Walpole, many previously unpublished; most recently we see the publication of *The Complete Letters of Henry James*, edited by Pierre A. Walker and Greg W. Zacharias, of which six volumes have appeared to date with letters written between 1855 and 1878.

biography or the giving to the world by ‘the family,’ or by any person for whom my disapproval has any sanctity, of any part or parts of my private correspondence. One can discredit & dishonour such enterprises even if one can’t prevent them, & as you are my sole & exclusive literary heir & executor you will doubtless be able to serve in some degree as a check & frustrator.¹⁶

On the one hand, James wanted to ‘frustrate as utterly as possible the post-mortem exploiter’, and on the other he designed a literary corpus in which, among other things, he presents the ‘private history’ of his work and his own visible face. Both acts, the destruction of papers and the collection of public and private texts, are authorial acts that by different means attempt to discipline the literary corpus that the author wishes to have associated with his name and his literary afterlife. They are both, to use Michael Millgate’s pointed term, testamentary acts, ‘ways in which writers famous in their own time have sought in old age to exert some degree of posthumous control over their personal and literary reputation—over the extent and nature of future biographical investigation and exposure, and over the interpretation and textual integrity of their published works.’¹⁷ These acts show a ‘sustained autobiographical engagement’ in the final decades of James’s life and show his ambition to extend the authorial grasp on his literary remains, ‘my bones’, beyond death – to become his own ‘executor’. His archival *auto-da-fé* and the construction of his literary monument were ways in which James sought, in Henry Adams’s words, to “‘take [his] own life’ and enhance or, at the very least, protect the image of himself that would be handed down to posterity.”¹⁸

Even though James had to employ different strategies in an effort to discipline his literary and private afterlife in the hands of future ‘executors’ and ‘post-mortem exploiters’, variously by withholding and releasing his private text to the public, they both indicate that James considered an author’s ‘memorial’ as a material product bound by both private and public discourses. James rehearsed this conflation of the private and the public in his tales about authors and their posthumous reputations. In this way, James’s late desire to exert authority over his literary legacy, as Millgate’s discussion of his testamentary acts convincingly argues, must be seen in relation to James’s extended (at least since the 1880s) and by no means resolved engagement with the haunted relationship between the author, the literary work and their remains.

3. ‘Cover your tracks’

In his study of *Death in Henry James* (2005), Andrew Cutting has noticed that the final scene in ‘The Aspern Papers’, where Juliana Bordereau catches the biographer at her desk, is suggestive of a grave-robbing scene: ‘his desire for the papers has a

¹⁶ Leon Edel, ed. *Henry James Letters*, IV. p. 806.

¹⁷ Millgate, p. 2.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 101

necrophilic quality.¹⁹ Memories of the dead and especially dead authors are in James's tales often associated with textual or visual objects. Such objects, according to Cutting, 'stand in place of bodies of flesh and blood that have departed the world' and '[reflect] James's increasing self-consciousness about the potential value of his own writings for literary history.'²⁰ Represented physical texts and burned and destroyed papers, are abundant in James's work (e.g. 'The Aspern Papers', 'Sir Dominick Ferrand', 'The Death of the Lion', *The American*, *What Maisie Knew*, *The Wings of the Dove*, *The Golden Bowl*, and 'The Jolly Corner'). Private papers function as supplements for absent physical bodies: they give a textual corpus to unrevealed secrets. They are, so to speak, 'embodiments' of characters' psychology. The physical and private body is supplemented with or substituted by discursive bodies, and is often figured in representations of a textual corpus such as private letters burned or hidden, or in a *carte de visite* as in *The Ambassadors* and in 'The Aspern Papers'. To a higher degree than the physical body, the discursive corpus is the locus of struggle in James's fiction. According to Thomas Otten, in 'The Aspern Papers' 'a whole grammar and vocabulary operate to associate papers with the body and to define privacy in terms of that association [...] privacy is construed as a problem of the relation, the ontology, even, of bodies and their papers.'²¹ It is particularly in the material aspect of private letters as 'remains' that James's story conflates the discursive and the corporeal: 'the acts of touching (or reading) bodies and reading (or touching) papers come to substitute for each other, come to be confused with each other.'²² In the literary culture of the nineteenth century such confusion was not particular to James. His work and responses may be seen to critically reflect and participate in a common figuration of the book as a body. Samantha Matthews's study of the phenomenon of 'poetical remains' finds that in the nineteenth century 'the book functioned as a substitute for and transformed incarnation of the poet's body, and in some cases through biography tied the work to the decayed authorial body itself, sending readers back to the site of the mortal remains.'²³

