Literature as Performance: Founding Spaces for Voice

In the recent history of literary studies, audience-oriented criticism emerges as a dominant trope for understanding the relationships between texts, authors, and readers. Barthes’s reclassification of the reader as a producer, and his elevation of an open, plural, “text” over a “work” that “closes on a signified,” emphasizes modern conceptions of reading as a form of writing.1 Yet, the specific processes that post-structuralism advances point back to older modes of criticism in an illustration of the dynamic relationship between history and literature. Thus, as Derrida resists logocentrism and dismantles traditional metaphysical hierarchies, viewing writing as both written and spoken language, he reaffirms the necessity of the text. I want to remain in the post-structuralist mode of thinking, allowing for the reader’s interpretive authority, but through that mode of thinking point out the inextricable link to the text itself, which provides the reader with voice. Granting the text performative power allows it to retain prescriptive agency and escape classification as a closed/ fixed “work” for consumption. I propose reading the productive collapse of hierarchies such as speech/writing and speech/action in Henry James’s *The Bostonians* through the lens of performance in order to explicate and expand upon Derrida’s deconstructive

practices. Ultimately, through the reverse process of using a text to read theory, rather than theory to read a text, I want to suggest that literature performs what culture has yet to articulate.

Situated in Reconstruction America, *The Bostonians* supplies a productive space for negotiating literary theory as it presents a society struggling to reconcile recent histories with a changing social and economic identity. Although all cultures perhaps lack definitive written records or consistent voices, all cultures, as well as individuals, seek determinate self-(re)presentation, independent expression. Addressing female emancipation, *The Bostonians* enters an ongoing discourse that raises the question of voice; its efficacy, authority, and origin. From what Jay Fliegelman terms the “elocutionary revolution” of the eighteenth century, to the problematic of Michel de Certeau’s modern “recited society,” the human voice both founds and invalidates its autonomy, perpetually shifting registers between the social boundaries that (re)define it. James’s novel, as it breaks down distinctions between speech and writing, production and consumption, renders characters’ relationships to voice undecidable and engages in a deconstructive practice, a practice that frees voice from the structure of restrictive binaries but nevertheless predicates efficacious voice on the negotiation of one’s social strata. Rather than simply locate Derridian theory within James’s text, however, I want to argue that by way of literature’s performative dimension, *The Bostonians* offers a rereading of deconstruction; the text acts out the theory that vocalizes new critical possibilities, new fictions of voice. Instead of investigating performance and its relationship to literature, I first turn to James’s work, since, as this
essay seeks to prove, the text provides the space from which my critical voice can emerge.

Before exploring James’s individual characters within the novel, one must recognize the overarching narrative structure conditioning the text’s interaction with external readers. Claire Kahane presents a concise reading of The Bostonians’ staging when she writes,

North and South, freedom and slavery, speech and writing, the tongue and the touch, public and private – the novel repeatedly sets up these cultural oppositions, binds them to the difference between masculine and feminine, and then provocatively flirts with their collapse. In its oscillating movement, The Bostonians…both institutes a radically dualistic structure and insistently shows the boundaries of difference to be permeable.\(^2\)

Describing the novel’s “oscillating movement,” Kahane locates instability as the basis for the text’s performative nature. James challenges his readers’ understanding of cultural binaries, and by insinuating the permeability of social boundaries, places both readers and also “cultural oppositions” in a position of flux. The “narrative ambivalence” (Kahane, 65) that Kahane describes surfaces most strikingly through the narrator’s intrusive, ironic, code-shifting, and self-deprecating voice. When introducing Basil Ransom, the narrator concedes, “It is not in my power to reproduce by any combination of characters this charming dialect; but the initiated reader will have no difficulty in evoking the sound…,” a comment initially seeming to solicit reader participation.\(^3\) But James’s use of the phrase “initiated reader” suggests a limited

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readership controlled by the text’s standards. Thus, neither the narrative voice nor the
audience dictates what the novel conveys. Another interjection conflating the roles of
reader and text, the narrative voice concludes,

> Did [Verena] ask herself why she should give up her life to save a sex
> which, after all, didn’t wish to be saved, and which rejected the truth even
> after it had bathed them with its auroral light and they had pretended to
> be fed and fortified? These are mysteries into which I shall not attempt to
> enter, speculations with which I have no concern; it is sufficient for us to
> know that all human effort had never seemed to her so barren and
> thankless as on that fateful day. (James, 318-319)

The rhetorical question invites reader input but the narrator immediately reasserts his
authority when he dismisses speculation. Similarly, while the personal statement, “I
have no concern,” emphasizes the text as merely a product of the narrator’s preferences,
the phrase, “it is sufficient for us to know,” includes the reader in the narrator’s editorial
decisions. To raise a question presupposes interest, yet the narrator denies concern, and
to explain what “is sufficient for us to know” presupposes extensive knowledge, yet the
narrator refuses further investigation. These conflicting narrative perspectives
jeopardize classification of the text as a “history;” the reader cannot trust the narrator’s
voice but, ironically, the narrator’s voice provides the reader with the knowledge of that
voice’s instability.

