

## “Mind, Absent Characters, and the Deployment of Ideology in Henry James’s Short Fiction”

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In one of the 1972 Wolfson College lectures on structuralism, Tzvetan Todorov made the influential claim that Henry James’s short fiction thematises “the quest for an absolute and absent cause” (1973, p. 74), though, close upon this, he cautiously qualified the validity of this sweeping assertion and confined it to James’s later, more mature story-telling of the prolific period between 1892 and 1903 (p. 75). Thriving on paradox and antinomy, Todorov proceeds to sketch the nature of this cause—it is *absolute* in the sense that the whole of the tale is a function of it; it is *absent* because it forms a notorious gap, a troubling unknown, that often persists even beyond the closure of the narrative; and it is a *cause* by virtue of its capacity to generate a substantive quest in the diegetic domain which tends to be replicated outside it as has been amply attested by endless critical controversy over old favourites like “The Figure in the Carpet” (1896) and “The Turn of the Screw” (1898). This driving cause can be an event, an object, or, most enticingly, a character, and Todorov subsequently reviews three stories—“Sir Dominick Ferrand” (1893), “In the Cage” (1898), and “Maud-Evelyn” (1900)—which feature absent or quasi-absent characters turned into so many gaps of dissimilar width either by the ontological intervention of death or by the epistemic constraints of a (literally) engaged centre of consciousness.

Todorov’s insights into the constitutive gappiness of James’s protomodernist short fiction were soon taken up and further developed within the temporal and intellectual bounds of classical narratology. Shlomith Rimmon (1977), for one, based an interpretation of James’s ambiguous narratives on the existence of mutually incompatible sets of textual clues which can fill in crucial gaps in diametrically opposed ways, thus yielding contradictory—though “equally plenary, consistent, and coherent” (p. 50)—readings of a given tale and making rational choice ultimately impossible. Meir Sternberg (1978) also addressed the issue of the Jamesian gap in the wider context of a full-fledged narrative theory focused around the notion of the expositional in fiction and its interplay with other systemic resources of the narrative text such as narrative agents, restriction of field, sequentiality, and spatio-temporal structure. And yet it is curious to note that the response of these scholars to James’s characteristic drive to open core gaps in the informational fabric of his fiction and involve the reader in their cancellation was somehow anticipated as early as 1868 by his brother William. “You expressly restrict yourself,” he wrote from Dresden, “to showing a few external acts and speeches and by the magic of your art making the reader *feel* . . . the existence of a body of being”; and then he adds, “You wish to

suggest a mysterious fullness which you do not lead your reader through" (1992-2004, vol. 1, p. 46). Making the natural concessions for William's use of semi-transcendental vocabulary in his comments—"magic of your art," "mysterious fullness"—what he implies therein seems fairly descriptive of James's reticence and proverbial partiality for the unsaid.

When James's suppressive turn specifically affects characters, that is, when, despite their arguable prominence at plot level, they are denied the narrative focus and the attendant attributes of physical presence, conversational involvement in direct speech, and perhaps some form of mental access, they do take on a peculiar status within the represented world. Instead of effective, independent beings, endowed with bodily existence and the capacity to act on the fictional stage, they are just sets of consensual or contrasting images distributed across a range of other minds which contribute traces of themselves, in uncertain proportion, to the reconstruction of absence. This is a complex, nested process that builds on both sides of the textual boundary and equally involves how characters form hypotheses about the identity, motives, and dispositions of their peers and how readers, placed at the top of the informational ladder, try to make coordinate sense of all the flows of intelligence that come within their purview while keeping conscious all the time that, in engaging this kind of character, they are being exposed to a fiction *squared*. By drawing on the standard toolkit of cognitive narratology, this paper sets itself a twofold goal—first, to outline how the notions of extended and distributed minds, metarepresentation, and mind embedding, which have been imported from the field of cognitive psychology by narrative theorists over the past two decades, can be used to describe one way in which character blanks may be acknowledged and dealt with; second, and more importantly, to explore how ideas are marshalled in a number of Jamesian stories, embodied in various epistemic positions within the fictional world such as characters and character-narrators, and made operative to oppose absence and thus attempt to bridge master gaps. Though the case study here will be the construction of Mrs. Brash and her unusual circumstances in "The Beldonald Holbein" (1901), the deployment of ideology in this manner and to this end goes beyond a concrete period of James's short-story writing and spans several decades, as references to "Daisy Miller: A Study" (1878), "The Author of *Beltraffio*" (1884), and "The Next Time" (1895) will attempt to show.

### **Interacting minds and the resistance to absence**

Based on the key assumption that both actual and fictional minds are functionally equivalent,<sup>1</sup> cognitive narratology has become a major emphasis within the much wider field of postclassical narrative theory. Quite confidently, one could argue that its emergence was both stimulated and paralleled by the evolution of the cognitive

sciences towards externalist positions, that is, from the “heavily intellectualist” conviction (Clark 1998, 516) that mental processes are confined to the neuronal level and cannot escape the physical contours of the brain to a more holistic view of cognition as extended into the world. When classical narratology tackled the fictional mind, it stressed its more private and introspective aspects and often reduced its activity to inner speech and its reporting (Palmer 2004, 53-86); cognitive theory, on the contrary, tends to view fictional *interiority* as *exteriority* and the limits of the skull as a fluid and rather arbitrary frontier at which the workings of the mind need not halt—hence the emphasis on integration and the “integrated mind” so characteristic of this approach (e.g. Young 2010, 1-25).

Minimally defined, extended cognition means that mental processes are not context-free and internal to the biological brain, but contingent on the body and environment of the cognitive agent. Cognition is embodied in the sense that it is shaped by sensorimotor experience, and embedded because it is a function of the physical and social medium in which the agent is inserted. And yet the depth of integration of brain, body, and world remains contentious. Internalists roundly reject it and insist that the locus of cognition is the cranial cavity (Adams and Aizawa 2009); externalists, for their part, are divided between those who believe that the three components of extended cognition are causally linked, or, put another way, that mental processing is motivated and pushed forward by external resources (Roth and Jornet 2013, 470-71; Rupert 2004), and those who reach furthest and hold the conviction that a physical element like an iPad or a social setting like a committee or a platoon is as integral to cognition as neurons and dendrites (Clark 2008; Clark and Chalmers 1998; Wilson 2000; Wilson and Clark 2009). In the latter case, the relationship between intracranial and extracranial resources is not causal, but constitutive; it is a symptom of “deep functional integration” (Wilson and Clark 2009, 67), resulting in units of analysis larger than the individual mind as has been repeatedly substantiated in relation to the functioning of memory (e.g. Hutchins 1995). Especially productive to the study of absent characters in fiction is the social situatedness of mind; in particular, the compelling hypothesis suggested by Clark and Chalmers about minds being interactively constituted by other minds (1998, p. 17), that is, socially distributed across a potentially wide spectrum of epistemic positions in the form of subjective images and mental projections.