Negotiations of authorial privacy, the desire to and prohibition against 'touch', as found in a number of James's novels and tales, may be considered imaginative rehearsals for 'the testamentary acts' to preserve his own 'literary remains' that he performed in 1907–09: acts attempting to simultaneously withhold, make public and revise the relationship between the private life of the author and his public literary corpus beyond death.

¹⁹ Andrew Cutting, *Death in Henry James* (Palgrave, 2005), p. 67.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ Thomas J. Otten, *A Superficial Reading of Henry James: Preoccupations with the Material World*. Ohio State UP, 2006. p. 89.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 94.

²³ Samantha Matthews, *Poetical Remains: Poets' Graves, Bodies, and Books in the Nineteenth Century*. Oxford UP, 2004. p. 3.

According to Cutting, the term ‘corpus’ signifies a unified textual body that a writer constructs and which may survive into posterity to be reanimated through the act of reading. In Salmon’s words:

James considered the publication of private texts to be a violation of the author himself. The literary text, and its physical containers, retain the capacity to exude the ‘personality’ of the artist, even after death. It is this organic relationship between author and text which is specified by the term ‘literary remains’: the textual corpus is conceived as a residual extension of the authorial body.²⁴

Such authorial ‘bodies’, often in the shape of private letters or manuscripts, form the loci of struggle in many of James’s tales from literary life. Rosenberg has recently shown in the case of ‘Sir Dominick Ferrand’ that when the hero, Peter Baron, burns the letters they are imagined as embodied substitutes for their writer: “the ‘vague, musty’ stink of the hidden papers is the smell of nothing less than an extinguished life—the ‘human accent’ of the letter has been smothered like a flame put out.”²⁵

What we find consistently in James’s literary and critical work is the irreducible complexity involved in an ethics of reading put forth to protect the privacy of authors’ papers. This ‘ethics’ explicitly states that the meaning of a literary text resides in the *published* text, but it also implies that such a concealment of the private is necessary, due to the public’s desire for private papers, as somehow offering the hermeneutical clues to the published texts. Of course James’s desire to conceal his own and others’ private letters may be regarded in the context not so much of the hermeneutic interests of literary biographers, but more precisely in relation to a late nineteenth-century taste for scandal, and especially scandals pertaining to homosexuality. The revelation of private documents against the will of their authors may discredit both the man and the work: two positions that are necessarily conflated in such cases. James’s advice to authors is consequently ‘to cover their tracks’ and one way of concealment is to burn their letters, though the ‘cover-up’ will erase neither the traces nor the reader’s desire ‘to know’.²⁶

4. ‘No absolute privacy’

As a literary critic James had throughout his career ample opportunity to consider the cultural and epistemological dynamics of public scrutiny into authors’ private papers. In reviews of publications such as *Correspondance Inédite de la Comtesse de*

²⁴ Salmon, p. 84.

²⁵ Rosenberg, p. 256.

²⁶ Henry James, ‘Letters to Robert Louis Stevenson,’ *Literary Criticism. Volume I: Essays on Literature, American Writers, English Writers* (Library of America, 1984), p. 1257. This review was printed in the *North American Review* in January 1900 and reprinted as ‘Robert Louis Stevenson’ in *Notes on Novelists* (1914).

