Henry James, 'The Coxon Fund', and the Impression of a 'fine central genius'

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IN APRIL 1894, HENRY JAMES WAS IN VENICE. He was staying on the Grand Canal in rooms that had until recently been occupied by his friend, the American novelist Constance Fenimore Woolson, who had committed suicide in January of that year. When James received the news, he travelled immediately to Venice, where he acted as Woolson's first literary executor.[1]

While sorting through Woolson's literary remains, James was also reading James Dykes Campbell's recently published biography of Samuel Taylor Coleridge. James recorded in his notebooks:

> In reading Dykes Campbell's book on Coleridge—it is so good that one almost forgets how much better a little more of the power of evocation might have made it—I was infinitely struck with the suggestiveness of S.T.C.'s figure—wonderful, admirable figure—for pictorial treatment. What a subject some particular cluster of its relations would make for a little story, a small vivid picture. There was a point, as I read, at which I seemed to see a little story—to have a quick glimpse of the possible drama.[2]

He soon gave the 'small vivid picture' its 'pictorial treatment': it became 'The Coxon Fund', a short story centring on a dissolute philosopher-poet named Frank Saltram. It could be argued that the tale was James's attempt to supply that 'power of evocation' so lacking in Dykes Campbell's work. However, the beginnings of 'The Coxon Fund' are not unique; James's fictions were often stimulated by his reading or, more frequently, by his conversation. The narrative of 'The Turn of the Screw', for example, has its origins in a ghost story related to James by Edward White Benson, Archbishop of Canterbury, (*Notebooks* 109) and similar moments of inspiration litter the notebooks. Nevertheless, it must be emphasised that what had struck James in particular was the 'suggestiveness' of Coleridge's 'figure': the Coleridge "type".

While sketching his characters and their role in the drama, James began to conceive of his central task as one of dramatization. His goal, as he saw it, was to dramatise the ways in which one might respond to the Coleridge "type": he set out to 'embody' 'the element of opposition in the two modes, the unimaginative and the imaginative, the literal and the constructive manner of dealing with him.' (*Notebooks* 90) James, however, became so enamoured with the theme that he decided to fashion 'a fine short (1 vol.) novel' out of it. (*Notebooks* 91) 'A good 100,000 [words] are already required,' he wrote, noting that the idea was 'far too fine and brave to be spoiled by mutilation—

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[1] See Leon Edel, *Henry James: A Life*, (London: Flamingo, 1996), pp.393-5.

[2] Henry James, *The Complete Notebooks of Henry James*, ed. Leon Edel and Lyall H. Powers, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), p.89. All further references are to this edition.

compression into the compass of 20,000 words.' (*Notebooks* 91) Again this is fairly typical, especially of the later James. After his theatrical failures in the 1890s he returned to prose fiction with renewed vigour. Several tales of the period were projected as short works but expanded into larger pieces, most notably *The Sacred Fount* (1901), which, according to its author, began 'as a small fantasticality' but swiftly grew to 25,000 words—'& was still but a third developed.'[3] Nevertheless, after laying aside 'The Coxon Fund' for a week or so, practical matters sent him back to the 'possible drama'. Towards the end of April James recorded that he had committed himself

> to [the literary periodical] *The Yellow Book* for 20,000 words, and I swing back, on *2d* thought, to the idea of *The Coxon Fund* […] I want to do something very good for the Y.B., and this subject strikes me as superior. (*Notebooks* 95)

Once he had decided to restrict the story to 20,000 words, things progressed quickly, and 'The Coxon Fund' was completed in May.