The instrumental basis for extended cognition and socially situated minds is provided by the metarepresentational ability (Wilson 2000, 45). For minds to stand in constitutive relation to other minds and for mental operations to reach out beyond the individual brain, subjects of cognition must be able to identify mental functioning in others and in themselves and be confident, though not necessarily right, in making statements about its content. A typically human cognitive skill, metarepresentation admits at least of two complementary angles of approach, both connected to the kind

of argument made here. First, it is standard knowledge that cognitive systems—essentially minds—can represent objects or states of affairs by integrating external reality in subjective experience, and that these representations can be recursively embedded in further representations, now metarepresentations, which decouple thinking from world via an interposing mind. The thought or utterance “It was hot in that room” represents a state of affairs which already entails a first, tacit level of mental activity, since terms such as “thought” or “utterance” are nominalisations whose deep structures run “X thought Y” or “X said Y.” But if represented again as in “Julia thought [or said], ‘It was hot in that room,’” it becomes a metarepresentation with an explicit source, i.e. Julia, and a content, i.e. the conceptualisation of the temperature of the room. Recursivity is an important feature of metarepresentation, for the more levels a mind can process, the more prepared it is, for instance, to fend off deception and, should the occasion arise, to be itself deceptive. “I stared and stared,” says the narrator of “The Beldonald Holbein,” “till I became aware she<sub>MB</sub> might have fancied me challenging her as a person unrepresented.”<sup>2</sup> Four layers of mind occur in this passage, the transitions being signposted by “I became aware,” “[she] . . . fancied me,” and “[I] challeng[ed] her,” while Mrs. Brash’s awkward sense of not having been properly introduced forms the deepest layer of all. As in this example, metarepresentations can involve different minds, but also successive levels of the same mind (Rosenthal 2000, 265, 270, 282), since mental states can be represented by higher-order thoughts and constitute the basis for introspection as when the narrator of James’s *What Maisie Knew* (1897) tells us that “from the first Maisie not only felt it [the strain], but knew she felt it” (1985, p. 40).

Another angle of approach is to consider that the metarepresentational ability enables us to successfully handle local, context-bound, or contingent information, that is, information which can be true or not depending on its source and scope of application. To have communicative skills gives human beings no advantage unless we can store the information thus obtained with tags indicating the informer and the set of circumstances within which it is valid; otherwise, we are open to falsehood and deception, and what is worse, to corrupt perfectly wholesome information stored away in memory by allowing it to interact inferentially with dubious one. The evolved ability to monitor sources and consider information in relation to them allows us, for instance, to hold Julia’s report about the temperature of the room in abeyance, in a kind of cognitive sandbox, especially if we know that she is heat-sensitive and prone to suffer from heat exhaustion. If the content of Julia’s representation is effectively confirmed, precautionary tags may be dropped and her report becomes an “*architectural truth*” (Cosmides and Tooby 2000, 60) which can function as a safe inferential basis for the creation of new knowledge. The problem is, of course, when tags are wrongly dropped and heavily contingent datasets are viewed as universal truths. The information obtained from, say, reading a fictional work is generally stored

with strong caveats, but should the decoupling mechanism fail for some reason, the damage caused to the reader's mental architecture could be catastrophic.<sup>3</sup>

The foregoing remarks bring up two final considerations. Being the narrative text the acknowledged domain of indirection, all issues related to mind-embedding, source-tracking, and scope-monitoring are integral to any meaningful reading. When communicative tracks grow in number and circuitousness—author/authorial audience, narrator/narratee, characters among themselves, as well as mutual interferences and metaleptic transgressions—informational units must be identified, decoupled from each other, and stored with tags indicating their source—or sources, for it is quite common that datasets should reach us via several embeddings and refractions. To do this on a systematic basis is a taxing activity; it generates tensions between our innate predisposition to know *both* the content of a piece of intelligence *and* its path of propagation, and the tendency to drop tags and economise on cognitive resources. The default attitude to believe narrators is a consequence of the latter, which can be further aggravated when information is processed en masse regardless of sources and scope. Little wonder that serious misreadings may follow from such relaxation of the metarepresentational ability.

Equally relevant to the central concern of this paper is the fact that all fictional characters are absent to some degree, if only because giving a whole, finalised account of one, i.e. representing it for the reader in all conceivable respects, details, and relations, would demand an impossible amount of text and make a narrative totally pointless. Two types of absence may be distinguished—normal or default, on the one hand, and deliberate, intensified, or aesthetically motivated, on the other. The former stems from the inscapable fact that no storyworld can be represented in full, and so gaps are substituted for irrelevant material; the latter, on the contrary, tends to omit key information and pursues effects such as, for instance, those pointed out by William James above when discussing James's "mysterious fullness" and his reluctance to disclose it to the reader. As will be obvious by now, the object here is the treatment of the deliberate character blank.

For cognitive narratology, the construction of a character, that is, the extraction of a sense of personhood from a verbal string, equates with the creation of his or her mind, since the attribution of minds forms the core of narrative meaning-making (e.g. Palmer 2004, 137, 175-78, 201; Zunshine 2006, 10). Given the sketchiness of textural denotation either by necessity or aesthetic design,<sup>4</sup> a character develops at the meeting-point of *two* sets of data (Schneider 2001; Weststeijn 2004). One is obtained top-down from our stores of knowledge fed on previous experiences of both real-life and literary individuals, and the other culled bottom-up from the text on an immediate or deferred basis—in other words, by direct readerly exposure to a character's presence through physical action, speech acts, and reliable mental access, or, in the case of deliberately effaced characters, in distributed form across an array of peer minds which have

evolved sets of homogeneous or conflicted images of such characters by past experience, hearsay, or a combination of both. When this happens, the postulates of externalism and mental distribution come into their own, and character emerges less as an ontological essence contained within hard, somatic limits than as a communal project, a functional negation of an internalist metaphysics. As was to be expected, every bit of information contributed bottom-up to this end is utterly contingent on sources—i.e. the network of image-holding minds—which calls for the activation of the protective measures afforded by the metarepresentational ability. Exploring Mrs. Brash's case, a relatively unnoted though typical instance of James's absent characters, will provide evidence of the kinds of processes involved in her construction.