Sabran et du Chevalier de Boufflers (1875), *Correspondance de H. de Balzac, 1819–1850* (1877), *Correspondance de Gustave Flaubert* (1893), and *The Letters of Robert Louis Stevenson to His Family and Friends* (1900), James continually returns to the question of the relevance of private letters to the evaluation of an author's works and to the ethical issues involved.²⁷ James finds himself discouraged when the letters do not live up to or mirror his own impressions of the authors. He is more forgiving when they offer literary insights, and relieved when they do not reveal any scandals. He feels continually compelled to discuss the ethical and aesthetic issues arising from such publications because the publication of private letters may intrude upon the privacy of authors. They are symptoms of a general misguided desire to 'get behind' the literary works to the 'private' person, and James is compelled because the publication of private letters offers the best cases in which to understand a contemporary preoccupation with the general question of the 'right to privacy'. James outlines the problem in his review of Stevenson's letters: 'Nothing comes up oftener today than the question of the rights of privacy; of our warrant, or want of warrant, for getting behind, by the aid of editors or other retailers, certain appearances of distinction.'²⁸ James initially approaches authors' letters with mixed feelings, as in his review of Balzac's:

The first feeling of the reader of the two volumes which have lately been published under the foregoing title is that he has almost done wrong to read them. He reproaches himself with having taken a shabby advantage of a person who is unable to defend himself. He feels as one who has broken open a cabinet or rummaged an old desk. The contents of Balzac's letters are so private, so personal, so exclusively his own affairs and those of no one else, that the generous critic constantly lays them down with a sort of dismay and asks himself in virtue of what peculiar privilege or what newly discovered principle it is that he is thus burying his nose in them. Of course he presently reflects that he has not broken open a cabinet nor violated a desk, but that these repositories have been very freely and confidently emptied into his lap [...] we are thankful for it; in spite of our bad conscience.²⁹

²⁷ James's review of *Correspondance Inédite de la Comtesse de Sabran et du Chevalier de Boufflers* (Paris: Plon, 1875) entitled 'Madame de Sabran' was published in *Galaxy* in October, 1875, and *Correspondance de H. de Balzac, 1819-1850* (Paris: Calmann Lévy, 1976) entitled 'The Letters of Honore de Balzac' was printed in the same magazine in February, 1877; they were both reprinted in *French Poets and Novelists* (Macmillan, 1878). His review of *Correspondance de Gustave Flaubert* (Paris: Quatrième Série, 1893) was published in *Macmillan's Magazine* in March 1893, and reprinted in *Essays in London and Elsewhere* (New York: Harpers, 1893). James's review of *The Letters of Robert Louis Stevenson to his Family and Friends* (Scribner's, 1899) was printed in *The North American Review* 170 (1900): 61–78.

²⁸ James, 'Letters to Robert Louis Stevenson,' p. 1257.

²⁹ Henry James, 'Correspondance de H. de Balzac, 1819–1850,' *Literary Criticism, vol. 2: French Writers, Other European Writers, the Prefaces to the New York Edition* (The Library of America, 1984), pp. 68–69.

The review was published in 1877 and predates James's portraits of fictional characters who do break open cabinets and rummage old desks. The 'generous critic' has not personally intruded upon the privacy of the author, but he is still haunted by a bad conscience. The 'repositories' that stored these private letters (initially the private desk and now the published volumes) 'have freely and confidently emptied [them] into his lap.' As such, the critic does not feel ethically responsible for the intrusion. Although '[i]t is always a question whether we have the right to investigate a man's life for the sake of anything but his official utterances—his results,' James 'hasten[s] to add that they tell no disagreeable secrets; they contain nothing for the lovers of scandal,' although the picture of the author may be found disagreeable and his literary work may not gain from such exposure.³⁰ This James partly mourns and finds 'the last remnant of charm, of the graceful and the agreeable,' with the publication of his letters, 'removed from Balzac's literary physiognomy.'³¹ While he welcomes the un-idealized portrait of the author revealed in the letters, revealing the '[h]uge literary ogre as he was,' the charm of his 'literary physiognomy' is still regrettably removed by the 'rudely exposed' 'urgency of his consuming money-hunger.'