Corresponding with his brother William, James mentioned his upcoming appearance in *The Yellow Book*:

> I hate too much the horrid aspect & company of the whole publication. And yet I am again to be intimately – conspicuously – associated with the 2*d* number. It is for gold & to oblige the worshipful [Henry] Harland [editor of *The Yellow Book*].[4]

It may seem odd that, having recorded privately that he wanted 'to do something very good' for *The Yellow Book*, James would then disparage the publication. But this is characteristic of his epistolary discourse with William, at least where literary business is concerned. If James's attitude here appears affected and blasé, this can reasonably be put down to the difficult dynamic that persisted between the two brothers when it came to professional matters.[5] In any case, there is no reason to suspect that 'The Coxon Fund' was considered by its author a mere trivial exercise, a *jeu d'esprit*, even if it were indeed simply 'for gold'. Not only did the tale duly appear in July 1894 in the second edition of *The Yellow Book*, it was also published, along with three other stories, in *Terminations* (1895), and was included, finally, in *The New York Edition of Henry James* (1907-9), the novelist's 24-volume collected works, which were selected by the author himself. (By contrast, *Washington*

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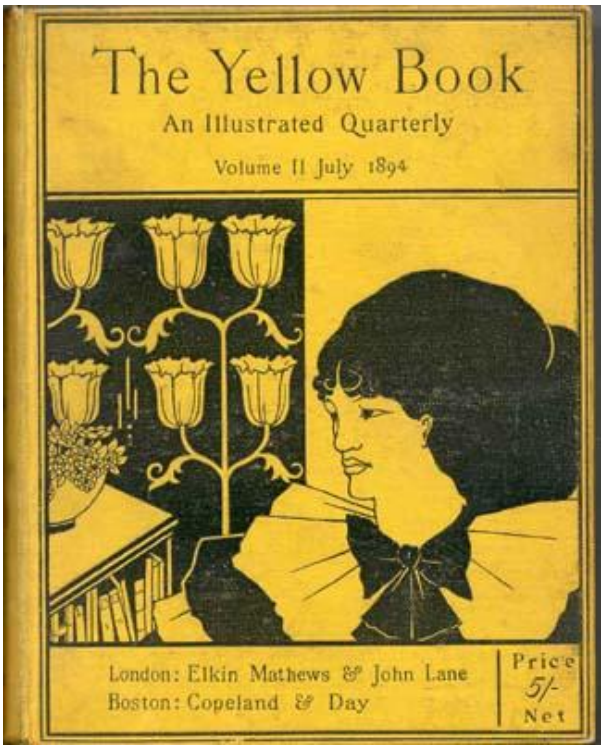
[3] Henry James, *A Life in Letters*, ed. Philip Horne, (London: Penguin, 1999), p.351-2.

[4] Henry James, *The Correspondence of William James, vol. 2: William and Henry, 1885-1896*, ed. Ignas K. Skrupselis and Elizabeth M. Berkeley, volume II, (Charlotesville: University of Virginia Press, 1993), p.312.

[5] The final expression of the brothers' differing attitudes to literary method might be seen in William's response to *The Golden Bowl* (1904): 'But why won't you, just to please Brother, sit down and write a new book, with no twilight or mustiness in the plot, with great vigor and decisiveness in the action, no fencing in the dialogue, no psychological commentaries, and absolute straightness in the style?' William James, *The Correspondence of William James: William and Henry*, ed. Ignas K. Skrupselis and Elizabeth M. Berkeley, volume III, (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1994), p.301.

Square (1880), generally regarded as one of James's finest short novels, was not included.)



The Novelist and the Poets

Why Coleridge? Leon Edel has argued that James was not 'particularly attracted to English poetry, and only to a degree to French, although he was far from insensitive to either.'[6] Despite the vagueness here—neither particularly attracted nor particularly insensitive—Edel is making the important point that James was often more interested in the figure of the poet as such—the "type"—than in the poet themselves, or in the poetry itself. Which is not to say that the novelist failed to engage creatively with English poets.[7] It is rather to note simply that James rarely produced criticism on poets and poetry. This might be put down to his general position as a novelist. As a young writer, James's critical output was often determined by the sort of review offered to him; whereas later, as an established figure, his criticism depended on the sort

[6] Leon Edel, 'Henry James and the Poets', *Poetry*, vol. 62, no. 6, (September 1943), p.328 (pp.328-334).