### **Locating ideology—the Jamesian way**

Systems, networks, arrays, and even gestalts (Herman 2006, 358, 367, 371, 374) are collective labels often attached to those sets of minds that jointly contribute to reconstructing absent character by acting as sources of metarepresentation. This is not a mere form of words, nor an empty naming convention. Properly speaking, a system is not an inorganic, haphazard collection of parts; it rather conforms to some organising principle which can be identified and discussed. This paper is precisely an attempt to suggest the existence of a regularity in this regard. It can be observed in a number of Jamesian stories whose presumed centres of interest do not take full narrative focus and are cooperatively assembled, in all or in part, by other characters via metarepresentation.

By no means universal nor confined either to a concrete phase of James's production, this regularity implies that those minds in the role of metarepresentational sources *do not tend to form random aggregates or occur in chaotic isolation*; they rather place themselves on an ideological continuum, or cline, and represent several degrees of commitment to the thematic dominant or central idea which animates a story and is variously known as "theme," "conchetto," "motif," or "donnée" in James's shifting idiom (James 1987, 91, 177, 121). This ideological alignment of minds, which involves a plurality of viewpoints and some measure of confrontation reminiscent of Bakhtinian polyphony, constitutes a genuine system, a functionally integrated meaning-making organism that can rightly be called a gestalt and has a formative influence on the construction of absent character. It is interdependent too, for whatever is predicated of mind<sub>1</sub> modifies mind<sub>2</sub>, mind<sub>3</sub> . . . mind<sub>n</sub>, which, in turn, condition mind<sub>1</sub>. The resulting network is thus deprived of extrasystemic points of reference, and this may often turn a perfectly simple activity such as plot summarising into an oddly absurd endeavour. In talking of ideology, moreover, it should be noted that the term is used in its standard sense, that is, a more or less structured set of ideas or beliefs preexisting

characters and even realistically mirrored from outside the fictional world. It is not a transient opinion on, or a personal attitude to, a state of affairs, though it can also partake of these. In "Glasses" (1896), for instance, every character that holds images in his or her mind of quasi-absent Flora Saunt has developed an attitude to her predicament which can be said to intensify along an axis, but one would be hard put to describe this as a true ideological progression. The critical remarks to be made right below on "The Beldonald Holbein" and other tales pivot on the treatment of three key factors—first, the nature of the *gap*, that is, the absent character and his or her circumstances which readers miss and must piece together top-down and bottom-up as previously suggested; second, the *driving idea* or ideological substratum enacted or manifested by the story; and third, the *cline* or, more precisely, its definition in terms of the different degrees of commitment to the driving idea as embodied by characters in their metarepresentational roles.

A fairly apposite background to the analysis of how Mrs. Brash materialises for the reader in "The Beldonald Holbein" is provided by such tales as "Daisy Miller," "The Author of *Beltraffio*," and "The Next Time," each published in a different decade of James's career. Both discrepancies and points in common clarify the type of construction Mrs. Brash is subjected to. In the first place, we have the dissimilar degrees of absence that affect those characters of whom the four stories are told; they range from Mrs. Brash's almost total effacement to Mark Ambient's significant presence in "The Author of *Beltraffio*" which, nonetheless, fails to determine his identity in full and leaves critical blanks as to his motives and the bewildering want of adjustment—at least in the narrator's eyes—between his radical aesthetics and his mellow social behaviour. More importance might yet be attached to the vocal option of these tales. Except for "Daisy Miller," which is told by a highly personal, probably male, heterodiegetic or third-person narrator, all the rest are told by standard Jamesian homodiegetic observer-narrators who share the same ontological realm as the other characters and become so involved in the diegesis that responsibility is often imputed to them for the deaths of Dolcino and Mrs. Brash in the respective cases of "The Author of *Beltraffio*" and "The Beldonald Holbein" (e.g. Reiman 1962; Kraver 2001; Yacobi 2006).

Even if they diverge on the width and depth of character gaps and on vocal option, the four tales show a compelling similarity in how intelligence is come by and passed on, that is, in the treatment of metarepresentational sources. Regardless of the nature of narrative voice—an issue that lost centrality in the early 1980s—all four are uniformly patterned in that respect. First, the three stories told homodiegetically display an obvious hiatus, temporal and judgemental, between the narrating self and the experiencing self which grows explicit, for instance, in the former's occasional allusions to the telling activity and the use of the present tense to refer to it. Second, "Daisy Miller," though a third-person narrative, displays a number of I-references

which, curiously enough, also denote the circumstances of the telling—e.g. “As I have already had occasion to relate” (James 1999b, 287)—and temporally point to the narratorial now. Third, all four tales have a situated centre of consciousness or internal focaliser embodied in a character, whether Winterbourne in “Daisy Miller” or the experiencing selves of the unnamed narrators in the other stories. The only difference is that the two selves of the homodiegetic narrator are existentially linked, and this does not seem to be the case in the narrative situation of “Daisy Miller.” Functionally, however, and from the angle of how information is circulated, the difference is just negligible.

But the most decisive common ground to these stories is their capacity to mobilise systems of ideologically sequenced minds in order to counter the effects of absence by setting up vivid simulacra of characters which are often discussed by critics as metaphysical essences or, in cognitive terms, as architectural truths rather than as contingent, source-bound constructions. Take “Daisy Miller,” a tale which could be invoked as an apt counter-example to Todorov’s argument that the thematisation of absence in James’s short fiction was limited to the period of ripeness just before his major phase. It poses a double epistemic quest—that of Winterbourne’s lame attempts at negotiating Daisy’s mind and that of the reader trying to make sense both of Daisy and of Winterbourne’s baffled representation of her (Graham 1993, 35; Walker 1995, 5). In this respect, the story is just another literary rendering of the difficulties involved in thinking about thinking when little or no extrasystemic support is forthcoming.