Balzac's letters reveal no 'ideas' comparable to those defining the author of the *Comédie Humaine*. Instead the letters present the 'physiognomy' of a writer who was all work, always 'fastened to the writing-desk', and only preoccupied with "the muse of 'business'": 'business was what he most cared for.'³² The discrepancy between the artistic 'ideas' of his literary work and the material world ensures that the two 'physiognomies' will not blend and the aesthetic charm may finally be preserved. The dualism between 'ideas' and 'things' offers James the opportunity to consider, although only in passing, that the letters, the private life, may inform on the author's aesthetics in an interesting way:

his great characteristic, far from being a passion for ideas, was a passion for *things* [...] his books are full of ideas; but we must add that his letters make us feel that these ideas are themselves in a certain sense 'things.' They are pigments, properties, frippery; they are always concrete and available. Balzac cared for them only if they would fit into his inkstand.³³

The economy of literary composition and invention may not be too far removed from the business of authorship and the everyday pecuniary problems present in private life: the properties of an author, the things that he trades in, are the ephemeral ideas that he turns into materials for his fiction. Without following this thought to its end, to what would in fact be a sociological reading of Balzac's authorship, the economic dealings and

³⁰ Ibid., p. 69.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid., p. 82.

³³ Ibid. p. 83.

transactions flowing from his inkstand into both his private letters and into ‘the great human spectacle’ of his fiction, James’s final apology for the intrusion on the author’s privacy rests in the inherent difference between his life and his work. The secrets and charm of his masterpieces are still (despite the letters) hidden in the author’s ‘closet’: ‘The fact that his omnivorous observation of the great human spectacle has no echo in his letters only makes us feel how concentrated and how intense was the labor that went on in his closet.’³⁴

Though initially reading the letters of Balzac with ‘a bad conscience’, James engages Charles Augustin Sainte-Beuve’s correspondence and his friend Robert Louis Stevenson’s letters with fewer scruples, because their life and work are not divorced. On the contrary, Sainte-Beuve’s letters reveal no difference between the man and the author. Radically stated by James, the letters reveal to the reader ‘a complete reflection of the man and writer—the materials for a living portrait.’³⁵ Stevenson’s work and life are also found to be coherent. While engaging with the letters of Stevenson, James comes to the interesting conclusion that there is ‘no absolute privacy’ except in cases where the author has expressed a desire to withhold information from the public.³⁶ The access to the privacy of the author and his work goes by way of the ‘will’ of the author. The private papers may be perceived as accessories that, as James noted in the preface to *Roderick Hudson*, constitute their own aesthetic wholeness and fruitful continuity with the literary work. Stevenson’s life was as romantic and adventurous as his fiction and therefore the reader approaches his letters with ‘no sense of intrusion’. James even feels compelled to ‘penetrate further’. The author has expressed no ‘will’ to ‘cover his tracks’. Access has therefore been authorized by the author himself, an access to the author’s private life that may prove the letters as interesting as the literary works themselves: ‘Stevenson never covered his tracks, and the tracks prove, perhaps, to be what most attaches us.’ The ‘will’ is the authorizing power available to the author to cover or reveal his ‘tracks’, and those tracks may be what most ‘attaches’ the reader. The continuity between work and life in Stevenson is the proof of an author ‘Figure’, of one of the last geniuses who has ‘passed into legend’. Most often, James claims, ‘the work has often been great and yet the figure *nil*,’ but not in Stevenson’s case. Although the willed intrusion upon the author reveals coherence between his life and work, James still finds that the author is holding something back. The reader of Stevenson’s letters is given his ideas about the literary form, ‘the envelope’, as James ironically names that which is revealed inside the letter, but what his fiction was all about, the ‘figure in the carpet’, is kept and remains hidden in the author’s mind: ‘The form, the envelope, is there with him, headforemost, as the idea; titles, names, that is, chapters, sequences, order, while

³⁴ Ibid. p. 89.

³⁵ Henry James, ‘*Correspondance de C. A. Sainte-Beuve, 1822-69*,’ *Literary Criticism*, vol. 2: *French Writers, Other European Writers, the Prefaces to the New York Edition* (The Library of America, 1984), p. 695. The review was first printed in the *North American Review* in 1880 and was revised and reprinted in *American Literary Criticism*, William Morton Payne, ed. (Longmans, 1904).

³⁶ James, “Letters to Robert Louis Stevenson,” p. 1257.

we are still asking ourselves how it was that he primarily put to his own mind what it was all to be about.' The letters, as his fiction, are mysterious, exotic, as if they have been mailed and received but still remain unopened in the critic's mind. In fact, while appearing to invite intrusion and further penetration, to offer an image of the author figure woven into his literary works, Stevenson's letters actually, counter-intuitively, cover his tracks, turn him into legend, a 'Figure'.