[7] For example, allusions to Shakespeare, Milton, and Tennyson occur frequently in James, and especially in *The Golden Bowl* (1904). For a discussion of the significance of English poets—rather than English poetry—to one of James's tales, see Jeffrey Meyers, "'Daisy Miller" and the Romantic Poets', *The Henry James Review*, vol. 28, no. 1, (Winter 2007), pp. 94-100.

of work he would accept.[8] It seems natural also that James *qua* novelist should chiefly be interested in the novel as a form. Indeed, his most significant work of literary criticism—the prefaces to *The New York Edition*—are, above all, studies of his own artistic decisions. When James did write on a poet such as Browning, it was Browning as dramatist ('On a Drama of Mr. Browning') or Browning as "novelist" ('On the Novel in *The Ring and the Book*') rather than Browning's as poet. In terms of James's own fiction, Edel notes that the novelist's

> stories of artists usually dealt with painters, playwrights or novelists; when he put Browning into *The Private Life* he made him into a dramatist; when he put Coleridge into *The Coxon Fund* he was interested not so much in the poet as the personality.[9]

The question of just how much Coleridge there is in Saltram—in Edel's terms, how directly the poet was 'put' into 'The Coxon Fund'—will be addressed below. But before turning to the tale itself, a consideration of James's other remarks on Coleridge is in order.

References to Coleridge are rare in James's oeuvre. The poet is never once named in James's fiction, named only once in the extant notebooks (in relation to 'The Coxon Fund'), referred to twice in the prefaces to *The New York Edition* (again in relation to 'The Coxon Fund'), and never alluded to by name in the letters. Coleridge does, however, appear *in propria persona* in James's criticism. In a review of Matthew Arnold's *Essays in Criticism* (1865) for the July, 1865 edition of *North American Review*, James found Arnold's 'incidental remarks' on Coleridge to be an 'illustration of the nicety of Mr. Arnold's feeling'.[10] This was followed ten years later in a review of Stopford A. Brooke's *Theology in the English Poets* (1875), published in the *Nation* in January, 1875, in which James observes that 'Mr. Brooke quotes from "The Ancient Mariner" several examples of Coleridge's subtlety of observation of natural phenomena, which are peculiarly striking in a writer of his loosely reflective cast'; James himself goes on to quote Brooke's selection from Coleridge's poem ('Oh! Sweeter than the marriage feast…'). (*Essays* 772-3) The 'loosely reflective' poet is mentioned once more in June of that year, in a brief notice published in the *Nation* of Thomas Moore and William Jerdan's *Personal Reminiscences of Moore and Jerdan,* edited by R. H. Stoddard (1875). James quotes in his review a reminiscence 'better perhaps than the average':

> "Told of Coleridge riding about in a strange, shabby dress with I forget whom, at Keswick, and on some company approaching them, Coleridge offered to fall behind and pass for his companion's servant. 'No,' said

[8] For the authoritative discussion on the subject, see Michael Anesko, *Friction with the Market: Henry James and the Profession of Authorship*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987).

[9] Edel, 'Poets', p.328.

[10] Henry James, *Literary Criticism Volume I: Essays on Literature, American and English Writers,* ed. Leon Edel, (New York: Literary Classics of the United States, 1984), p.715. All further references are to this edition.

> the other, 'I am proud of you as a friend, but I must say I should be ashamed of you as a servant.'" (*Essays* 1176)

This anecdote is clearly intended to reveal more about the *Personal Reminiscences* than about Coleridge himself. Yet in July, 1875 James again alludes to the poet, this time in a review for the *Nation* of Algernon Charles Swinburne's *Essays and Studies* (1875), in which the novelist criticises Swinburne as 'constantly liable' to

> flagrant levity and perversity of taste; as in saying that he cannot consider Wordsworth "as mere poet" equal to Coleridge as mere poet. (*Essays* 1280)

James's final mention of Coleridge comes in a preface to Rupert Brooke's *Letters from America* (1916), in which the novelist describes Brooke as amongst those writers whose artistic growth and poetic faculty 'have been positively in proportion to certain rigours of circumstance'—that is, writers like Coleridge. (*Essays* 747)