Setting a mind like Winterbourne’s as the centre of consciousness determines the core gap of this fiction. Though Daisy occasionally acts and speaks before him and the others, and so in a way before the reader, the flow of information is severely curtailed by the simple fact that her mind cannot be *authoritatively* sounded, one of the conventional indicators of undeniable narrative presence. From an internalist perspective, her cognitive processes remain strictly private and confined, so to speak, within the biological limits of her brain, which means that the motives behind her conduct and the bounds of her morality are critical blanks for which no ontological redress is possible. Hence, no reliable answers can be given to questions about Daisy’s unruliness being deliberate or not, innocent or corrupt, or even if the term *unruliness* fits her behaviour at all. The driving idea behind this tale is the treatment of the sexual mores and conventions of young unmarried women, obviously complicated by the occurrence of the international theme and its cultural ramifications. Though Daisy’s authoritative, scope-free attitude to this issue hardly transpires, the story teems with mental attributions made by a network of minds which hold images of her, recursively or not, and react differently to the driving idea. So, in a very real sense, one can say that her mind exists outside her brain, her identity being shaped piecemeal in distributed form.



The ideological spectrum of image-holding minds is easily outlined for this tale. At both ends we have the static positions represented by the Genevan women, Mrs. Costello and Mrs. Walker, both American expatriates in Europe who seem to overdo their Calvinist hostility against Daisy to cover their own tracks, and by Giovanelli, a Roman character who typifies a kind of Mediterranean liberal urbanity and whose calm representation of Daisy at her burial—“‘And she was the most innocent’ . . . ‘The most innocent!’” (p. 294)—reverses, or at least balances, the prevailing moral profile ascribed to her. If the ends of the spectrum are fixed and predictable, the central part is dynamic and thus controversial. Caught between Geneva and Rome, Winterbourne’s puzzled attitude to Daisy is essentially responsible for her conflicted identity, rather than the contrary. If Daisy has been described as a type (Lukacs 1988, 215), it is surely because she has been constructed as such by Winterbourne’s stereotyping mind (Bell 1991, 57-60), often bent on equalising differences and thinking of people in terms of what they share and not of what makes them unique, his exclamation “American girls are the best girls” (p. 241) being a fine token of this attitude. Winterbourne’s succession of mental states of doubt and certainty is notable. For most of the story, he tries to clinch Daisy’s ethical stance ineffectually. Meeting her and Giovanelli at night in the Colosseum tips the scale and he sides with the Genevan set—she is “a young lady whom a gentleman need no longer be at pains to respect” (p. 291). Then, at her grave, he seems to accept Giovanelli’s representation of her innocence, only to resume a hesitant frame of mind in the closing conversation with Mrs. Costello. Within a constructivist logic, Daisy does not provoke this hesitation; instead, she is shaped by it. Her elusiveness is not “inherent,” to borrow Weisbuch’s term (1993, p. 66), but rather the result of incompatible worldviews which construct her for the reader as a cognitive mosaic, much in the same way—it should be said—as it happens with any historical personage.

A similar pattern holds for “The Author of *Beltraffio*” and “The Next Time.” In the former—James’s earliest tale of literary life—a young American narrator, having sought for some time to meet his literary hero, the advanced aestheticist writer Mark Ambient, is eventually asked to spend a weekend in his family home in Surrey. During his stay, he witnesses a disturbing contest between Ambient and his wife for the possession of their small son’s mind. The story ends in tragedy, for there are grounds to believe that Mrs. Ambient lets her son die of diphtheria by withdrawing the prescribed medication lest he should grow up and read his father’s works whose ethical values she deems “most objectionable” (James 1999a, 886). This rather obvious reading tends to overshadow the true central gap of the story, that is, the actual depth of Mark Ambient’s aestheticist convictions. Such depth is fathomed for the reader by three metarepresentational sources that mould Ambient’s identity from contrasting angles, each geared to one degree of commitment to the driving idea behind the

narrative—i.e. the bitter antagonism between aestheticist and moralistic conceptions of art.

As in “Daisy Miller,” the ideological continuum features two ends and a middle term. Here, however, the narrator’s experiencing self—the functional equivalent of Winterbourne’s perceiving role—is not hedging somewhere between two poles, but so identified with the extremities of art-for-art’s-sake that he is discomfited to find evidence of a fairly bourgeois, conservative frame of mind behind Ambient’s behaviour which is out of step with the radical image projected by his works. Mrs. Ambient occupies, of course, the other end of the spectrum on account of her deadly resistance to the immorality of the aestheticist credo, whereas Gwendolen, Ambient’s sister and the narrator’s confidant, though affecting a shallow aestheticism in attire and external pose, twice questions the doctrinal core of this movement before the narrator by critically describing her brother’s ideas as “rather queer” and his theories as “very peculiar,” and by expressing qualms about art and beauty being above everything else (pp. 888, 895). So Mark Ambient is conjured up for the reader as a weighted sum of mental projections made from concrete, situated ideological positions. There is a Mrs. Ambient’s Ambient, the epitome of moral evil; a Miss Ambient’s Ambient, a more acceptable figure though not exempt from nuanced criticism; and, most interestingly, a narrator’s Ambient, conceived of as a dissonant individual whose contradictions arise from his young admirer’s preset views of what an aestheticist writer should be in soul and body. What Ambient does and says in public—read *The Observer*, keep on cordial terms with the representatives of the Church of England, avoid any direct clash with his wife, etc.—is felt to be incompatible with the spirit underpinning his writings and private confessions, and this sets the narrator on a curious course to justify and excuse Ambient’s petty betrayals of the aestheticist code in order to ease his mind and achieve internal consistency.

