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Reaching Out for Fictional Reality:  
Para-Derridean Forms of *Différance*  
in Henry James's "The Coxon Fund"

I

Though the ghostly non-word, non-concept of *différance* has long been established as a powerful Derridean trade mark, relatable meaning-making strategies of a similar desubstantiating kind can be discerned, I think, in Mikhail Bakhtin's dialogical system of thought, and seen at work, with all necessary concessions and qualifications, in a Jamesian tale of literary life such as "The Coxon Fund" (1894). The object of this paper is, therefore, to invite discussion by proposing the existence of a plausible analogy between what happens to absolute, transcendental meaning in the Bakhtinian and Derridean paradigms, on the one hand, and what occurs to the essence of deed and character in "The Coxon Fund," on the other. To that effect, I would like to begin by submitting the hypothesis that, viewed from a sufficiently large-scale perspective, both Bakhtinian dialogism and Derridean deconstruction count as two philosophical programmes ultimately engaged in the relativization of reference, and thus of extra-textual (fictional) reality, and further radiating methodological principles closely in tune with the compositional fabric of certain narrative texts which, *prima facie*, could hardly be described as dangerously disruptive or consciously seditious.

Excerpted from *Margins of Philosophy*, whose original French version appeared in 1972, the essay "Différance" is Derrida's most focused account of the movement of *différance* and a crucial mile-

stone in his attempt to expose and dismantle the so-called Western metaphysics of presence. Derrida's will to push the Saussurean differential-relational theory of the linguistic sign to its breaking point yields a number of notions that, notwithstanding his ostensible efforts, come inevitably couched in the language of the tradition he seeks to upset and displace. First, for instance, we have the two strands of meaning cunningly twisted in the term *différance* itself, an economical neographism that telescopes the systematic, spatial idea of *differing* and the temporal, historical one of *deferring*, both inseparably blended in the French verb *différer*.<sup>1</sup> The strategy of *différance* endows language with semiotic properties by turning it into a system of differences in both Saussurean domains of the signifier and the signified. Either phonic or conceptual, its elements do not acquire their respective values in isolation, i.e. by being solipsistically related to the pre-linguistic segmentation of substance, but rather as a function of their differences from other surrounding elements. The sign thus becomes a *structure of exclusion*, since it lacks a substantive nature of its own and picks up meaning not from what it *is*, but from what it *is not*, as determined by its position within the system. A logical offshoot of the rule of difference in the linguistic meaning-making process is the idea of *deferring*. If semiosis stems from mere dissimilarity between elements, from a web of relations, then actual reference is persistently deferred, postponed, temporized. The user of the linguistic sign can never lay his hands, as it were, on a solid core of extra-textual meaning, absolute presence, or unshakeable origin cast in the role of a permanent, extra-systematic frame of reference immunized

1 I would not like to disperse my efforts here pursuing too many conceptual parallels within the limited scope of this paper, but it is not otiose to point out that the conjunction of space and time – explicitly informed by Einstein's theory of relativity – is the very substance of the Bakhtinian notion of the *chronotope* as developed in his classic essay "Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel: Notes toward a Historical Poetics" (Bakhtin 1992).

against the movement of *différance*; he is rather expected to find his way in a jungle of signifiers as empty forms that prop one another without end. Derrida characterizes this movement as the ‘infinite deferral from signifier to signifier’ (1978: 25), and insists that ‘the circulation of signs defers the moment in which we can encounter the thing itself, make it ours, consume or expend it, touch it, see it, intuit its presence’ (1986: 402). This is quite akin to the experience of looking up a word in the verbal necropolis of a dictionary, and being given, in exchange for this gesture, an endless spate of words which, if subjected to the same search, will return nothing but more words in a circular trajectory whose end often merges with its inception. From such premisses there follows the corollary that *absolute* extra-textual reference is just impossible, for pre-linguistic meaning remains a commonsense delusion categorically worded by Derrida as ‘[*t*]here is nothing outside of the text [there is no outside-text; *il n’y a pas de hors-texte*]’ (1976: 158). However, despite seemingly unambiguous dicta of this type, Derrida has gone out of his way to oppose the received impression that his works can be read as a determinist statement ‘that deconstruction is a suspension of reference [...] that there is nothing beyond language, that we are imprisoned in language’ (1984: 123), and also that the text can ‘suspend reference – to history, to the world, to reality, to being, and, especially [...] to the other’ (1988: 137). The explanation of this apparent contradiction lies in the sui generis idea of a text subscribed to by Derrida, for whom “text” implies all structures called “real,” “economic,” “historical,” “socio-institutional,” in short: all possible referents [...] [which means that] every referent, all reality has the structure of a differential trace [. . .]’ (1988: 148). A text is thus envisaged as *any* system governed by *différance*, and it is limited ‘neither to the graphic, nor to the book, not even to discourse [. . .]’ (1988: 148). Such a huge extension of the conventional idea of a text goes a long way towards dismissing the incongruity noted above.

The conception of the sign as a structure of exclusion, whose meaning is generated by *différance* rather than by substantive deixis, automatically brings in the master duality of *presence* vs. *absence* and the attending notion of *trace*. Tactically restricting the vast field of application of these ideas, the point of departure might as well be Derrida's definition of the sign as 'deferred presence,' which highlights the capacity of language and other semiotic systems to deal with 'the present in its absence' (1986: 402). Absolute presence understood as extra-textual, extra-systematic meaning is a theoretical impossibility within the Derridean universe, and so it is problematic to posit an inconceivable, pre-linguistic 'thing' intransitively pointed to by the sign and making up a final layer of meaning which remains unaffected by the relativizing interplay of *différance*. Western philosophy – so goes Derrida's claim – has consistently privileged the idea of absolute presence to the detriment of that of absence, and has thus created and spread the mind-easing stereotype that somehow, somewhere an intransitive, stable, extra-systematic core of meaning is to be found regardless of the recursive *noli me tangere* decreed by *différance*. By virtue of the latter, however, language is precisely the homeland of absence. There is no external uninvolved centre, no immutable standard, no ultimate origin resisting further regression and thus constituting the basis on which to found a semiotics of substance. In the domain of *différance*, meaning paradoxically depends on absence rather than presence. Signs acquire their respective values from absence or, in other words, bear on themselves the traces of other non-concurrent signs that have preceded them or have not yet come to pass. In brief, this is just another way of arguing that linguistic elements taken in metaphysical isolation cannot convey meaning, since, in order to fulfil this purpose, the support of otherness is indispensable. Therefore, traces are excellent – if elusive – purveyors of sense, devices for imparting meaning from without and so breaking the essentialism of traditional semiosis.

Qualified illustration of how the duality of presence vs. absence comes into its own lies in Derrida's critique and deconstruction of the characteristic opposition between *speech* and *writing* effected in *Of Grammatology*. For him, Western metaphysics of presence and the kind of linguistic analysis congruous with it has systematically promoted speech as the prime manifestation of language and relegated writing to the ancillary, technical role of representing speech. Phonocentrism is a banner followed by linguists of all persuasions, from 19th-century neogrammarians to structuralists such as Saussure himself or Roman Jakobson, as well as by dozens of lesser linguists. This prevalent attitude is of a piece with the craving for presence that Derrida ascribes to the Western mind. Speech calls for the immediate presence of the speaker, whereas writing, as it thrives on (abhorred) absence and threatens the supremacy of speech, suffers repression and is confined to a more or less subsidiary position. *Of Grammatology* is an attempt to point out, and elaborate on, this fact, turn the tables by deconstructing the predominance of speech, and reverse the received hierarchy between both members of the opposition.

The highly selective primer of Derridean thought offered above is not at all capricious; on the contrary, it should be viewed as a preparatory move with a twofold purpose. First, to define the liminal space where the inspiring core of Bakhtinian dialogism can be seen to interact with the staples of deconstructive orthodoxy, and so be able to discuss it as a pre-deconstructive strategy. Second, above all, to establish a methodological basis on which to carry out the critical scrutiny of some key features of "The Coxon Fund." Curiously enough, as this scrutiny will hopefully reveal, some points of encounter between Bakhtinian dialogism and Derridean deconstruction tend to be mirrored in James's tale from the specific angle of fictional creation as if a parallel had been carefully devised and then developed in a deliberate – though obviously anachronic – attempt to allegorize theoretical positions.