Prior to his reading of Dykes Campbell's biography, then, James possessed a working if incomplete knowledge of Coleridge—the fact that he is struck by the subtlety of the poet's observations on natural phenomena suggests that the novelist had previously been unfamiliar with such observations—and a view of Coleridge that was not altogether unique. Swinburne's apparent 'perversity of taste', for example, seems indicative above all of a late-nineteenth century attitude that would seek to place writers such as Wordsworth and Coleridge in a rigid hierarchy of poetic achievement. Further, there is no evidence to suggest that James took a deeper interest in Coleridge until he had read Dykes Campbell's biography. Indeed it seems mere coincidence that he read the book at all; certainly he was under no professional obligation to do so. Thus the fact that 1875 was James's year of citing Coleridge owes more to the exigencies of literary life than anything else. (The novelist was, for most of that year, resident in the United States and attempting to establish himself in literary-journalistic circles; in 1875 he produced 41 reviews for the *Nation* alone.) But if it is to be accepted that Coleridge was merely a marginal presence in James's literary life, why, then, does the novelist return to the figure of the poet, and particularly to the Coleridge "type"? The most reasonable answer is the simplest and also the most obvious: James's reading provided the necessary spark for a story. As an explanation this may not be entirely satisfactory, but it is all that the available evidence would seem to suggest. If we are to ascertain, then, what James made of Coleridge more generally, 'The Coxon Fund' is the place to look.

Richer Saturation

However, James's narrative technique renders a great deal in 'The Coxon Fund' ambiguous, veiling in particular its central figure. This ambiguity is principally effected by the use of a first person narrator, a device that James

employed with increasing frequency in the 1890s, and which reached its obfuscating apogee in the opacities of *The Sacred Fount*, a novel in which no final truth can be arrived at because of the narrator's apparent confusion about the society around him and the world at large.

Like the narrator of *The Sacred Fount*, the narrator of 'The Coxon Fund' remains unnamed. Unlike the narrator of James's 1901 novel, however, the first-person speaker of 'The Coxon Fund' is identified in the notebooks as James himself—or at least the self that writes in the notebooks:

> The formula for the presentation of ['The Coxon Fund'] in 20,000 words is to make it an *Impression*—as one of [John Singer] Sargent's pictures is an impression. That is, I must do it from my own point of view—that of an imagined observer, participator, chronicler. I must picture it, summarize it, impressionize it, in a word—compress and confine it by making it the picture of what I see. (*Notebooks* 95)

The question of 'point of view' is famously associated with Jamesian practice, and it is an issue which occupied the novelist throughout his career. But the kind of pictorial language here—the terms '*Impression*' and 'impressionize', along with the reference to Sargent—is unique to the novelist's later period. The latter half of the 1890s saw James experimenting with literary form in a manner quite different from his earlier, essentially realist mode of presentation. Indeed, Edel has argued that 'The Coxon Fund' is 'perhaps the first [story] in which James's "later manner" begins to emerge'.[11] While the above passage from the notebooks has obvious implications for James's changing attitudes to literary method, the emergence of the novelist's "later manner" has a powerful impact on our understanding of James's relation to Coleridge.

'The Coxon Fund' purports to be the story of Frank Saltram, a supremely gifted conversationalist who is hailed, by those who know him, as a universal genius. Saltram is also, apparently, a drunk, a loafer, and a prodigious scrounger. Indeed, the tale opens with the narrator musing to himself about Saltram's stay at the Mulvilles: ""They've got him for life!"" he declares, considering the Mulville's predicament another example of 'the familiar truth that remarkable men find remarkable conveniences'.[12] Naturally there are parallels to be drawn between the biographies of Saltram and Coleridge. Both enjoyed the hospitality of friends[13]; both became alienated from their wives; and the titular fund itself, a research endowment for an 'earnest and disinterested seeker' ('Fund' 425), may be seen to resemble the annual endowment provided for Coleridge by the Wedgwoods. This is far from

[11] Edel, *A Life*, p.395.

[12] Henry James, 'The Coxon Fund', in *Complete Stories 1892-1898*, (New York: Literary Classics of the United States, 1996), p.393. All further references are to this edition.