Finally, in another tale of literary life such as “The Next Time,” the missing datum is the true nature of quality literature as it relates to Ralph Limbert, the absent writer, and to the vagaries of magazine owners and reading public, while the driving idea lies in the shifting opposition between highbrow literature and its commercial counterpart. So as to keep his jobs and feed his family, Limbert attempts to write badly—that is, in chatty journalese—but apparently he cannot help churning out masterpiece after masterpiece which places him in embarrassing terms with his employers. The perplexing reversal of common expectations developed in this tale—a writer trying hard to write *poorly* in order to get published in “the age of trash triumphant” (James 1996b, 487)—oddly conditions the system of minds acting as sources of metarepresentation and their ideological alignment. Things do not seem as straightforward as in “Daisy Miller” or “The Author of *Beltraffio*.” The narrator, for one, typifies a stern view of maximal literary quality and thus constructs Limbert’s efforts to lower his standards as a contemptible course of action, though he feels

sympathy for his personal plight and recognises his splendid capacity for *failure*, that is, his natural disposition to write excellent prose even when aiming at vulgarity. At the other end of the cline, one finds Jane Highmore, Limbert's sister-in-law and an immensely popular author of sensationalist novelettes who wishes to be a succès d'estime once in her life, for in her simplistic mind, and thinking that Limbert's case is reversible, she holds literary quality as the automatic result of commercial failure. Ranking between these two positions, Mr. Bousefield comically wavers between a highbrow conception of literature and a pragmatic view thereof. He poses as an advocate of high literature and gives Limbert carte blanche to edit his magazine, but soon withdraws it and sacks him, we are told, as Limbert's contributions and those he commissions from other writers are sinking the journal. If we take the narrator's thrice-embedding report at face value, Mr. Bousefield's concept of high literature is just an empty shell.

In such bizarre circumstances, is the polarity between highbrow and lowbrow literature sustainable? Or, put in more personal terms, where is Limbert's literary identity truly situated? Lacking either a source-free account of the quality of his works or even a glimpse of them, any valuation of his merits is distributed—a function of the ideological make-up of those minds that metarepresent him as a writer. For all we know, Ralph Limbert can *simultaneously* stoop to produce trash, as the narrator openly suggests (“If it had to be journalism—well, it *was* journalism. If he had to be ‘chatty’—well, he *was* chatty,” [p. 493]), and soar so high that nobody cares to read him, thus causing his dismissal as the London literary correspondent for *The Blackport Beacon*. In the process, however, the idea of literary quality as applied to Limbert's practice has become fully destabilised and contingent on a network of minds that hold a priori ideological positions. No wonder, then, that Caramello views “The Next Time” as “deconstructing that very distinction [between quality and popular literature]” (2003, p. 95) which had emerged with the professionalisation of writing in Victorian times.

### **Aesthetic views and cognitive dynamics in the imaging of Louisa Brash**

In a notebook entry of May 16, 1899, James jotted down the anecdote that lies at the root of “The Beldonald Holbein.” Focused around one Mrs. Elliott's mother, a “little old ugly, or plain (unappreciated) woman,” who, at the age of 78, is found to be “*the* most picturesque, striking, lovely old (wrinkled and *marked*) ‘Holbein,’ etc. that ever was,” this anecdote makes an “AWFULLY good little subject—if rightly worked” (James 1987, 183). In the course of execution, as usual, James problematised this flat, source-free layer of meaning by making it contingent on a number of epistemic positions with the consequence that the resulting story is hard to summarise in the accepted sense of the term, and all one can do is to *interpret* it in fewer words. Yet, as a starting point for

analysis, “The Beldonald Holbein” can be characterised as a compact tale of artistic life whose painter-narrator is hired to portray Lady Beldonald, a shallow, vain woman of American birth. One day, during an afternoon party, a French fellow painter by the name of Outreau draws his attention to Mrs. Louisa Brash, Lady Beldonald’s companion, an unassuming American woman in whom he discovers the beauty, distinction, and proper demeanour to sit for a portrait in the genuine Holbein style. Despite Lady Beldonald’s incredulity and mild resentment, the narrator and his confidant, Mrs. Munden, create a sensation in London about Mrs. Brash’s suitability as a Holbein model, until Lady Beldonald, first uncomprehending and then frankly jealous, sends her back to America, where she dies of loneliness and melancholy after having experienced the addictive “taste of the tree” (p. 401) of fame and admiration. It is at least debatable, however, which of these facts and judgements are fully established in the tale and which are not.

The gap at the core of “The Beldonald Holbein” is, of course, Mrs. Brash’s beauty and her true assets to become a model for a Holbein portrait. Much more effaced from the narrative foreground than Mark Ambient or Daisy Miller, she is the paradigm of James’s absent characters, only outdone in this respect by deceased figures such as John Delavoy or Maud-Evelyn in their homonymous fictions. Given the focal option adopted by James her mind is never accessed authoritatively, nor her direct speech ever reported; at most, only three of her presumed expressions emerge through heavy narratorial mediation and an uncertain maze of blurred sources (“she absolutely declined,” “she declared that it was quite enough for her,” “All that was thus in her power to say . . . was that she was sure” [pp. 398, 398, 399]). Both the internal and external sides of her identity remain in conflict—first, we are told that Lady Beldonald tends to employ ill-favoured, physically displeasing companions to enhance, by contrast, her own charm and good looks; second, two painters, Outreau and then the narrator himself, plus later Mrs. Munden and an unknown number of inhabitants of the London artistic world, seem to agree on her beauty and grace; and third, we are also told that Mrs. Brash herself is befuddled by being lionised for reasons beyond her ken. We are thus presented with a series of divergent images of Mrs. Brash which are distributed across the minds of several characters, including those of the narrator-as-character and of Mrs. Brash herself. They result from recursive acts of representation and even self-representation finally coordinated, at the topmost level, by the narrative agent who oscillates, as will be briefly shown, between overstating his role as the source of his own representations or just ignoring it. In these circumstances, a set of key questions beg themselves. What does it mean to be “beautiful” in the storyworld of “The Beldonald Holbein”? Is it the flashy attraction that makes “men turn round in Regent Street” (p. 391), or a charitable name for a type of serene distinction, an odd state of beauty based on ordinary ugliness and often dubbed *jolie laide* (O’Farrell 2014)? Is Mrs. Brash’s beauty the consequence of a collective craze started by Outreau,

supported by the narrator, and adhered to by Mrs. Munden and the “London mind” (p. 398)?

Closely related to these questions is the central idea driving “The Beldonald Holbein.” Like those behind “The Author of *Beltraffio*” and “The Next Time,” this idea is oppositional in nature and takes the form of a polarity between a purely mimetic conception of art and one that emphasises its transformative, formalistic, imaginative, and autotelic features, i.e. its condition as an autonomous artefact. In James’s “The Real Thing” (1892), readers are confronted with a much-discussed paradox—while true members of the gentry are poor models for portraits of aristocrats, uneducated, vulgar, and morally debased individuals do very well. This can be read, of course, as a plea for the autonomy of art and an attack on its mimetic nature very much in line with James’s later view of this issue (e.g. Monteiro 2003, 45-46). The notebook entry on this tale mostly addresses sociological aspects of British culture and the waning role of the nobility, but from the angle of aesthetic ideas and the concrete function of models in the art of portraiture “The Beldonald Holbein” is “The Real Thing” revisited, its “virtually perfect companion-piece” (Thorberg 1968, 84). Obviously, as argued earlier, the minds that hold images of absent Mrs. Brash are not randomly thrown together, but rather reflect degrees of commitment to the driving idea just suggested.