To my mind, the lowest common denominator between dialogism and deconstruction, i.e. the general idea that makes both programmes compatible, is the vital contribution of alterity to the construction of the self and its consequent relativization. Derrida theorizes language as a structural whole ruled by *différance* and so defined by difference and recursive deferral and not by the substantive nature of its elements; along similar lines, Bakhtin conceives of the self as in perpetual dialogue with the other, from which it obtains its selfhood, its mode of existence being also relational rather than substantial.<sup>2</sup> For Bakhtin, nothing exists in itself and for itself, nothing can acquire meaning in isolation from the other. Hence, self-contained, substantive notions of individuality are ruled out as deceptive. Founded on the unceasing friction of self and other, on their constant relations of mutual dependence, is the so-called *law of placement* which simultaneously reflects and imposes the situatedness of all experience, or, in other words, that the ontological definition of any phenomenon is a function of a concrete, describable system of observation provided by radical alterity. Bakhtin's idea of structure proceeds, I think, from the conviction that solipsistic completeness is a fallacy, that the profiles of the self are inescapably drawn from without by the other, with the obvious consequence that, if the other is modified, the self does not remain tied to a substantive, immutable essence, but changes accordingly. Of course, this interpretation of Bakhtinian dialogism does away with absolute, transcendental meaning, abolishes universal standards of judgement, makes these dependent on the other, desubstantiates the self, and effectively contributes to the relativization of reference and extra-textual (fictional) reality.

Thus run the abstract principles. In the next section, the Bakhtinian-Derridean interface just outlined will be related to the structure of the narrative text, and critical inquiry into "The Coxon

2 A full account of Bakhtinian philosophy of relativism as regards Henry James's narrative *modus operandi* and the structure of the fictional genre can be found in Álvarez Amorós [2002].

Fund” will gradually supersede theoretical discussion. Sections 3, 4, and 5 below will be respectively devoted to the analysis of the tale’s (subverted) oppositional macrostructure underpinning both theme and plot, the role of the narrator as the vehicle of otherness and thus as a prime relativizing force, and the relational construction of deed and character – essentially that of Frank Saltram – by means of difference and deferral.

## II

James truly excels in a particular variety of first-person narrative – that which is conducted through a first-person marginal narrator-witness. We often encounter this figure in his shorter fiction, and especially in his writer-hero tales. Many of these – exactly eight out of fourteen, if my estimation is correct (Álvarez Amorós 1996: 16–17) – exhibit a narrator of this type. What is, however, a first-person marginal narrator-witness and how does it fit in with the Bakhtinian-Derridean interface? First-person narrators have been variously known as dramatized (Booth 1961: 152–53), homodiegetic (Genette 1980: 243–45), personal (Tamir 1976; Ryan 1981), and so on. All these labels, as well as many others that could be adduced, designate a narrator which is *part of the fictional world*, and, as a consequence, refers to itself by means of first-person pronominal forms. Needless to say, a narrator of this type can have different degrees of presence, ranging from the role of leading character to that of a peripheral, almost effacing observer. In the latter case, its status nearly merges with the classical third-person or authorial narrative situation in a gradual process minutely investigated by Franz Stanzel in his seminal *Narrative Situations in the Novel* (1971: 158–69, esp. 165–66). In the context of James’s writer-hero tales, *marginal* just means that the narrator does not fulfil the *formal* role of a protagonist, which, in principle, would be attributed to the allegedly great artist placed at the very centre of the fictional world. An endless debate has turned, however, on

whether James's first-person narrators are genuinely marginal or not, since their presence often tends to override that of the ostensible protagonist who becomes a Hitchcockian MacGuffin of sorts, i.e. a mere formal pretext to sound, by implication, the depths of the narratorial mind – as is partly the case in “The Coxon Fund.” Finally, the term *witness* emphasizes the idea of passive observation – with the caveat just noted – and, at the same time, invokes James's theory of compositional centres as the most influential precedent of the contemporary notion of narrative point of view or focalization (Álvarez Amorós 1994: 47–48).

The act of placing the narratorial witness on the same ontological plane as that of the leading character has vast epistemic consequences. By systematically doing this, James refused to set up a universal, uninvolved, absolute frame of reference – i.e. the unifying authority of ‘omniscient’ third-person narration – and proceeded to engage both figures in a relativizing dialogue unconditioned by external, non-structural factors. The immediate result of this dialogical relation is that the leading character is depleted of any substantive entity and only exists as a function of the narrator, or, in Bakhtinian terms, that the isolated self is nothing unless perceived and shaped from without by the unavoidable influence of otherness. The selves at the core of plot in James's writer-hero tales – Mark Ambient, Neil Paraday, Frank Saltram, Ralph Limbert, etc. – enjoy no substantive existence of their own; they cannot be detached from the other on penalty of total obliteration. They are rather constructed through the interplay and clash of perspectives, contrasts, surpluses of seeing, differential relations, epistemic dephasing, and the multiplicity of cognitive positions deployed by James within the fictional world. So much is the self a function of the other in some of these tales that the narratorial witness invested in the role of alterity often threatens to supplant the main character in a covetous attempt at annexing his natural *Lebensraum*. In conclusion, my thesis is that the creation of the self in James's short stories such as “The Author of *Beltraffio*” (1884),

“The Death of the Lion” (1894), “The Coxon Fund,” and “The Next Time” (1895) projects onto the structure of narrative transmission the general principle that meaning is engendered by relation and not by substance. Resorting to para-Derridean vocabulary, this proposition entails that the central characters so constructed bear on themselves the irrevocable traces of the other. In “The Coxon Fund,” for one, it is quite irrelevant – as well as impracticable – to know exactly which data about Frank Saltram are relayed to the reader unless we are also fully apprised of which sources have been tapped and which epistemic positions intervene – and in which order – between an inconceivable solipsistic core of personality and the final interpreter of the text. A statement – any statement – in this story means nothing unless we also take heed of who makes it, who receives and deciphers it, and who passes it on, for Saltram’s selfhood is in a very real sense shaped by the indelible traces left on it by successive layers of otherness. Take, for instance, the following much-quoted passage: ‘Mr. Saltram, according to Mrs. Mulville, was of opinion that a man was never to suffer his relation to money to become a spiritual relation – he was to keep it exclusively material’ (“Fund” 324).<sup>3</sup> Critics usually read it as direct, substantive evidence of Saltram’s personality, and thus turn it into a stable, unambiguous point of departure for discussing his ethical stance (e.g. Giorcelli 1993: 64–65). But those who act in this way systematically ignore the parenthetical ‘according to Mrs. Mulville,’ i.e. ascribe the expressed opinion *constitutionally* to Saltram, as if his interpreter were a transparent, passive medium contributing nothing to the construction of his character and so dismissing offhand the heavy mass of interested attitudes involved in the Mulvilles’ relationship to him, attitudes which may pull the act of reporting – deliberately or not – away from an ‘accurate’ rendering of the transcendental, hypostasized presence of character. I believe that statements of this type, which make up most of “The

3 “The Coxon Fund” quoted from James 1937; hereafter “Fund” in the text.

Coxon Fund” on account of the narrative strategy adopted by James, may be more contributive to the definition of those who make them – Adelaide Mulville, in this case – than to the delineation of their purported objects. Once again the overwhelming power of the trace is, to my mind, conspicuously asserted.

The example examined in the foregoing paragraph brings into the discussion of “The Coxon Fund” another phenomenon that can also be contemplated in the light of *différance*, and more exactly in the light of the temporal, temporizing meaning telescoped in this neographism. It has been established above that the issue of relativization as the outcome of the situatedness of all experience, i.e. as a dialogue between self and other that can never be disposed of, constitutes an effective desubstantiating movement. But this neat, almost didactic scheme of self and other can be incredibly complicated when we come to deal with the intricacies of a concrete narrative work. Either fictional or non-fictional, reality cannot be apprehended unless in conjunction with a specific standpoint that leaves deep scars on the object of perception. To use an explicative metaphor, this process can be likened to the placing of a translucent screen between reality and its ultimate observer – the reader in the case of a novel or tale. Such screening, however, is disconcertingly recurrent in some of James’s works, “The Coxon Fund” being a paradigmatic instance. Here the construction of the central character is recursively submitted to a maze of criss-crossing dialogues between self and other, with the consequence that the reader is always maintained at several removes from Frank Saltram, who, deprived of substantive existence, becomes only the precipitate of a series of epistemic positions whose traces interact, reinforce or neutralize each other, and ultimately remain in constant dialectic tension. Still using metaphoric terms, the reader tries to reach out for a solid core of meaningfulness, only to meet with elusive layers of provisional and sometimes contradictory meaning. Under the circumstances, it does not seem an intellectual risk to invoke an idea of para-Derridean *deferral* in connection with this

baffling postponement of presence which, in varying degrees, characterize those Jamesian tales fitted with a first-person marginal narrator-witness.