[13] Coleridge went to stay with Dr James Gillman in Highgate in 1816. Although he intended to remain only until he was able to reduce his opium dependence, he stayed longer than expected; he died in the Gillman household in 1834. The Gillman's, then, quite literally had him for life. This and other parallels were kindly pointed out to me by Graham Davidson.

incidental. James writes in his notebooks:

> He [Saltram] has the great Coleridge-quality—he is a splendid, an incomparable *talker*. He has the other qualities—I needn't name them here, I see them admirably, all, with the high picturesqueness of their anomalous, their baffling, despairing, exasperating cluster round the fine central genius. (*Notebooks*, 89)

Once more it is a question of picture and arrangement, and of the suggestiveness of Coleridge's figure. But just as James avoids confronting the poet's other qualities—'I needn't name them here'—the narrative technique of 'The Coxon Fund' ultimately obscures the figure of Saltram. The conversation for which he is famed is neither represented nor even quoted. The one public lecture Saltram is intended to give remains undelivered; the would-be lecturer has instead gone on a spree. Nevertheless, if Saltram "'*had* lectured he would have lectured divinely. It would just have been his talk.'" ['Fund' 405]) Again, there is a parallel to be drawn between Saltram's spree and Coleridge's reputed hedonism—'Bacchus ever sleek and young' as Charles Lamb once described him after a sudden recovery from illness, adding a comic account of his capacity for drink.[14] Similarly, Henry Crabb Robinson noted that, after being disappointed by one of Coleridge's lectures, 'the lecture hardly equalled his conversation'.[15]

Edel has argued that, in 'The Coxon Fund', James was attempting to express 'his belief in the supremacy of the artist, whose vagaries and idiosyncrasies society must learn to tolerate'.[16] Indeed, James's stories of the period such as 'The Private Life' (1892) address the divide between the artist and society, and especially the artist's struggle with the market. Framed in this way, Coleridge is a compelling example of an artist whose 'vagaries and idiosyncrasies' were seized upon by society, and often held up to ridicule. However, 'The Coxon Fund' is altogether more complex than Edel's argument would seem to admit. In fact, the body of the tale has little to do with Saltram at all; the focus is largely on the question of a marriage. The fund itself is in danger of being appropriated as a dowry so that the impoverished American Ruth Anvoy might marry the promising young MP for Clockborough, George Gravener. The tale, then, is presented as a series of conversations that centre on the marriage and the fund, and that take place between the narrator and his circle, with a particular focus on Gravener and Anvoy. Indeed, it is in these characters that the 'imaginative' and 'unimaginative' ways of dealing with Saltram are embodied. Gravener represents the 'unimaginative', and is basically a sceptic: "'Of course I've never seen the fellow, but it's clear enough he's a humbug.'" ('Fund' 397) Anvoy, on the other hand, is enchanted by the figure

[14] Marrs III 62, to Dorothy Wordsworth, 13 Nov. 1810
[15] Henry Crabb Robinson, *Henry Crabb Robinson on Books and Their Writers*, ed. Edith J. Morley, vol. 1, (London: J. M. Dent, 1938), p.51.
[16] Edel, *A Life*, p.395.

of the philosopher-poet: 'She regarded Mr. Saltram naturally as a tremendous force for good. She was intelligent enough to understand him and generous enough to admire.' ('Fund' 435) It is worth noting that these divergent assessments of Saltram—as 'humbug' and as 'force for good'—mirror the opposing views of Coleridge commonly held by his contemporaries.[17] Ruth Anvoy remains sufficiently convinced to ensure that the fund is given to Saltram, who subsequently produces nothing more, her offer of marriage is withdrawn, and she remains single for the rest of her life. But what is fundamentally ambiguous in 'The Coxon Fund' is the narrator and his beliefs. Indeed, he remains essentially uncertain about Saltram, and speaks only of his shifting and contradictory impressions. Although his response at the end of the tale to the philosopher-poet's decline would seem to point towards a kind of retrospective realisation of Saltram's worth, the narrator is silent for the most part on the subject. While there can be little doubt that James's personal views were on the side on the artist—Edel, in a characteristically psychological explication, suggested that the novelist's tales of the artistic life 'expressed James's disappointment in the marketplace as well as in the world of letters'[18]—'The Coxon Fund', like other late Jamesian fictions, cultivates ambiguity. Why, for example, did James fail to represent the conversation for which Saltram was so famed? Perhaps so as to preserve its mystique, or even so as to avoid the duty of having to craft such luminous talk. In any event, the result is that one can never be certain whether there is any substance to Saltram's conversation or whether it is pure sophistry. As in *The Sacred Fount*, the reader is separated from direct knowledge of Saltram; he is a kind of absent centre.