5. Tracking the Author

We find the same figure of 'tracks' at work in James's prefaces to the New York Edition. In the preface to *The Awkward Age* James uses the figure of 'covering tracks' to signify an important 'contribution to the history' of the novel, a certain 'anxiety of influence' in relation to the French writer Gyp (the pen name of Sibylle Aimée Marie Antoinette Gabrielle de Riquetti de Mirabeau, Comtesse de Martel de Janville, 1849–1932), especially in her treatment of dialogue and literary form: "my first care *had* to be the covering of my tracks—lest I truly should be caught in the act of arranging, of organizing dialogue to 'speak for itself.'"³⁷ Such a revelation would immensely hurt the fate of the novel with the 'Anglo-saxon reader', a reader, James noted,

as perverse and inconsequent in respect to the absorption of 'dialogue'—[one had] observed the 'public for fiction' consume it, in certain connections, on the scale and with the smack of lips that mark the consumption of bread-and-jam by a children's school-feast, consume it even at the theatre [...] and yet as flagrantly rejects it when served, so to speak, *au naturel*.³⁸

Contrary to the French, James claims, the mere typographic look of a dramatic text printed, revealing its colloquial form, was enough to turn English and American readers away: 'An English, an American Gyp would typographically offend.'³⁹ The influence of the dialogic and dramatic form in which James worked, an expression of his 'marriage' of 'substance and form', is logically not hidden any longer with the Edition's preface supposedly revealing his intention to the reader. Instead, this revealed 'secret' of style and form takes the place of the story's 'idea' and 'private history', which James is reluctant to reveal. This is how the preface begins:

I recall with perfect ease the idea in which 'The Awkward Age' had its origin, but re-perusal gives me pause in respect to naming it. This composition, as it stands, makes, to my vision—and will have made perhaps still more to that of

³⁷ Henry James, 'Preface to *The Awkward Age*,' *Literary Criticism, vol. 2: French Writers, Other European Writers, the Prefaces to the New York Edition* (The Library of America, 1984), p. 1128.

³⁸ *Ibid.* p. 1127.

³⁹ *Ibid.* p. 1128.

its readers—so considerable a mass beside the germ sunk in it and still possibly distinguishable, that I am half-moved to leave my small secret undivulged.⁴⁰

James will not reveal the secret of the tale's origin. Instead he offers a discourse on the marriage of substance and form where even typography is included, and proceeds to discuss the reading public and the publishers' inconsequent dismissal of dialogue. Where some tracks are hidden and covered by the author, other tracks are made available to readers. The private history of the text's unfolding is hidden to reveal other 'private' histories. Tracks are made more visible if stepped into again while they disappear if not retraced, as such they are an adequate image for anamnesis or for James's revisionary project to 'retouch' his original texts and his author figure.

In the preface to *The Portrait of a Lady* certain memories also seem to escape the author. He is unable to track his own footsteps: 'I am quite unable to track the footsteps of those that constitute, as the case stands, the general situation exhibited. They are there, for what they are worth, and as numerous as might be; but my memory, I confess, is a blank as to how and whence they came.'⁴¹ This rhetoric of following tracks is taken up again by James in the preface to *The Golden Bowl* where it signifies the revising author's sense of stepping into his own (original) footsteps, or texts.

The movement between withholding information and revealing personal 'ideas' is inscribed into the epistolary discourse, which James, according to his agent, was planning to invoke in the Edition's prefaces: each volume should include 'a freely colloquial and even perhaps [...] confidential preface or introduction.'⁴² As such 'confidential letters' to the readers (the final result, though, is not what one would regard as epistolary or even confidential in any conventional sense), the prefaces would certainly add greatly to the interest of the series of volumes. They would cater to the readers' curiosity: their 'will to know' and to see the author behind the text.