By way of illustration, let me discuss briefly two cases of recursive deferral in James's short narrative. One occurs in "The Author of *Beltraffio*" and lies behind its central plot crux – i.e. the circumstances surrounding the death of Mark Ambient's child Dolcino in a scene which is, so to speak, thrice removed from the reader's eyes. During the fatal night, Mrs. Ambient has been alone with Dolcino, save for the occasional short visits paid by the nurse to the sickroom. The first level of otherness thus corresponds to the nurse, who construes what she sees there and submits her version to Miss Ambient – 'I know that from the nurse,' she admits ("*Beltraffio*" 110).<sup>4</sup> Acting as a second level of otherness, the latter takes in this version and relays it to the narrative agent who verbalizes it several years later in his role as a third layer of otherness. The night nurse remains completely impersonal in "The Author of *Beltraffio*," being just a name that appears once and then vanishes. But we have sufficient information about Miss Ambient and the narrator himself to know for a fact that they are painfully involved in the ongoing tragedy. Therefore, it does not seem extravagant to hypothesize that they leave vigorous traces of themselves on the primal scene taking place in the sickroom, which only reaches us circuitously and as a mere desubstantiated function of otherness.

The recursive deferral of the fictional world is not at all restricted to James's tales of literary life; on the contrary, it is fairly widespread in his shorter narratives. Another instance of this phenomenon can be found in a story called "Maud-Evelyn" (1900), in which one can discern *five* levels of successive deferral. A first-person, unnamed narrator introduces Lady Emma, who recounts Lavinia's rejection of Marmaduke as well as later circumstances in

4 "The Author of *Beltraffio*" quoted from James 1986a; hereafter "*Beltraffio*" in the text.

his life concerning Maud-Evelyn, a deceased young girl. These circumstances she learns from Lavinia, who knows them because Marmaduke has told her, who, in turn, obtained this information from the Dedricks, Maud-Evelyn's dotting parents. After such criss-crossing of dialogues between self and other and the successive generation of confronting perspectives and dephasing patterns (Maud-Evelyn [self] > the Dedricks [other<sub>1</sub>] > Marmaduke [other<sub>2</sub>] > Lavinia [other<sub>3</sub>] > Lady Emma [other<sub>4</sub>] > the unnamed narrator [other<sub>5</sub>]),<sup>5</sup> there is very little left of the substantive personality and attending circumstances of Maud-Evelyn, who becomes a mere conglomerate of traces that keep accreting and interacting from one deferral to the next.

### III

Like other writer-hero tales, "The Coxon Fund" rests on what could be called an oppositional macrostructure. This means that its main thematic concerns issue from a set of abstract, pre-thematic oppositions that James enumerates and discusses in his notebooks and which remain open to deconstruction, as will be noted. First, we have the master opposition between what he calls the 'unimaginative' and the 'imaginative' modes, i.e. the 'literal and the constructive manner' of dealing with Frank Saltram, respectively embodied by George Gravener and Ruth Anvoy, his fiancée

5 This is, of course, a gross simplification of the process taking place in "Maud-Evelyn" and also in "The Coxon Fund." A more accurate representation would be: (\*|{(Maud-Evelyn [self] > the Dedricks [other<sub>1</sub>] > Marmaduke [other<sub>2</sub>]}) > Lavinia [other<sub>3</sub>] > Lady Emma [other<sub>4</sub>]\* > the unnamed narrator [other<sub>5</sub>]). The different sets of parentheses and graphic symbols indicate that what is submitted to a new process of deferral is the self plus its perpetual interlocutor, the other. This indissoluble unit forms a new self that recursively enters into dialogue with successive others. For the sake of clarity, however, I shall stick to the simplified representation given in the text.

(*Notebooks* 90).<sup>6</sup> In a straightforward reading of the tale, this opposition engenders a conflict between both as to the most suitable candidate for a fund established to aid destitute intellectuals, a fund for which she is responsible by inheritance. Miss Anvoy, as it finally transpires, wants to favour Saltram, whereas Gravener prefers to use the fund to finance their own marriage, for testamentary conditions are so slack that the money could be legally put to that end. The central opposition between the unimaginative and the imaginative modes generates secondary ones to be found both in his notebooks and scattered throughout the text of the tale. In his notebooks, for instance, James opposes ‘the individual [...] [who] *does* pay for [Saltram]’ to that ‘who doesn’t, who won’t’ (*Notebooks* 89), i.e. the imaginative Miss Anvoy, ready to sacrifice a convenient marriage in order to provide Saltram with a handsome income, and the unimaginative, cynically pragmatic Gravener who would take the fund for himself without the slightest hesitation. At one point in the text, the narrator alludes to the ‘relative [...] the opposed importances [in Saltram] of virtue and brains’ (“Fund” 323), a statement which foregrounds the kindred opposition between morality and art – a true favourite with James – being Saltram’s alleged brains and lack of virtue the reasons respectively paraded by Miss Anvoy and her fiancé to justify the use they each want to make of the fund. Later on, and realizing that both persist in their attitudes, the narrator reflects on the unavoidable opposition between his friends’ private welfare and the public concern of advancing art and culture which lies behind the Coxon Fund. This opposition is real enough, for the final award of the money to Saltram will bring about the end of their engagement.

The thematic core of “The Coxon Fund” has been the object of some critical controversy. James makes a detailed presentation of it in a popular passage of his notebooks, where he wonders if

6 James’s notebooks quoted from James 1987; hereafter *Notebooks* in the text.

such a drama [would not] necessarily be the question of the acceptance by someone [Miss Anvoy] – some one with something important at stake [her marriage to Gravener] – of the general *responsibility* of rising to the height of accepting him [Saltram] for what he is, recognizing his rare, anomalous, magnificent, interesting, curious, tremendously suggestive character, vices and all, with all its imperfections on its head, and not being guilty of the pedantry, the stupidity, the want of imagination, of fighting him, deploring him in the details – failing to recognize that one *must* pay for him, and that on the whole he is magnificently worthy of it. (*Notebooks* 89)

In principle, this is, of course, the thematic germ for the whole story, which itself pivots on the key term ‘*responsibility*’ (James’s italics). It would be hard to argue otherwise were it not for the final reversal in which Saltram, after being awarded the fund – a move that liberates him from material worries – becomes a barren mind totally incapable of intellectual or artistic production. Curiously absent from James’s initial intention as expressed in his notebooks, this reversal is so emphatically clear that it cannot be put down to the interpretation of a moot point; it is pointedly deliberate, and no reading of the tale can ignore it. Martin and Ober, for instance, view “The Coxon Fund” as a forthright development from the thematic germ quoted above, and, not knowing how to deal with the sudden, glaring decline of Saltram’s powers, they simply attribute it to a compositional weakness on James’s part, ‘a flaw in an otherwise admirable story’ (1982: 66). The hindsight provided by the final reversal allows us to read the story differently, casting subversive light on the interpretation of character. So, arguably, the text of “The Coxon Fund” carries within itself – and very explicitly at that – the potential to destabilize its own ostensible meaning. In view of the unexpected denouement, Miss Anvoy no longer seems the young, conscientious woman who forfeits her prospects of marriage in order to fulfil self-imposed responsibilities for the advancement of art and culture; on the contrary, by bestowing the fund on what turns out to be a fraud, she exhibits gross misjudgement, invincible ignorance, a pathetic tendency to be allured by brilliant surfaces, and a