Being artists themselves, both Outreau and the narrator boast complex notions of the relationship between nature and art which transcend the simple down-to-ground imitation of one by the other and which include transfigurative, autotelic approaches, and even possibly a performative idea of beauty based on its mere proclamation by those who are conventionally authorised to deal in these matters. None would be too averse either to rephrase the Horatian dictum as *ut pictura vita*. If further refinement were called for, Outreau would occupy the top of the cline for two reasons—on the one hand, because his perception of Mrs. Brash’s Holbeinian beauty precedes and conditions that of the narrator; on the other, because his French origin seems to add a bonus of credibility to his appreciation (Donoghue 2002, 225; O’Farrell 2014, 227). But, since Outreau disappears from the tale as soon as he has primed the narrator’s perception, the main ideological antagonism occurs between the latter and Lady Beldonald—a haughty though simple woman for whom a portrait is just a portrait whose execution must be essentially judged in terms of likeness. Outreau and the narrator represent Mrs. Brash as the perfect Holbein model because their mentalities are not dominated by the mimetic strain; Lady Beldonald and even Mrs. Brash, on the contrary, are totally baffled at what happens around them since neither can shake off the conviction that art is an imitative practice, a window open on life, and so that no one can make a Holbein out of an undistinguished face.

There is a further resemblance between “The Beldonald Holbein” and “The Real Thing”—that gentlefolk in both subscribe to mimetic views of art. Two threads intertwine here to explain this concurrence. First, James depicts in his notes the British

gentry as “just simply *being*,” as a useless, incompetent class that must yield when challenged by “trained, competitive, intelligent, *qualified art*” whatever its social extraction (James 1987, 55).<sup>5</sup> In this regard, he is describing the triumph of functionality over ontology, of the bourgeois ethos of *doing* versus the more aristocratic claim that it is *being* which actually counts. Second, both Lady Beldonald and the Monarchs in their respective tales clutch at ontology to protect their social station and show incomprehension and hostility to any kind of art seeking to reach beyond hard mimesis and thus depriving them of their existential privilege, for if art severs its direct bonds with reality and concerns itself with second-degree imitations—i.e. Miss Churm and Oronte, for instance—their role as providers of the *real thing* grows negligible. In this context, the closing lines of “The Beldonald Holbein,” in which the narrator ironically turns the tables on Lady Beldonald and takes secret revenge for her alleged mistreatment of Mrs. Brash, form a pointed aesthetic commentary. Lady Beldonald, we are told, “has come back to the question of her own portrait. Let me settle it then at last. Since she *will* have the real thing—well, hang it, she shall!” (p. 402). Apart from the phrase “the real thing,” ostensibly linking both tales, what the narrator does here is settle a score with his patron—since literal mimesis is her ideal, she will not benefit from the transformative, imaginative power of art, and will be represented as she is: vain, shallow, and dull.

Having dealt with both ends of the ideological continuum, some remarks must be made about its central portion. In principle, the issue with this middle part does not seem to be the *content* of the aesthetic convictions held by those who occupy it, which are quite similar to Outreau’s and the narrator’s, but rather their origin and strength, whether they are genuine or derivative. So, in *content*, that is, in their attitude towards the mimetic role of art, all epistemic positions or sources for the metarepresentation of Mrs. Brash are aligned together, except Lady Beldonald who remains fairly isolated despite an ephemeral admission that her companion “*is a picture*” (p. 399). This central part of the ideological spectrum is taken up by two minds, one individual and another social. The individual mind is Mrs. Munden’s, the narrator’s confidant, while the social one—an intermental unit in Palmer’s terms (2010, pp. 39-64)—is formed by the collective thinking of an artistic coterie associated with the narrator, called the “London mind” and “our set,” and scornfully described as “so happy a mixture of . . . the parrot and the sheep” (p. 398). Both bow to Outreau’s view of Mrs. Brash as circulated by the narrator. Critics, however, tend to place Mrs. Munden in the knowing company of Outreau and the said narrator (e.g. Donoghue 2002, 225-26), while the “London mind” is decoupled from this trio on account of their unwitting, apish adherence to Mrs. Brash’s Holbeinness. And yet it seems more plausible to align Mrs. Munden with the latter than with the former, and so consider her the only fully identified member of London’s collective mind and, chronologically, the first victim of the craze started by Outreau and fuelled by the narrator. Two reasons at least support

this view. First, her conversion. While the narrator had never seen Mrs. Brash when Outreau pointed her out to him, Mrs. Munden was already acquainted with her and had never thought she was a Holbein model. In fact, she reacts to the news like Lady Beldonald—she is “stupefied” and shows “a first fine vacancy” of surprise, though “[comes] round promptly” and accepts the performative claim of those who know (p. 392). Second, there is no extrasystemic confirmation of the depth of her new conviction, her response in direct speech being so unenthusiastic—“Oh, *is* she [a Holbein]?”—that one fears the narrator is misreporting, or at least misregarding, her later vehemence in “sprea[ding] the tidings” (p. 392). Mrs. Munden seems to be the prey of spurious consensus rather than one of its perpetrators, and all through the tale she appears more concerned with the ethical outcome of exposing Mrs. Brash to the limelight and then disowning her than with the aesthetic grounds for such exposure.