6. Padding or substance?

It is evident that to James reading the published private letters of authors is an activity marked by anxiety, by a sense of intrusion. But while always possessed by this consciousness, James's literary criticism suggests that judgments pertaining to such publications' right and value should be made on a case-by-case basis: there is 'no absolute privacy'. As long as no scandals are revealed aesthetic judgment takes over from the ethical. The publication of letters begs the inevitable question: to what degree the life of the producer informs on the produced. Examples have been given here from

⁴⁰ Ibid. p. 1120.

⁴¹ James, Preface to *The Portrait of a Lady*, p. 12.

⁴² James B. Pinker in letter to E. L. Burlingame, August 3, 1904; cited in Anesko, *Friction with the Market*, p. 144.

James's reviews of different cases in which letters offer an image of the artist radically at odds, in James's reading, with the author-figure available in the published works (Balzac), and of authors whose private figures are so perfectly reflected in both their private and public texts that they cannot be separated (Sainte-Beuve and Stevenson). To a third category belongs Gustave Flaubert. Contrary to Balzac who was all business and never spoke about his art, Flaubert seems to speak only about his art. As in the case of Balzac there is a discrepancy between the private man and the public author. Flaubert's letters, published in 1893, are almost themselves, in James's review, a 'will' against public exposure: "'May I be skinned alive,' [Flaubert] writes in 1854, 'before I ever turn my private feelings to literary account.'"⁴³ And James quotes Flaubert's famous dictum of impersonality in narration: 'It's one of my principles that one must never write down *one's self*. The artist must be present in his work like God in creation, invisible and almighty, everywhere felt, but nowhere seen.'⁴⁴ The irony is, of course, that this will to impersonality, which matches James's own aesthetics, is 'revealed' in Flaubert's published private correspondence.⁴⁵ James's attitude to the publication of private letters is never categorical. The decision to keep papers private rests with the will of the author, but the author's will is a function of a particular kind of ethical reading that only after the fact determines the relevance of the private text for the public. Private correspondence made public is an accessory, a veil the reader must decide to lift to determine whether it offers or resists access to the literary work and the mind of the producer. An author's letters are crucial to the formation of the 'author's image'; they are ways in which the author, editors, publishers and readers construct the 'author' in life and after death.

Greg Zacharias has found that concealment is a central motive to reckon with in the editing of James's own letters, partly due to the fact that the James family has shown an active interest in such 'literary memorials' to their members by managing publication rights, demanding omissions and correcting typescripts.⁴⁶ Such management of access to private letters was also extended to Henry James when he made use of William James's letters for the autobiographical volume *Notes of a Son and Brother* (1914). He was criticized by his nephew, Henry, for having retouched and revised the original letters for the publication to suit his own taste and purposes. James's reply to Henry James, junior, interestingly corroborates the 'ethical reading' distilled in the reviews. The ethical responsibility towards the 'corpse' and corpus that constitutes the author-figure rests

⁴³ Henry James, 'Correspondance de Gustave Flaubert,' in *Literary Criticism, vol. 2: French Writers, Other European Writers, the Prefaces to the New York Edition* (The Library of America, 1984), p. 295.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ James's own aesthetics of impersonality in narration was similar to Flaubert's: 'As a narrator of fictitious events [the novelist] is nowhere' (James, 'Anthony Trollope', *Literary Criticism*, vol 2, p. 1143). James considered his narrators 'the impersonal author's concrete delegate or deputy [...] or apologist for the creative power otherwise so veiled and disembodied.' ('Preface to *The Golden Bowl*', in *Literary Criticism: French Writers*, p. 1322.

⁴⁶ Zacharias, p. 264.

upon an intimate, responsible reading, a ghostly communication and imagined agreement with the author beyond death:

And when I laid my hands upon the letters to use as so many touches & tones in the picture I frankly confess I seemed to see them in a better, or at all events in another light, here & there, than those rough & rather illiterate copies I had from you showed as their face value. I found myself again in such close relation with your Father, such a revival of relation as I hadn't known since his death, & which was a passion of tenderness for doing the best thing by him that the material allowed & which I seemed to feel him in the room & at my elbow asking me for as I worked and as he listened.⁴⁷

James's argument for re-touching William's original letters is conceived in the intimate (and ghostly) language of touch and proximity; the very 'death of the author' allows and even calls for an ethical responsibility to present the author's 'corpus' in tune with the reader or editor's intimate recollections and as a memorial erected with the future in mind. We find the same 'responsibility' enforced (to the detriment of other interested professional readers) when the James family selected Percy Lubbock as the first editor of James's letters (the ones they allowed him to see) and when Leon Edel was later offered a veritable 'monopoly' over the legacy of James's private papers.