somewhat snobbish awareness of her capacity for self-sacrifice. She longs to play the role of a great patron of art, but lacks the necessary knowledge and sensitivity; hence, she ends up granting the fund to the first humbug that comes her way. There is ample evidence of this, but only in retrospect can it achieve full justification and become part of a global interpretive pattern which defies superficial readings. In support of this thesis, I will mention three circumstances. First, the narrator calls her ‘a generous irresponsible inquirer’ just after he has met her (“Fund” 295). In itself, this proves little, for the narrator’s authoritative judgement is placed in doubt throughout the tale on account of the persistent relativizing strategies implemented by James. What is really curious is that Martin and Ober present Ruth Anvoy as the *epitome of critical responsibility* and, to do this, they have to deactivate the narrator’s views – whatever their worth – by quoting other sympathetic opinions that do not manage to offset the initial impression (1982: 64). Second, it is again the narrator who presents her as having ‘read some of his [Saltram’s] papers’ without understanding them (“Fund” 296), a fact which bespeaks a limited base to judge intellectual merit and make well-founded decisions. These two cases, however, could be dismissed as a mere matter of opinion. But they are confirmed by a third, more complicated one, that bears the hallmark of James’s forethought. At the end of chapter 3, and sensing Ruth Anvoy’s mounting interest in Frank Saltram’s personality and merits, the narrator tries to dodge her endless questioning by describing Saltram as ‘[t]he sight of a great suspended swinging crystal – huge lucid lustrous, a block of light – flashing back every impression of life and every possibility of thought!’ (“Fund” 300); seemingly proud of the success of his stratagem, he adds to himself: ‘This gave her something to turn over till we had passed out to the dusky porch of the hall [. . .]’ (“Fund” 300). Of course, the ridiculously ornate metaphor employed by the narrator hits the target, and, by doing so, gives the measure of the young woman’s artistic and intellectual horizon.

But this is not all. At the end of chapter 7, and in the course of a conversation between Adelaide Mulville and the narrator, the former quotes Ruth Anvoy as having publicly likened Saltram's mind to 'a crystal [...] [s]uspended in the moral world – swinging and flashing there' ("Fund" 327). Her blatant appropriation of the narrator's most stilted utterance in the tale – without due credit, moreover – is not a symptom of critical responsibility, I think, but rather of her doubtful intellectual stature and derivative frame of mind. George Gravener, for his part, emerges from a retrospective reading of "The Coxon Fund" as a shrewd individual – more of a Hobbes than of a Rousseau – who, being the thoroughbred politician he is, can penetrate other people's motives, assess their worth accurately, see into the future, use such foresight for his own benefit, and avoid traps into which other people would fall. Endowed with 'more ambition than charity' ("Fund" 308), he is naturally impervious to Saltram's reported charms, because, given his profession, he knows very well how enthusiasm can be generated in certain people. One should not forget, however, that he is never directly exposed to such charms – as both Miss Anvoy and the narrator are – and it is hard to guess if James exempted him on design or if mere compositional coincidence protected him from exposure. Yet the final reversal bears out the rather melancholy conclusion that imaginative people can be easily deceived by chatter and humbug, whereas those with an unimaginative mind stand a stronger chance to survive and be proved right in the end. What is truly important for my reading of "The Coxon Fund," however, is not the axiological implications of the imaginative component, but rather that the final reversal opens up the possibility of undermining the status quo derived from the oppositional macrostructure devised by James in his notebooks and made effective in most of the story. Such undermining is carried out first by exposing the existence of a hierarchy which conventionally assumes that the imaginative frame of mind is in some sense superior to the unimaginative one, and then by inverting

such a hierarchy as soon as we are made aware of the surprising outcome of the tale.

Frank Saltram's abrupt loss of his powers precisely when his material need has disappeared also places under suspicion the theme of critical responsibility as formulated by James in his notebooks – where one encounters no hint of a closing reversal – and then assumed to the letter by Martin and Ober. Bearing in mind the subversive irony of such loss of powers, Sara S. Chapman submits that the basic thematic concern of "The Coxon Fund" is not 'the social responsibility to humour and protect brilliance, no matter how unconventional,' but rather what happens when 'conventional people [...] attempt to deal with unconventional behaviour they have confidently ascribed to genius' (1982: 70). I find this proposal much more interesting for three reasons. First, because it is compatible with James's substantial change of mind between the jotting down of ideas in his notebooks and the final composition of the tale; second, because it leaves ample room for considering the behaviour of most characters – and not only of Gravener's – in the more or less undignified light of self-interest; and third, because it underlines the existence of a stimulating chiasmic pattern between "The Coxon Fund" and "The Author of *Beltraffio*." In the latter story, Mark Ambient, the alleged genius, behaves like an ordinary middle-class bourgeois to the narrator's stupefaction and mild dislike; whereas in "The Coxon Fund" the great Saltram's behaviour is an excellent catalogue of oddities – to say the least – and fulfils every expectation of how an artist should conflict with the norms of everyday existence.

In order to bring home the unsettling complexities of these thematic lines, James developed a blandly satirical plot for "The Coxon Fund" that revolves around Frank Saltram's uncertain moral suitability for obtaining the award and the construction of a free will for Ruth Anvoy as to its granting, i.e. to organize events in such a way that it remains undoubtedly clear that the young woman is not legally bound to give the money to a third party,

being perfectly capable of retaining it for her own benefit if, on her sole judgement, she finds no one worthy of it. The dilemma is rounded off when her father goes bankrupt, a fact which jeopardizes her engagement to Gravener and throws into relief the distressing quality of the choice she must make.<sup>7</sup> Note, however, that in narratives of this type a mere plot summary already entails interpretation and thus the severe flattening of an otherwise irreducible, three-dimensional openness.

Inspiration for Frank Saltram's character proceeds from J. Dyke Campbell's biography of Coleridge, which James had recently read (*Notebooks* 89). So between Saltram and Coleridge there is a genetic relationship that James makes haste to qualify. For him, Campbell's Coleridge was a kind of prime mover of imagination intended 'to fertilise [his] fancy' rather than a model to be literally followed (*Art of the Novel* 230).<sup>8</sup> Saltram is just 'a dim reflexion [of Coleridge] and above all a free rearrangement' (*Art of the Novel* 229), which – in agreement with his view of the creative process – highlights the fact that only the initial germ of any narrative must replicate reality, for its later development exclusively belongs to the sphere of art, i.e. of artistic *fabrication*. According to the narrator's version, Saltram is an immensely clever man whose mind and extraordinary talk – 'which is far and away the richest I ever listened to' ("Fund" 289) – is counteracted by his suspect moral condition.

7 James's notebook entries for "The Coxon Fund" are mainly devoted to devising a verisimilar course of events in order to emphasize Miss Anvoy's free will as to the bestowal of the fund (see *Notebooks* 89–91 and 95–98). Here we can visualize James shaping and arranging his material to make the sequence credible without being inartistic, i.e. fondling the facts until they yield a smooth, seemingly organic narrative. In the tale itself, the locus of the dilemma-building process is chapter 8, where Gravener apprises the narrator of the legal aspects of the Coxon Fund and of the vagueness of the whole project, the conclusion being that Ruth Anvoy's 'hands are not tied. She has a grand discretion' ("Fund" 334).

8 James's critical prefaces quoted from James 1984; hereafter *Art of the Novel* in the text.

Though his behaviour (drunkenness, negligence, promiscuity, ingratitude, no ‘force of character’ [“Fund” 295], ‘want of dignity’ [“Fund” 298], etc.) places him far below the average English gentleman, he regularly lives with the Mulvilles, a well-to-do family who, despite his embarrassing weaknesses, are fascinated by his talk, his customary display of genius, and the possibility of showing him off as a fashionable symbol of social status. The Mulvilles’ dependence on Saltram is often hinted at (“Fund” 321, 368), though Miss Anvoy suggests the contrary, i.e. that the Mulvilles would like to part with him, and, for this reason, they discreetly press for the fund to be bestowed on him, or at least that seems to be her conclusion (“Fund” 351). In chapter 3, the reader is introduced to Ruth Anvoy, the American young woman who will be in control of the fund when her aunt, Lady Coxon, dies. She gradually falls for Saltram’s showiness, but, in order to ease her mind, she requires some kind of assurance that his moral shortcomings are not so gross that they prevent him from receiving the award. Instead of this assurance, she is made more and more suspicious. Even the narrator is reluctant to single him out as the right candidate, until in chapter 11 he undergoes a kind of conversion, gives up his qualms, and entirely surrenders to Saltram’s magnetism. After Lady Coxon’s death, and at the cost of her own marriage to Gravener, Miss Anvoy awards Saltram the money. As we know, the end is cruelly ironical – with the irony of subversion – since Saltram, so dazzling and interesting when poor, becomes vulgarized by his new income, the magnificence of which ‘quite quenched him; it was the beginning of his decline’ (“Fund” 367–68).