The discussion of Mrs. Brash’s imaging in “The Beldonald Holbein” would be at best incomplete and at worst meaningless without a sketch of how minds interact in this tale, that is, how they embed other minds, attribute mental states to them, act as sources for their metarepresentation, and, in general terms, display an acute awareness of other people’s capacity to think and represent reality, other minds, or successive levels of their own minds. It is from the cognitive dynamics of this narrative that Mrs. Brash’s extended, world-involved identity emerges as conditioned by the aesthetic ideology of her peers. First among them is the nameless observer-narrator, the typical homodiegetic teller of James’s later short fiction. Retrospection and dissonance concur in him, i.e. the ability to report the past from the vantage point of the present and foreground the separation between the narrating self and the experiencing self through present-tense verbs of recollection and consciousness (e.g. “I have not forgotten,” “It has dropped into my memory,” “I remember,” “I recall,” “I recollect,” “I think,” “I am afraid” [pp. 387, 398, 399, 400, 400, 383, 390]) plus references that betray the narrative stance and some grasp of the denouement of the tale (e.g. “the essence of my anecdote,” “drama,” “touching catastrophe” [pp. 389, 391, 391]). Retrospection, moreover, communicates a strong teleological sense to this story, since, appraised of its dismal outcome, the narrator shapes the narrative with a view to deflecting his ethical liability in Mrs. Brash’s downfall, a strategy that is especially visible in the use of such disclaimers as “[O]ur attitude’s a responsibility,” “Our attitude was a responsibility,” and “We had not been at fault” (pp. 396, 397, 402).

The cognitive map of “The Beldonald Holbein” is quite simple in outline and results from the neat distinction just mentioned between the narrator and the narrator-as-character. Its topmost, default layer of mind is constituted by a macro-operation of remembering self-attributed by the retrospective narrator and often explicit in the text. Within this general medium, minds interact by embedding other minds, recursively or not, and hypothesising beliefs, desires, and general dispositions. For instance, the narrator attributes a state of mind to his younger self which contains a reflection on the

interiority of another character as in “I<sub>ES</sub> understood that her<sub>LB</sub> life had its centre in her<sub>LB</sub> own idea of her<sub>LB</sub> appearance” (p. 383), though he often makes unmediated attributions from his retrospective vantage point such as “the poor lady<sub>MB</sub> had never known an hour’s appreciation,” “She<sub>LB</sub> couldn’t get over it,” or “Lady Beldonald was immensely fond of her<sub>MB</sub>” (pp. 393, 390, 387). Characters in conversation also attribute mental states to other characters. The experiencing self thus represents Lady Beldonald’s incapacity to “make out what we mean” (p. 397), Mrs. Brash’s loss of “her peace of mind,” (p. 397), or his own readiness to “understand her<sub>MB</sub> anxiety” (p. 384). Other characters do likewise. Mrs. Munden attributes conscientiousness to Mrs. Brash (p. 396), Lady Beldonald thinks she makes out the motives behind the narrator’s and Mrs. Munden’s attitude (p. 399), Mrs. Brash herself briefly discusses in heavily mediated form her own confidence in the narrator’s ability to portray her (p. 399), and so on. The entangling of minds reaches a curious peak when Lady Beldonald’s admission that Mrs. Brash “is a picture” (p. 399) is described as “the mere hypocrisy of her<sub>LB</sub> reflective endeavour for virtue” (p. 400). The cognitive structure of hypocrisy is an interesting one (Zunshine 2012, 154-57); it involves third-level mind embedment which, expressed in mentalese, would more or less run as “Lady Beldonald *knows* that the narrator *believes* that Mrs. Brash is a Holbein; so Lady Beldonald *wants* the narrator to *believe* that she *thinks* likewise.” Complexity grows, however, because the narrator manages to process a fourth level of mind — “the narrator *knows* that Lady Beldonald *wants* him to *believe* that she *thinks* Mrs. Brash is a Holbein, when it is not true.” This is just evidence that the capacity to handle additional levels of intentionality not only allows humans—and realistic characters—to avoid deception, but also to deceive their conspecifics.

Except for the occasional operation of the disclosure functions (Phelan 2005a, 12-13), storyworlds are only accessible to the reader via the images held of them in the mind of the retrospective homodiegetic narrator. So the issue of how the latter comes by the represented information—i.e. how it propagates—is of critical importance, especially in James’s later fiction noted for its aspiration to epistemic verisimilitude. Closely related is the question of whether the narrators’ projections are consistent, complete, and reliable, which heavily depends on their capacity to judge the amount of subjectivity injected in their representations or, in other words, on their capacity to acknowledge that the source for the represented content lies in their own minds and inferences. From such cognitive *honesty* derives in a sense a narrator’s trustworthiness—maximal when the contents of narrative statements that originate in his or her subjectivity are clearly linked to it, and minimal or uncertain when they are not. “The Beldonald Holbein” is a compelling case in this respect, for two major critics hold contrary views on the reliability of its narrator (Donoghue 2002, 226; Yacobi 2006, 276, 281-81). Both are right in a way, as the narrator’s reporting mode veritably oscillates between overstating his role as the source of his own metarepresentations



mostly through conjectural pointers and verbs of consciousness, and concealing it by withdrawing these clues. Two variables obtain here—whether removing the signs of subjectivity is a deliberate or an unintended, self-delusional move on the narrator’s part; and, more importantly, whether such removal communicates true authority to the narrator or just a simulacrum thereof, in which case the instructions for the reader to respond to, and interact with, the text have become corrupt. Allowing for a tongue-twister, this oscillation occurs between a state of reliable unreliability and one of unreliable reliability, that is, from the candid admission by the narrator that he is the source of his own representations to the concealment of this fact behind a screen of questionable authority.

A number of passages from “The Beldonald Holbein” can illustrate this oscillatory mode, but there is a sentence that may be read as its encapsulation. Lady Beldonald’s query “had the ring of impatience,” says the narrator, “nevertheless, on a scruple, it stopped short” (p. 391). Construed as a conjectural pointer, “ring” suggests that the attribution of impatience originates in the narrator’s subjectivity, whereas “on a scruple,” though surely proceeding from the same source, is presented as an unmodalised fictional fact (compare “*as if on a scruple*”). Evidence of the narrator’s epistemic integrity is quite ample, conjectural pointers and declarations of sources being almost ubiquitous. Two passages, however, are particularly revealing. One foregrounds the narrator’s overwhelming circumspection and concern with tracing what he reports to his own subjectivity, while the other contains an expression that destabilises a whole set of facts and judgements generally read as incontrovertible truths. In the first one, the narrator observes that “*something in Mrs. Munden’s tone, with the way she appeared to muse a moment, even suggested to me that what she ‘oughtn’t’ was perhaps what Lady Beldonald had too much neglected*” (p. 382, italics added). Here the narrator attributes Lady Beldonald a state of mind—neglect—but takes care to emphasise his role as the source of such attribution through a remarkable string of conjectural pointers: he interprets Mrs. Munden’s external signs *ad libitum* and even appends a final “perhaps” just in case Lady Beldonald’s disposition could pass for a fictional fact rather than an inference. The second passage occurs at the end of the story and purports to recount Mrs. Brash’s last months after having been sent back to America by Lady Beldonald:

Mrs. Munden remained in correspondence with Mrs. Brash—to the extent, that is, of three letters, each of which she showed me. They so told, *to our imagination*, her terrible little story . . . She resisted, on her return to her original conditions, less than a year . . . I know nothing of her original conditions—some minor American city—save that for her to have gone back to them was clearly to have stepped out of her frame . . . It wasn’t—the minor American city—a market for Holbeins, and what had occurred was that the poor old picture . . . was capable of the miracle of a silent revolution, of itself turning, in its

dire dishonour, its face to the wall. So it stood . . . till they happened to pull it round again and find it mere dead paint. (pp. 401-02, italics added)

What is reported here could be taken as a set of source-free facts and mental states, especially Mrs. Brash's death and her bitter dejection at having been disowned by those who raised her to fame. But the supposedly factual account of the letters is modalised by the glaring, though often overlooked, recognition that all is an imaginary reconstruction triggered by such letters. Even if "her terrible little story" escaped this reconstruction, it is obvious that the circumstances of her death—in theory even the death itself—could not show in her correspondence and, just as her Holbeinian beauty, they would have to be based on the workings of an a priori frame of mind. The narrator may be telling a tall story, granted, but he ostensibly declares that it originates in his—and Mrs. Munden's—imagination, and, in such circumstances, one might rather speak of an unreliable reader than of an unreliable narrator.<sup>6</sup>

The contrary situation, i.e. the narrator attempting to present subjective inferences as architectural truths within the storyworld of "The Beldonald Holbein," also occurs, its detection being more difficult and uncertain as its paradoxical hallmark is precisely the absence of textual indicators. Passages like the following, for instance, catch the reader's eye because instead of diffidence and conjecture they contain categorical assertions that hardly seem within the narrator's power to make:

. . . the poor lady<sub>MB</sub> had never known an hour's appreciation—which, moreover, in perfect good faith, she had never missed . . . What I thus came face to face with was, on the instant, her whole unenlightened past . . . Here was a poor lady who had waited for the approach of old age to find out what she was worth . . . She looked much more than her age, and was fairly frightened . . . when she had taken in my appeal. (p. 393)

Her<sub>MB</sub> whole nature had been pitched in the key of her supposed plainness. She had known how to be ugly—it was the only thing she had learnt save, if possible, how not to mind it . . . It was on the prior theory, literally, that she had developed her admirable dress, instinctively felicitous, always either black or white . . . (pp. 394-95)

As they stand, these assertions denote a kind of epiphanic knowledge weirdly obtained within minutes of having first met Mrs. Brash, and it is curious to note, moreover, that possibly the most emphatic, source-free statement in the whole tale—"We had not been at fault" (p. 402)—is that which readers feel to be more heavily tagged as it forms part of the narrator's well-plotted endeavour at self-exoneration.

The foregoing notes have attempted to describe one way in which the issue of the absent character can be addressed in Henry James's short fiction on the heuristic scaffolding provided by cognitive narrative theory. Much like Linda Pallant, Ray Limbert, Frank Saltram, the Rimmle sisters, and so many others, Louisa Brash is but a virtual figure mostly residing in the minds of other characters despite her capacity to

elicit vigorous responses from readers which are arguably based on the neglect of metarepresentational sources to minimise cognitive efforts. She is assembled according to ideologically dissimilar mental frames and thus endowed with an irreducible personality in the extended sense of the term, that is, as a functional unit made up of internal and external factors—respectively, her emotional reaction to being acclaimed and then cast off, and her facial features and general demeanour. Mrs. Brash is alternatively imaged by different kinds of attributions such as the narrator’s both diffident and seemingly authoritative comments which may embed other characters’ beliefs and dispositions, the speech acts uttered in conversation and reported more or less directly which, in turn, may also contain mental representations, and quite often by disconcerting fragments whose sources are simply untraceable, a case in point being the passage where we learn how Mrs. Brash replaced Mrs. Dadd as Lady Beldonald’s companion (pp. 386-87). No doubt it is an appealing hypothesis to say that James’s execution of his short fiction out of notebook material generally amounts to making blocks of content contingent on specific sources; and it is no doubt either that “The Beldonald Holbein” would be a key element to substantiate this claim.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> In this context, functional equivalence means that information about both classes of minds is obtained, processed, stored, and retrieved in much the same way, attributional uncertainties and indeterminacies included; see, for instance, Palmer 2004, 198-200; Palmer 2010, 19, 56; Ryan 2010, 477; Zunshine 2012, 150.

<sup>2</sup> James 1996a, 288; further references to “The Beldonald Holbein” will be given in the text. Pronominal ambiguity in quoting this tale will be avoided by appending these subscript keys: NS, narrating self; ES, experiencing self; MB, Mrs. Brash; LB, Lady Beldonald; and MM, Mrs. Munden.

<sup>3</sup> Ground-breaking work about human skills to keep track of sources of information and store data with source and scope tags was contributed by Cosmides and Tooby (2000). Zunshine (2006) first adapted their insights to the study of narrative, and other scholars like Phelan (2005b) and Iversen (2011) have used them for their own interpretive work.

<sup>4</sup> Palmer lists all the references, narratorial or otherwise, to Lydgate in George Eliot’s *Middlemarch* and wonders how a vivid personality can emerge from such fragmentary textual evidence (2010, pp. 93-99).

<sup>5</sup> According to Moon, James’s fin-de-siècle sense of the crisis of aristocracy was thematized in three 1898 narratives of salvation, “The Turn of the Screw,” “Covering End,” and “In the Cage,” in which what he calls a “sensitive, appreciative outsider” (1982, p. 25) is ready to uphold the values of the gentry and help its members to retain their possessions whether material or spiritual. It is obvious that different modulations of this sense of crisis underlie other tales of the 1890s and early 1900s.

<sup>6</sup> Note, besides, that the metaphor of Mrs. Brash dying with her face against the wall is replicated one year later in *The Wings of the Dove* (1902) when Milly Theale is twice represented as having “turned her face to the wall” (James 1982, 369, 372) after being told of Densher’s betrayal. This extratextual link surely discloses the author himself suppling material for the workings of the narrator’s imagination.

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