Central to this necessary construction of the author-figure between the public and the private is not only the substance of private letters, their possible concealments and revelations, but also significantly the material form ('touches & tones') in which they are published, as revealed in James's late review from 1912 of George Meredith's letters:

What lacerates me perhaps most of all in the Meredith volumes is the meanness and poorness of the editing—the absence of any attempt to project the Image (of character, temper, quantity and quality of mind, general size and sort of personality) that such a subject cries aloud for; to the shame of our purblind criticism. For such a Vividness to go a-begging [...].⁴⁸

The physical format of the container of the private letters should match the personality of the author: 'the Image (of character, temper, quantity and quality of mind, general size and sort of personality)'. And as such the publication of private letters is similar to the design of collected editions, wherein, to a large extent, it is the material condition, the physical presentation of the literary work and its author that gestures towards its position in the cultural field and the marketplace. They are both paper memorials to the non-presence of the author.

⁴⁷ Letter to Henry James, junior, 15-18 Nov. 1913. Cited from Millgate, p. 95.

⁴⁸ Cited in Alan G. Hill, 'Review of *Letters of George Meredith*.' *Review of English Studies* 22 (1971), p. 512.

Letters and their promise of an intimate relation to a non-present writer, their status as material literary remains, function as discursive and material substitutes for the author's missing physical body. This is the case with the fictional letters in James's works; with his own letters from later years wherein he can be seen to exhibit a 'cumulative rhetoric of intimacy', seeming always 'to be clasping his friends (all of them male) closer and closer'; and in his reviews of the correspondences of famous authors.⁴⁹ In a review of Madame de Sabran's 'love-letters' (1875), James reveals the power of published letters to give a physical shape and a material memorial to a past textual culture and an almost forgotten writer. James does not engage the question of privacy in this connection: the letters of Madame de Sabran belong to an era of scribbling where private correspondence *was* the public text, it was a culture in which the private letter as a genre reigned supreme. Eighteenth-century French literature is to James marked not by the quantity of published literature but by the quality of private 'scribbling':

More even than our own time the eighteenth century was an age of scribbling. This indeed is untrue if taken in the sense that the amount of published writing, in proportion to the size of society, was larger than in our own day; but it is true if we speak with an eye to the quality of production. In proportion to the size of society, we suspect that there were more things written in private between 1720 and 1790 which might go to press without professional revision (save in the matter of orthography) than between 1800 and 1875. There was in other words, so far as form was concerned, less merely wasted and squandered literary effort than we witness nowadays. The distinction between padding and substance had not then been invented [...] all the writing (so far as it went) was substance rather than padding.⁵⁰

This abundance of privately written texts has made the nineteenth century in France 'the golden age of editors', who, in James's rhetoric of mining, have brought the unpublished letters 'to light in particles of all dimensions—in massive boulders.' The mass of scribbling, James explains, was possible because eighteenth-century writers 'had vastly more time on their hands.' They were not occupied with the business of literature or business of any other kind, and especially women writers had occupations 'less exacting': 'Ladies, therefore, wrote a great deal, and at a first glance at the field it seems as if every woman of good fashion had produced certain volumes of letters, of

⁴⁹ Michael Anesko reading William Dean Howells' reaction to James's letters in "'God Knows They Are Impossible': James's Letters and Their Editors." *Henry James Review* 18 (1997): 142. An example of such a letter 'intimately' and discursively standing in for the non-present correspondent is a typewritten letter to Hendrik Andersen from 1912: 'I feel now you know that I can't by that impersonal machinery [the typewriter], dearest Hendrik, touch you and draw you close, half as tenderly as I would on better and above all on newer ground (*Henry James Letters* IV, p. 642).