As for the question of how much Coleridge there is in Saltram: James himself had anticipated such a critical response. He had perhaps worried that he would be charged with depicting the poet unfairly. (Though it is unclear how unfair the depiction would have seemed at the time, if Max Beerbohm's 1904 cartoon is anything to go by, which shows Coleridge discoursing to a table of somnolent figures.) In his preface to volume XV of *The New York Edition* (1908), which included 'The Coxon Fund', James wrote that the subject of the tale

> had long been with me, but was, beyond doubt, to have found its interest clinched by my perusal […] of Mr. J. Dyke [sic] Campbell's admirable monograph on S. T. Coleridge. The wondrous figure of that genius had long haunted me […] Yet it's none the less true that the Frank Saltram of 'The Coxon Fund' pretends to be of his great suggester no more than a dim reflexion and above all a free rearrangement. More interesting still than the man—for the dramatist at any rate—is the S. T. Coleridge *type*;

[17] In chapter eight of his *Life of John Sterling* (1851), Thomas Carlyle speaks disparagingly and at length about Coleridge's intellectual achievements; Charles Lamb, on the other hand, took the opposite view. He is reported to have said, for example, that Coleridge 'teaches what is best': see E. V. Lucas, *The Life of Charles Lamb*, (London: Methuen, 1905), p.267.

[18] Ibid., p.396.

> so what I was to do was merely to recognise the type, to borrow it, to re-embody and freshly place it; an ideal under the law of which I could but cultivate a free hand. […] though, when all this is said, it had assuredly taken the recorded, transmitted person, the image embalmed in literary history, to fertilise my fancy. What I should, for that matter, like most to go into here, space serving, is the so interesting question […] of the story-teller's "real person" or actual contemporary transplanted or exhibited. […] We here figure the morsel, of course, not as boiled to nothing, but as exposed, in return for the taste it gives out, to a new and richer saturation. […] It has entered, in fine, into new relations, it emerges for new ones. Its final savour has been constituted, but its prime identity destroyed. Thus it has become a different, and thanks to a rare alchemy, a better thing. Therefore let us have here as little as possible about its "being" Mr. This or Mrs. That. If it adjusts itself with the least truth to its new life it can't possibly be either.[19]

Recorded, embalmed, fertilised: Coleridge is everywhere represented as more or less a dead thing from which life might spring, a 'wondrous' ghostly being from literary history to be resurrected and, above all, freely rearranged. To agree with James's argument is to conclude that, within the tale, Coleridge has been homeopathically diluted almost out of existence. It is the "type", rather, that has been borrowed and freshly placed. Indeed, it is the "type" alone that can be revivified; the personality itself remains 'embalmed' in history. All that is required from the novelist is a certain 'power of evocation'.

Again, things are more complex than they seem. For behind James's argument lies an ugly episode from his own past. He had in the 1880s been accused by William of caricaturing prominent Bostonian educator Elizabeth Peabody in the figure of Miss Birdseye in *The Bostonians* (1886).[20] Despite his initially protesting the charge—'Dear William,' he wrote, 'I am quite appalled by your note of the *2d*'[21]—he seemed, in the end, to apologise.[22] Some go so far as to suggest that the accusation led to a change in the way in which Miss Birdseye was depicted in the novel.[23] Although Coleridge was, by 1894, long since deceased, and though the two men had of course never met—James was born in 1843—the novelist here appears acutely aware of the critical tendency to ascribe a "real" basis to a fictional character. Rather than addressing the issue of plagiarism from life on a case-by-case basis, it is easier for James simply to declare 'let us have here as little as possible about its "being" Mr. This or Mrs. That' and have done with it.