#### IV

In section 2 above, I spoke of “The Coxon Fund” as a tangle of criss-crossing dialogues between numerous epistemic positions that define each other by difference and contrast rather than by

substantive plenitude. Though by no means the only one, the narrator is the most obtrusive of these positions – if only because the textual yield of his activity is always before our eyes – and should be attended to in some detail. First, his marginality with reference to plot development is much higher than that of his counterparts in “The Death of the Lion” or “The Author of *Beltraffio*.” The respective narrators of these stories have firsthand access to Paraday and Ambient most of the time, since they stay with them in their homes for practically the whole fictional span. They are indeed marginal because there is another figure in the tale contending for the narrative focus, but they constantly stand by Paraday and Ambient and, with local exceptions, there is no screening or deferral between what they see and their eyes. In “The Coxon Fund,” the narrator meets Saltram only occasionally, and it is not until chapter 11 that there is what we might call an intimate dialogue between both men – the conversion episode – which only reaches us through the narrator’s enraptured decentering. This fact leads to a considerable blocking off of the field of vision and leaves the reader with fewer and fewer elements on which to pass judgement on Saltram, thus fostering the relativized presentation of fictional character. At one point, the narrator himself recognizes his marginality by admitting that the anecdote behind the tale ‘concerns even more closely several other persons’ (“Fund” 284). This is true in relative terms only, for he has a sizeable responsibility in the final award of the fund through refusing to read and then disclose to Miss Anvoy the contents of an incriminatory letter about Saltram he receives from the Pudneys.

A second issue directly related to what could be called the narrator’s *professional* profile is that of narrative dissonance. According to Dorrit Cohn’s formulation, dissonance occurs when there is a considerable temporal and judgemental hiatus between the experiencing self and the reporting self, or, in other words, between the character and the first-person narrator (1978: 26–33, 143–61). When this happens, the narrator feels free to look back at his

younger self, comment on his own behaviour, criticize his folly, praise his good points, etc.; he is obviously knowledgeable about the past and makes no effort whatsoever to hide this circumstance, though he can, of course, control the flow of information, claim ignorance, or even pretend to go wrong in order to turn out an amazing denouement. While “The Author of *Beltraccio*” exhibits massive dissonance, “The Coxon Fund” only displays a highly attenuated version of this phenomenon. The former tale, for instance, teems with ominous references to an impending tragedy, i.e. Dolcino’s death, whereas the allusions to Saltram’s loss of powers are so doubtful and obscure in “The Coxon Fund” that they pass unnoticed in a first reading and can only be interpreted as such retrospectively, and even so remain a debatable point.<sup>9</sup> The most eye-catching instance of incompatibility between what is suggested and what eventually happens is not connected with the final reversal, but rather with Ruth Anvoy’s future. At one point, the narrator hints that ‘[t]he girl [Miss Anvoy] at any rate would forget the small adventure [meeting Saltram], be distracted, take a husband; besides which she would lack occasion to repeat her experiment’ (“Fund” 304). Here the narrator generates a statement full of material errors which, from his temporal and cognitive vantage point, he must have known as such: the young woman does *not* forget his adventure, which is anything but small to her, is *not* distracted, does *not* take a husband, and, whatever the judgement her behaviour elicits from the reader, she shows determination, even if

9 The following passages, which occur in the conversation between George Gravener and the narrator in chapter 2, could be read in context as indications that something surprising may/will befall. But this remains a matter of opinion. These are the fragments (my italics in all cases): ‘That ejaculation on my part must have been the beginning of what was to be later a long ache for final *frivolous* rest’ (“Fund” 287), ‘His [Gravener’s] vehemence was doubtless an accident, but it might have been a *strange foreknowledge*’ (“Fund” 288), and ‘for such a picture was an anticipation of *Saltram’s later development* and still more of my fuller acquaintance with him’ (“Fund” 290).

this may provoke benevolent mirth when considered in the light of the final reversal. Two explanations can be adduced to justify the narrator's lack of foresight. Either this is a deliberate, rather misogynous sample of paralipsis – i.e. the tactical retention of information (Genette 1980: 195) – in order to surprise the reader later, or an instance of non-canonical free indirect reporting of thought masquerading as narrative statement and acting as a vehicle for the opinion he had *at the time the events occurred*, an opinion which is factually contradicted by the outcome of the story.

Dissonance has been traditionally viewed as a remedy for narrative unreliability. This is not at all the case, I think, because to be placed at the end of the narrative span and so be able to look back on earlier occurrences does not immunize against the misconstruction of events. The narrator of “The Coxon Fund” seems to share this conviction when he admits his potential unreliability and puts the blame *precisely* on one of the main features of dissonance, i.e. the existence of a wide temporal gap between character and first-person narrator. For him, instead of promoting cognitive perspective and reliability, this gap can generate confusion and error, since the passage of time blurs the contours of fact and sets imagination in motion. Saltram dazzles the narrator ‘more in remembrance than in fact’ simply because ‘imagination goes to some expense, inserting a jewel here and there or giving a twist to a plume’ (“Fund” 282–83). This confession of unreliability and the reasons behind it make, however, an excellent point of departure to discuss briefly the narrator's role in the relativization and decentering of fictional reality in “The Coxon Fund.”

In section 2, when dealing with the Bakhtinian-Derridean interface and its relation to the structure of the narrative text, I introduced the first-person marginal narrator-witness as a key interlocutor in a differential, meaning-making dialogue, which can be simple and synoptic as in “The Death of the Lion” or labyrinthine as in “The Coxon Fund.” In the first of these tales, the said dialogue is just bilateral and takes place between the unnamed nar-

rator and Neil Paraday, the alleged great writer who is placed at the centre of the fictional world and fleshed out – so to speak – by virtue of a relational process. In “The Coxon Fund,” however, indirection grows exponentially because the narrator is *just one* relativizing position among several. It is true that it holds the privilege of being the only one that is never *turned off*, for the narrative text before the reader’s eyes is ample proof of his unceasing mediation. Adelaide Mulville or Mrs. Saltram, on the contrary, do not always act as relativizing positions just because, at times, the narrator relates directly to Saltram or uses a different epistemic path to reach out for him. But the narrator, by definition, always intervenes as the ultimate layer of otherness. Owing to the abstract, universal configuration of the structure of narrative transmission, he is the only requisite artificer of difference and deferral, and, as such, his contribution can be deciphered and evaluated only by an extratextual stance, i.e. by the reader.

Speculative support for the vital role fulfilled by the narrator in the relativization of the fictional world can be strengthened by the discussion of a revealing phenomenon, which could be described in “The Coxon Fund” as the almost insensible conversion of mere narratorial surmises into what is spuriously made to count as hard fact. This phenomenon is not, of course, exclusive of the tale under analysis here; “The Death of the Lion,” for instance, also exhibits a fine illustration of it (“Lion” 274).<sup>10</sup> In the course of a conversation between Gravener and the narrator, the latter reports that [he] saw that some deep discomfort, some restless desire to be sided with, reassuringly, approvingly mirrored, had been at the bottom of his [Gravener’s] drifting so far, and I was genuinely touched by his confidence’ (“Fund” 335). A few lines below, and in the same vein, the narrator insists that his ‘old loyalty to him [Gravener] mustered to meet his unexpected hint that I could

10 “The Death of the Lion” quoted from James 1986; hereafter “Lion” in the text. For a full commentary, see Álvarez Amorós 2000: 29–31.

help him' ("Fund" 335). At first reading, one may get the impression that Gravener's 'desire to be sided with,' his 'confidence' to the narrator, and the 'unexpected hint' for help are verifiable facts within the fictional world of "The Coxon Fund." But even if we perform a close perusal of the passage, no information is at hand to that effect, and we must conclude that, carried away by his charitable wish to consolidate the engagement between Gravener and his fiancée, the narrator grants factual status to the mere personal yearning that his friend should request his assistance in such a delicate situation. But what is truly important here is that the specious construction of the proud, adamant Gravener as an almost pathetic, help-seeking individual is the narrator's sole responsibility, which is eventually disowned by Gravener's words and behaviour. Another instance of this phenomenon is connected with the distribution of information about the intricacies of the Coxon Fund between Ruth Anvoy, George Gravener, Adelaide Mulville, and the narrator himself. In chapter 9, the latter admits that he 'waited impatiently to see whether she [Miss Anvoy] wouldn't have told Mrs. Mulville a portion at least of what I had learned from Gravener. But I saw Mrs. Mulville was still reduced to wonder what she [Miss Anvoy] had come out again for if she hadn't come as a conciliatory bride' ("Fund" 343). This brief passage and its preceding context make a very interesting case. First, it is remarkable to ascertain that the cognitive channels flowing into the narrator's epistemic position are largely blocked; second, for this very reason, the narrator has to feed on conjecture, which is quite legitimate in the circumstances; but, third, he conceals this fact, for he does not use the customary terms of estrangement – *apparently, perhaps, it seemed to me* – that cue the presence of conjectural constructions, and fobs off on the reader the unwarranted certainty that Mrs. Mulville remained ignorant of Miss Anvoy's motives for staying with her at Wimbledon.