⁵⁰ Henry James, '*Correspondance inédite de la Comtesse de Sabran et du Chevalier de Boufflers*,' in *Literary Criticism: French Writers*, p. 646.

reminiscences, of memoirs, of maxims, or of madrigals.’⁵¹ It was before the professionalization of authorship which culminated in James’s own time, a development in James’s logic which brought about ‘wasted’ literary efforts and more ‘padding’ than ‘substance’. The editors who are excavating eighteenth-century private letters are described as miners searching for gold or as archaeologists unearthing statues, reminiscent of James’s archaeologist mining his own notebooks for ‘commemorative tables’ as sources for his ‘intimate’ prefaces:

The situation has a certain resemblance to those portions of modern Rome and Athens in which there are still chances of disinterring Greek statues. Excavation has been so systematically pursued that we may reasonably suppose there are now many more maimed divinities above ground than beneath it; and yet the explorer’s spade still rings against a masterpiece often enough to maintain us in hopeful attention. It was but the other day—compared to the duration of its muddy concealment—that the beautifully mailed Augustus of the Vatican was restored to the light, and it was but yesterday that MM. de Magnieu and Prat put forward, in a beautiful and substantial volume, the letters of Madame de Sabran.⁵²

Although the semantic overlap of the iron-clad sense of *mail* and the epistolary sense of ‘mail’ is coincidental, we might imagine James using the word for its resonance: the *mailed* statue and the mailed letters, so that disinterring a statue shares the same register as opening an envelope. James endows both figures (the fetishistic object of the disinterred statue and the revealed personal letter) with a sense of revelation. Through the half-veiled and half-unveiled material objects, the past and the figure of the scribbling ‘author’ appear. We find a similar double bind represented by the ‘excavated’ notebooks James’s explorer (his own revising author figure) uses to find his way, as he tracks the past only revealed in the present.

Private letters signify many things in James’s fiction, in his reviews, and in his personal life. They are privileged discursive objects activating fundamental issues of privacy and publicity, canonicity, and the material condition of writing. They offer access to the inaccessible past and the minds of authors. The letter is a contested discursive object in James’s thinking since it is at one and the same time a potent figure for authenticity and interiority, and consequently poses a threat to the author’s desire to control his own literary corpus and his privacy. As Mark Seltzer has pointed out, the ontology and materiality of the letter is what allows for a culture of interiority: ‘Once it becomes possible to write on sheets of paper that can be folded back on themselves [...] once it becomes possible for the handwritten and folded sheet of paper to be inserted in an envelope, sealed, and posted, the technical conditions of interiority and privacy are in

⁵¹ Ibid. p. 647.

⁵² Ibid. p. 648.

place.’⁵³ But these conditions are, of course, also what opens up for the transgression of privacy.

In 1909 James committed two significant acts of authorship rarely considered when we contemplate the discursive powers available to authors. He saw the completion of his collected edition to its end and he began destroying his personal and private papers. By selecting, collecting, and republishing the literary works he found worthy, and by destroying his private papers, James took an active decision to manage the afterlife of his authorship. These acts are figured in the paratexts of the Edition. Both frontispieces and prefaces are figured in a somewhat indefinable zone between a desire to reveal the interior mind of the author; to document his personal relationship with the literary works collected; and to turn away from the prying eyes of the reader, to observe the points in the process of republication where the private character insists on ‘dropping out’. In the paratexts and in his two testamentary acts, James shows, as Richard Salmon has noticed, ‘recognition of the complicity between revelation and concealment.’⁵⁴ Limiting the access to the author’s private papers simultaneously assures readers (and biographers) that what is hidden may finally be revealed. On the other hand, committing private papers to the fire in an act ‘to frustrate’ one’s ‘executors’ and ‘post-mortem biographers’ acknowledges the fact that the published literary work, the author’s literary ‘corpus’, will inevitably be associated with the living or dead ‘corpus’ of the author. James testamentary acts and his ethics of reading authors’ letters are, then, not merely invested in protecting the author’s afterlife and his privacy. They demarcate a zone between the private and the public, the past and the present, and the text and the paratext, in which James’s author figure (and James as a reader of authorship) is endlessly covering and retracing his own tracks.

⁵³ Mark Seltzer, ‘The Postal Unconscious,’ *Henry James Review* 21 (2000), p. 203.

⁵⁴ Salmon, p. 89.