The preface to 'The Coxon Fund', then, may be seen as addressing in part

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[19] Henry James, *Literary Criticism Volume II: French Writers, Other European Writers, The Prefaces to the New York Edition*, ed. Leon Edel, (New York: Literary Classics of the United States, 1984), p.1236-7.

[20] See Horne, *A Life*, p.169.

[21] Ibid., p.169.

[22] That is, after a fashion: 'even if Miss Peabody *should* think I meant to portray her (which, however, heaven forfend!), she cannot on the whole…' Ibid., p.172.

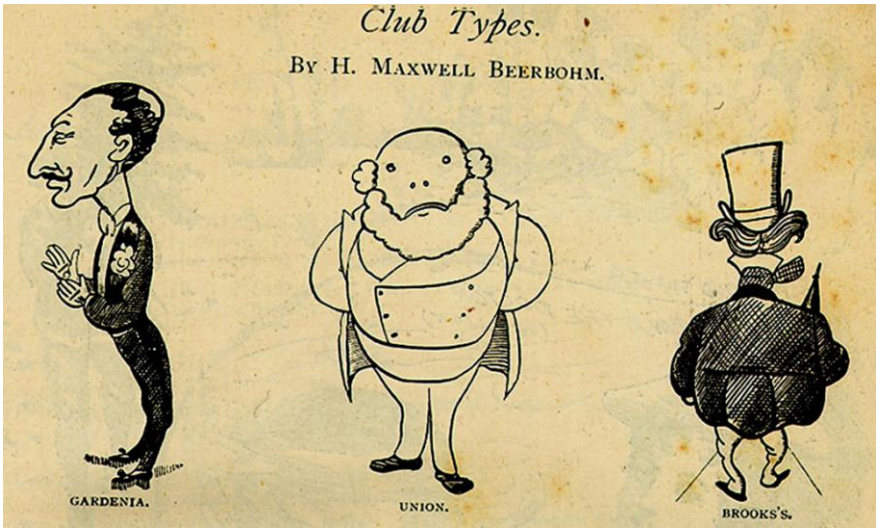
[23] See Daniel H. Heaton, 'The Altered Characterization of Miss Birdseye in Henry James's *The Bostonians*', *American Literature*, vol. 50, no. 4 (Jan., 1979), pp. 588-603.

the larger issue of the relation between the man and the work. For there can be little doubt that James would have been as hostile to such criticism as he was towards any future biographer.[24] What is at stake, finally, is the privacy of his existence and the mystery of his art. Indeed, the famous Jamesian subtlety and the infamous Jamesian circumlocution—hallmarks of the "later manner", and present throughout 'The Coxon Fund'—are important figurations of a characteristic evasiveness. So too is the presentation of Saltram, who carries secreted within him the kernel of Coleridge—but only the kernel.

And so despite the fact that 'the wondrous figure of that genius' Coleridge had 'long haunted' James, it is ultimately unclear what the novelist made of the poet. Whether a result of James's interest in the "type" or of more general Jamesian practice, the avoidance of a direct or even significantly oblique confrontation with Coleridge renders the matter entirely uncertain. One has only the impression of a relation between Saltram and the poet. There is, however, one further indication of James's attraction to the "type" over and above his concern with the individual. In January 1891 James wrote to Robert Louis Stevenson, informing his friend that he expected to see the art critic Sidney Colvin at

> a decidedly too starched dining-club to which we both belong, of which Lord Coleridge is president and too many persons of the type of Sir Theodore Martin are members.[25]

Even as he dined with Coleridge's great-nephew John Lord Coleridge, James was more interested in the "type" of poet and translator Sir Theodore Martin than in the man himself.



[24] In a letter to his nephew Henry James III the novelist that his 'sole wish is to frustrate as utterly as possible the post-mortem exploiter'. Henry James, *The Letters of Henry James*, *Volume 4: 1895-1916*, ed. Leon Edel, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984), p.806.

[25] Henry James, *The Letters of Henry James*, ed. Percy Lubbock, vol. 1, (London: Macmillan, 1920), p. 180.