After examining how the narrator contributes to building up the misty circuitousness whereby the reader obtains a relativized

picture of what is (may be) going on in “The Coxon Fund,” there lingers the impression that James’s narrative strategies in this tale – and in many similar ones – reach far beyond realism into what could be called *arch-realism* for want of a better term. The way in which a fictional world used to be spelled out in front of the reader’s eyes in a traditional, *realistic* narrative has paradoxically very little to do with the way *real* cognition operates. Our knowledge of the world out there and of those with whom we interact is fragmentary, dephased; we come by it deviously, through guesswork and biased filters, almost by hearsay, and even when we happen upon a substantive truth, there is no way we can know, since absolute frames of reference seem to be lacking. The object of the next and final section will be precisely to give a few hints of how Frank Saltram is constructed by para-Derridean *différance*, and how many other epistemic positions – besides that of the narrator – concur in the task.

## V

As was submitted earlier in this paper, “The Coxon Fund” exhibits certain compositional features that *seem* intended to illustrate the theoretical positions of the Bakhtinian-Derridean interface in the praxis of narrative creation. Of course, the cause-effect link between theory and practical case is just an attractive critical fiction. To invoke it literally would entail both a substantial anachronism and a serious lack of methodological precision. With a view to avoiding these evils, I have consistently spoken of *para-Derridean* strategies right from the title as a means of laying emphasis on the idea of *analogy* or *resemblance* rather than strict transposition, which is, in itself, untenable. However, once the direct cause-effect link has been dismissed, the striking continuities between theory and creation deserve further scrutiny.

Three issues are likely to spark off discussion when related to “The Coxon Fund.” First, the role of difference and alterity in the

generation of meaning; second, the recursive deferral of substantive reference from signifier to signifier; and, third, the interplay of the master duality of presence vs. absence with the linguistic modes of speech and writing. If we put these issues in terms of narrative structure – and specifically in terms of James’s strategies in “The Coxon Fund” – attention should be respectively paid to the dialogical, differential construction of fictional self, to the recurrent postponement of deed and character far beyond what can be expected even in a genre whose constitutional nature is indirection, and to the much-tangled relations between such postponement and Saltram’s gift of eloquence.

That “The Coxon Fund” is the locus classicus of para-Derridean *différance* among James’s writer-hero tales was already suggested at the outset of this paper and elaborated on from a speculative angle in section 2. To say that no element within the fictional world of this story enjoys a substantive, independent existence would be a trivial statement, since this principle inheres in the basic structure of mediation that we call the narrative genre. But what is noteworthy here is the obduracy and even gusto with which James piled up layer upon layer of conflicting alterity till the presumed central character becomes fully desubstantiated, a kind of nothing-in-itself position in a web of relations. Yet this procedure does not seem to be an afterthought – like the final reversal – but rather a premeditated move that can be traced back to his notebooks, where it appears under two different forms, i.e. explicitly as an injunction to himself regarding a concrete epistemic path, and implicitly as part of the impressionistic technique he adopts. At one point of his strife with narrative *dispositio*, he demands of himself that ‘[s]he [Ruth Anvoy] must only hear about him [Saltram] from me’ (*Notebooks* 97). This tiny reminder bespeaks a whole compositional programme when one realizes that fictional data in “The Coxon Fund” are systematically submitted to detours and indirections of this type in fulfilment of a deliberate scenario and not as a strategy unwittingly followed. But differential and deferred

presentation of deed and character is also at the root of narrative impressionism, a technique enthusiastically adhered to by James as a plausible solution – in fact, a condensing method – to his inveterate problem with word count. To present “The Coxon Fund” in no more than 20,000 words, he reflects. ‘is to make it an impression – as one of Sargent’s pictures is an impression’ (*Notebooks* 95), and then he proposes to give ‘one whole brief section devoted to an impressionism of the beauty of his [Saltram’s] personal genius and the kindling effect of his talk’ (*Notebooks* 96). In essence, narrative impressionism is of a piece with dialogical relativization and deferral, for the idea of *impression* necessarily entails an *impression of something or somebody on somebody else*, i.e. another way of alluding to the inevitable conjoining of self and other in the meaning-making process as previously outlined in relation to *différance*. What stands out, however, is James’s admission that even if imposed brevity had not been an issue ‘the great advantage [of impressionism] [...] perhaps after all would have been an imperative necessity [...] I should probably have had, after all, to have come to this – should have found it impossible to content myself with any literal record [...]’ (“Fund” 95). In other words, he somehow feels that a fine dose of narrative deferral in the circumstances would contribute to the rendition of character far better than ‘literal record,’ i.e. an approach aimed at maintaining the illusion of transparency.

In “The Coxon Fund,” the default narrative strategy is that of consistent indirection and deliberate deferral, a claim that can be easily substantiated just by glancing at any part of the text. However, for the sake of argument, let me transcribe six revealing instances; in four of them, the temporizing medium is Adelaide Mulville, the narrator’s friend and main confidante; in one, it is Mrs. Saltram, a persistent bearer of ominous news whose role and relationship to the narrator make her equivalent to the Miss Ambient of “The Author of *Beltraffio*”; and in another, it is Ruth Anvoy, though I would like to qualify this view later. At the end of chapter 6, the narrator admits that even if his discretion prevented

him from paying a third visit to Lady Coxon's home 'this didn't matter, for it was through Adelaide Mulville that the side-wind of comedy [Lady Coxon's illness compounded with the difficulties of bestowing her fund], though I was at first unwitting, began to reach me' ("Fund" 319). At the outset of chapter 7, a crucial event like Miss Anvoy's introduction to Frank Saltram is withdrawn not only from the reader's sight and judgement, but also from those of the narrator, who has to be contented with Mrs. Mulville's 'account of the introduction' which reaches him 'in order,' i.e. in due time ("Fund" 321–22). In the same chapter, and along similar lines, it is Mrs. Mulville who 'let[s]' the narrator 'know what was already said' among friends and acquaintances regarding Ruth Anvoy's loss of her marriage-portion through her father's bankruptcy ("Fund" 324). In this case, moreover, the origin of Mrs. Mulville's reported information is irretrievably lost in the maze of rumour. Finally, it is again Adelaide Mulville who interposes between Miss Anvoy's 'second glimpse of our great man [Saltram]' and the narrator, who must ask her confidante 'if the impression made by the first [meeting between Saltram and Miss Anvoy] appeared to have been confirmed,' only to obtain the noncommittal reply that 'with time and opportunity it couldn't fail to be' ("Fund" 339). Mrs. Saltram, for her part, also constitutes a much-frequented epistemic path. 'News of the catastrophe first came to me,' says the narrator, 'from Mrs. Saltram, and it was afterwards confirmed [...] poor Miss Anvoy was in trouble – great disasters in America had suddenly summoned her home' ("Fund" 323). Once again, key information about a watershed in the process of dilemma-building reaches the narrator, and consequently the reader, only circuitously and relativized by the traces left on it by an indeterminate series of epistemic positions endowed with varying degrees of involvement in the reported occurrence. The last instance concerns a kind of pretended deferral through Miss Anvoy of Saltram's spoken monologue. Both the narrator and the young woman attend his performance in propria persona; so it would be fallacious to speak

of a literal deferral of presence. '[B]ut I knew something about one of the listeners [Miss Anvoy],' confesses the narrator, 'that nobody else knew, and Saltram's monologue could reach me only through that medium' ("Fund" 341). What the narrator knows is that Ruth Anvoy is ruminating the idea of bestowing the Coxon Fund on Saltram. This piece of information – plus the certainty of being the only one besides Miss Anvoy to be in possession of it – heavily conditions the way Saltram's talk is processed and appreciated by the narrator. With regard to this passage, Chapman mistakenly assumes that the medium through which the narrator reaches out for Saltram's eloquence is Ruth Anvoy (1982: 74). But this belief involves a counterfactual interpretation of what is going on at the gathering, as well as a possible misreading of an anaphoric reference. James writes that the narrator 'knew *something* about one of the listeners [...] and Saltram's monologue could reach me only through *that medium*' (my italics). To my mind, the antecedent of the phrase 'that medium' is 'something' rather than 'one of the listeners,' an analysis that harmonizes grammar with verisimilitude. The narrator does not gain access to Saltram's discourse through Miss Anvoy's *reporting* – as it happens, for instance, in Mrs. Mulville's examples quoted above – but rather through *his knowledge* of the young woman's dilemma, which makes Saltram sound different in his ears. So this is not a case of literal deferral, though it certainly contributes to depleting Saltram's monologue of its substantive sense and making such sense contingent on the quality of Miss Anvoy's quandary.

Deferral and indirection are unceasing in "The Coxon Fund" to the extent that they become the norm rather than the exception, and grow unobtrusive after a short while. Yet there are cases when referral from one epistemic position to another is so intense and repetitive that it draws attention to its huge influence on the destabilization of deed and character in this tale. A few examples will suffice to establish the typical pattern. In chapter 3, for instance, in

the course of a conversation between the narrator and Miss Anvoy, we come across the following passage:

She had read some of his [Saltram's] papers and hadn't understood them; but it was at home, at her aunt's, that her curiosity had been kindled – kindled mainly by his wife's remarkable stories of his want of virtue. 'I suppose they ought to have kept me away,' my companion dropped, 'and I suppose they'd have done so if I hadn't somehow got an idea that he's fascinating. In fact Mrs. Saltram herself says he is.' ("Fund" 296)

Both the narrator and Miss Anvoy are in a lecture hall waiting for Saltram to turn up, which he never does. The narrator reports his conversation with Miss Anvoy by means of direct and indirect modes of quotation and, from time to time, comments on her beauty and enthusiasm, as well as on his own reactions to them. With the first sentence the narrator intimates that her knowledge of Saltram does not stem directly from his works, but rather from gossip picked up at her aunt's. If Saltram is the self, whatever truth there is about his 'want of virtue' reaches us in quite a roundabout way. First, we have Mrs. Saltram as a the first hypothetical layer of otherness. If we believe the narrator's word – which may also be prejudiced – she is untrustworthy, and having, as she declared, washed her hands of her husband after their separation, 'she had carefully preserved the water of this ablution, which she handed about for analysis' ("Fund" 301). This firsthand witness does not seem very reliable and, for once, we tend to accept the narrator's scepticism. Then we have Miss Anvoy's version of Mrs. Saltram's gossip. She is captivated not by his works – which she does not understand – but by his alleged immorality, and this fact contributes to presenting her in anything but a commendable light, as was pointed out in section 3. Finally, we have the narrator, who receives Miss Anvoy's words – whatever they are – and relays them to the reader in the form quoted above. After this process of filtering and re-filtering through biased and interested media embedded in the fictional world (Saltram [self] > Mrs. Saltram [other<sub>1</sub>]

> Miss Anvoy [other<sub>2</sub>] > the narrator [other<sub>3</sub>]), one wonders what remains of Saltram's 'true' moral worth, what firm bases allow us to pass judgement on him.

Another similar instance occurs in a conversation with Mrs. Saltram herself that the narrator reports indirectly. Although she usually brings bad news, she also has an endless repertoire of bits and pieces of useful information to be tapped when need arises. The passage runs as follows:

I recognised her [Mrs. Saltram's] superiority when I asked her about the aunt of the disappointed young lady [Miss Anvoy]: it sounded like a sentence from an English-French or other phrase-book. She triumphed in what she told me and she may have triumphed still more in what she withheld. My friend of the other evening, Miss Anvoy, had but lately come to England; Lady Coxon, the aunt, had been established here for years [...] I should have been glad to know more about the disappointed young lady, but I felt I should know most by not depriving her of her advantage, as she might have mysterious means of depriving me of my knowledge [...] The niece [Miss Anvoy], besides being immensely clever, was an heiress [...] ("Fund" 302–303)

The process of deferral of substantive reality in this fragment is even less definite, because Mrs. Saltram's sources of information remain obscure and, moreover, the narrator suspects that she is keeping some facts to herself. Consequently, there is a first screen embodied in Mrs. Saltram, who actively filters and limits the information she relays according to her interests. This circumstance is more than feared by the wary narrator, who ruefully deplores the fact that his knowledge – no matter how dephased and distorted – should entirely depend on his abhorred acquaintance. Miss Anvoy, however, is depicted as 'immensely clever' and this does not conform to the idea we had formed of her in the course of her first conversation with the narrator, unless 'clever' simply means 'bright' or 'cunning' in this context. She is well-meaning, no doubt, but her intelligence has not been proved beyond her attendance at

lectures that, if delivered, might have left her in the dark, judging by her reported reaction to Saltram's writings.

Mrs. Saltram is again the narrator's source of information in the following passage, which reproduces the same deferral pattern as discussed above: 'I was destined to hear, none the less, through Mrs. Saltram – who, I afterwards learned, was in correspondence with Lady Coxon's housekeeper – that Gravener was known to have spoken of the habitation I had in my eye as the pleasantest thing at Clockborough' ("Fund" 311). Here, however, Mrs. Saltram's informant is disclosed ("Lady Coxon's house keeper"), thus adding another explicit layer of relativization – which was absent from the previous example – to the recursive postponement of substantive reality. We have again a succession of screens that hypothetically distorts beyond recognition Gravener's words and, more importantly, his intentions (Gravener [self] > housekeeper [other<sub>1</sub>] > Mrs. Saltram [other<sub>2</sub>] > the narrator [other<sub>3</sub>]). This process goes on endlessly in "The Coxon Fund," as if nobody – and least of all the narrator – could ever lay his hands on the substantive presence of deed or character.

Closely linked with both the strategy of deferral just examined and the duality of presence vs. absence is Frank Saltram's mode of existence and the peculiar nature of his intellectual and artistic powers. This set of related notions might appear to have been devised ad hoc in order to illustrate a capital aspect of deconstructive orthodoxy – i.e. the treatment of the opposition between speech and writing – in the same way that the cognitive structure of "The Coxon Fund" can be rewardingly contemplated in the light of *différance*. The essential concern now is Saltram's presentation as a talker, a converser, which makes all his claims to intellectual distinction dependent on the gift of *speech* rather than on that of *writing*, thus constituting a unique exception among James's tales of literary life. Endowing Saltram with a special talent for speech is again not a casual move; it is planned right from the April 17th, 1894 notebook entry – where he is called 'a splendid, an incompar-

able talker' (*Notebooks* 89) – and expressly derives from Coleridge's personality via the J. Dyke Campbell biography. The reader is certainly reminded that Saltram has also produced a considerable amount of writing, but it is made quite plain that his alleged reputation cannot rest on it. To Gravener's question of whether Saltram's 'extraordinary mind' is 'exhibited in his writings,' the narrator replies that '[p]ossibly in his writings, but certainly in his talk, which is far and away the richest I ever listened to' ("Fund" 289). Likewise, a fascinated Ruth Anvoy comes to hear of Saltram as a splendid converser whose writing 'isn't as fine, isn't certainly as showy, as his talk' ("Fund" 299). Leaving aside the puzzling unsuitability of the term 'showy' when applied to the manifestation of genius, the narrator feels compelled to defend speech against Gravener's sarcastic charges, and does so in a passage which Derrida would qualify as actively supporting the traditional priority of speech in Western metaphysics. While Gravener reportedly calls Saltram 'a chatterbox' and a 'wind-bag,' complains that they are 'drenched with talk' and 'dying of it,' the narrator reacts by extolling fine talk as 'the gift of the gods themselves, the only starry spangle on the ragged cloak of humanity,' and concludes after much praise that '[f]rom the best talk indeed the best writing had something to learn' ("Fund" 290).

This established, a host of thorny questions suggest themselves, which, moreover, can only be answered conjecturally. To begin with, why make Saltram a converser, a talker? Why deviate so strikingly from the steadfast norm set up by all the other tales of literary life? The most obvious answer is to invoke James's attribution of 'the great Coleridge-quality [i.e. talk]' to Saltram on the authority of the Campbell biography (*Notebooks* 89). James himself recognizes that Coleridge had 'the other qualities' as well, but he refuses to name them explicitly (*Notebooks* 89). Why then pick out his conversation to the detriment of his poetic gift or his capacity for abstract aesthetic thought? James's enigmatic choice, however, opens a new line of inquiry into the text on the basis of the inter-

play between the ideas of presence and absence, on the one hand, and Saltram's mode of existence in "The Coxon Fund," on the other. In Derrida's view, speech has been favoured by Western metaphysical thought because it satisfies a deeply ingrained craving for presence and definite origin – that of the speaker – while temporization and absence are inherent in writing. Saltram's intellectual self is identified with his talent for speech, and thus with inescapable presence, *but* the epistemic strategies deployed by James in "The Coxon Fund" tend to defer his presence ad infinitum and turn him into a significant absence. A crucial question suggests itself again: why cast the leading role on a converser, a brilliant talker who *never* talks? Why is the manifestation of his genius consistently stolen from the reader's judgement? Only *once* are Saltram's words literally quoted for the reader's benefit, and they do not seem to evince any special ability: "Yes," he suggestively allowed, "it's there, I think, that I am at my best; quite late, when it gets towards eleven – and if I've not been too much worried" ("Fund" 305). To put this paradox in more accurate terms, why choose a talker – i.e. the paradigm of necessary presence – as the hero of the tale and then decide to render him through a strategy of constant deferral, indirection, and screening that makes him irrevocably absent?

Several answers can be put forward, all of them partial and emphasizing different aspects of the problem in hand. First, with the sole exception of "The Velvet Glove" (1900), James consistently declined to produce literal evidence, and even general descriptions, of the works on which his featured authors had made their alleged reputations. This can be justified as a move to save himself the trouble of having to devise textual fragments – or conversational snatches – that would meet the high expectations generated in readers by extravagant narratorial praise. Such a move would also explain the exception just mentioned, since "The Velvet Glove" is the only tale which contains transcriptions expressly authored by one of the fictional characters, namely a young woman novelist

whose *nom de plume* is Amy Evans. The two brief quotes, however, are stylistically appalling – again, misogyny seems to rule – and lead us to conclude that it is much easier for any writer to fabricate an inartistic quotation than an artistic one. It is sufficient to place a couple of solecisms or anacolutha in a passage or compose it out of inordinately long sentences to brand it as poor prose, but the recipe for creating a fragment generally acclaimed as splendid is not so easily at hand. Furthermore, in the case of stories of writers such as “The Next Time” or “The Death of the Lion,” the deferral of origin implicit in the activity of writing is congruous with the deferral of the leading character as imposed by James’s narrative methods. But in “The Coxon Fund” both phenomena work in opposite directions – the necessity of presence demanded by speech vs. the radical absence of character in this tale – and their collision catches the reader’s eye much more forcefully.

Another answer to the same question may lie in the field of uncertainty-building. The only natural, inconspicuous method for concealing speech as the vehicle of presumed intellectual worth is by removing its origin, i.e. the speaker, from the narrative foreground – unless, of course, we choose to render him dumb. So deferring Saltram’s presence goes a long way towards leaving open the issue of whether he is a genius or an impostor, of whether his talk *is* magnificent or only *seems* so to a bunch of conventional people, of whether Gravener is right or wrong when he calls Saltram ‘a humbug’ (“Fund” 287). The narrator’s own opinion appears to waver between both poles. At times, he feels fascination for Saltram’s gift of eloquence, as when he commends him to Gravener and Miss Anvoy, or in the course of the conversation following the conversion episode (“Fund” 357); at times, he is unable ‘wholly to restrain [his] mirth’ (“Fund” 326) when apprised of the affected terms – ‘the idea of marriage, the philosophy, the poetry, the sublimity of it’ (“Fund” 326) – in which Saltram has celebrated Miss Anvoy’s engagement, not to mention the final reversal and the unsettling light it casts on the interpretation of the

whole story. Withdrawing absolute, extra-systematic proof of Saltram's faculties facilitates the relativization of his deserts to obtain the fund, even at the cost of inconsistently promoting presence by making him a speaker *and* having to defer such presence to circumvent serious compositional problems. Thus, even if the phrase sounds somewhat contrived, one can describe "The Coxon Fund" in a very real sense as the curious story of the deliberate absence of indispensable presence.

Although the movement of para-Derridean *différance* affects the constitution of the whole fictional world of "The Coxon Fund," its most vigorous manifestation clearly concerns Frank Saltram's figure. Chapter 3, for instance, is a memorable primer on how a rigorously absent character can be conjured in front of the reader by means of opinions, feelings, impressions, half-truths, self-interested views, prejudices, morose silences on crucial questions, surpluses of seeing, conflicting perspectives, and epistemic dephasing, contributed by both present interlocutors and absent ones whose opinions are quoted, referred to, brought to bear upon the fleshing out of character, presumed manipulated, mutilated, adapted, or diversely altered, but never ascertained from an extra-systematic perspective. Chapter 6 moves a step beyond in this process, for, without having Saltram put in an explicit appearance or even *mentioning* him over a long textual stretch, James creates an overwhelming feeling of presence only achieved by contextual innuendo. Frank Saltram, in conclusion, is *nothing in himself*. He is the very essence of narrative relativization, a mere function of a set of epistemic positions that leave their traces on his elusive, insubstantial self, which, by virtue of obstinate deferral, becomes the epitome of the absent leading character in James's writer-hero tales. 'It was precisely with [Saltram's] entrance,' the narrator admits, 'that I ceased to be vividly conscious of him' ("Fund" 341). Few intuitions could have been more in agreement with the nature of a character who prospers indeed on absence and is best defined through the interplay of *différance*.

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Henry James examines one of his favorite topics—the artist's place in society—by profiling a "genius" who just can't seem to support himself. A dazzling intellectual and brilliant speaker, Mr. Saltram has become the most sought-after houseguest in England. The Coxon Fund might be good for teaching, I guess. It would allow Professor (e.g.) Evans to yammer on about the relationship between money and the life of the mind, or to disquisition on the difficulty of working out whether someone is an authentic genius or a fraud. Unfortunately, James was never as good at first person narratives, and he runs into an odd choice for Melville House to drag out of irrelevance: James has oodles of novella length short stories that they could have made available. The Coxon Fund might be good for teaching, I guess. In the absence of faults reaching a satisfactory mutual agreement is usually an easy matter. In most cases it suffices simply to exchange values (times, in the case of clock synchronization) and compute some kind of average. In the presence of faulty processors, however, simple exchanges cannot be relied upon; a bad processor might report one value to a given processor and another value to some other processors, causing each to calculate a different "average." Since each nonfaulty processor applies this function to the same vector of values, an exact agreement is necessarily reached. We show in the following sections that algorithms can be devised to guarantee interactive consistency for  $n$  and  $m$  such that  $n \geq 3m$ .

James 1:12 Blessed is the man who perseveres under trial, because when he has stood the test, he will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love Him. James 1:16 Do not be deceived, my beloved brothers. James 1:19 My beloved brothers, understand this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to anger. Including all the forms of declension; apparently a primary word; all, any, every, the whole. joy,  $\text{ἡ χαρά}$  (chara) Noun - Accusative Feminine Singular Strong's Greek 5479: Joy, gladness, a source of joy. From  $\text{χαίρω}$ ; cheerfulness, i.e. Calm delight. "The Real Thing" is a short story by Henry James, first syndicated by S. S. McClure in multiple American newspapers and then published in the British publication *Black and White* in April 1892 and the following year as the title story in the collection, *The Real Thing and Other Stories* published by Macmillan. This story, often read as a parable, plays with the reality-illusion dichotomy that fascinated James, especially in the later stages of his career. For the illustrator who narrates the story, the