Philip Page further depicts this narrative anxiety in his essay “The Curious
Narration of The Bostonians.” He explains,

> James gave the reader a curious text in order to make the reader curious,
> to make the reader work, and, in his own words, to make the reader. He
> puts in quest the probing reader by putting in question the relationships

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among the narrator, the characters, and the reader. (Page, 374)

The technique of free indirect discourse facilitates James’s questioning and his ability to “make the reader.” At the same time the narrator assumes multiple characters’ voices, s/he rejects a narrative voice, a move challenging the practice of narration itself. For example, the line, “If we were at this moment to take, in a single glance, an inside view of Mrs Burage (a liberty we have not yet ventured on)” (James, 242), implies a penetrating and inclusive narrative vision, but directly contradicts the sentence, “Here again I must plead a certain incompetence to give an answer” (James, 319). The narrator, with the reader, takes the liberty to enter into a character’s psyche, but the narrator also deprecates his/her agency, forcing the reader to proceed with and without narrative guidance. What occurs inside of James’s text thus conditions but does not direct how one reads it; it’s as if the text offers a grammar with which the reader speaks an interpretive language. Page writes, “The Bostonians is a story about a girl who is manipulated psychologically, economically, and physically. At the same time the reader is made aware that he too is being manipulated. He is being forced to participate, to reach beyond the text and beyond the kinds of information that printed language can provide” (Page, 383). Paradoxically, through his desire to “make the reader,” James manipulates and acts on his audience, but those manipulations, by “put[ing] in quest the probing reader,” elevate the readers’ interpretive consciousness; manipulation at once seizes and grants power. The “curious” and “ambivalent” text, by teaching an audience “to read with the senses as well as with the reason” (Page, 383), prepares the reader to confront similarly disrupted binaries within the text itself.
Paralleling the dynamic between reader and narrative, James’s characters undergo seeming reversals in their relationships to voice. Basil Ransom, Verena Tarrant, and Olive Chancellor occupy roles as listeners, speakers, writers, and readers, but within a cultural system currently contesting the stability of those roles. The crucial question of women’s emancipation, and the redefinition of gender roles that emancipation implies, rethinks and challenges the concept of an independent voice, free from social constructs. A liberated female voice transcends confinement within a gendered discourse, supersedes subjugation to a privileged masculine tone, but a liberated voice also presupposes culturally defined and acknowledged male/female roles, roles without which liberation would not exist. Thus, James’s characters, in their relationships to self-presentation, demonstrate as much ambivalence as the narrative structure; as Ransom, Verena, and Olive challenge and/or seek to consolidate the borders of their social positions they cannot escape the social institutions by which others judge them. James opens his text with a description of Basil Ransom, rife with contradiction, which resists concrete interpretation of the “most important personage in [his] narrative” (James, 6):

…the young man looked poor – as poor as a young man could look who had such a fine head and such magnificent eyes. Those of Basil Ransom were dark, deep, and glowing; his head had a character of elevation which fairly added to his stature…These things, the eyes especially, with their smoldering fire, might have indicated that he was to be a great American statesman; or, on the other hand, they might simply have proved that he

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5 Sarah Blaire, in “Realism, Culture, and the Place of the Literary: Henry James and The Bostonians,” understands “culture” as “a set of institutions and exchanges in which citizens are made, [and] definitive communal and national ideas are forged” (Blaire, 153). I want to use this definition but also conceptualize “culture” in terms of literary studies, where “culture” denotes current theoretical and interpretive practices.
came from Carolina or Alabama. He came, in fact, from Mississippi... (James, 6)

Dark and deep but glowing with smoldering fire, Ransom’s eyes “might” denote his possible greatness or “might” indicate his origins, but the opposing terms and vague references prevent one from fully confirming what Ransom’s eyes express. And, as the narrator points out, “He came, in fact, from Mississippi,” a comment challenging the efficacy of communication through physical representation and foreshadowing the broader question of felicitous communication itself. A character supposedly a “representative of his sex” (James, 6), Ransom, for the majority of the text appears an impotent, unpublished author. Perpetually absorbed in a book, he appears more a reader than a writer, a distinction undermining his portrayal as the emblematic masculine figure; before one even learns Ransom’s name, one learns that, “he had taken up the volume from a table as soon as he came in, and, standing there, after a single glance round the apartment, had lost himself in its pages” (James, 5). An unnamed visitor, Ransom withdraws into the words of another. In another incident, “He looked at some of the books and saw that his cousin read German; and his impression of the importance of this…was not diminished by the fact that he himself had mastered the tongue” (James, 15). Although Ransom lacks a voice of his own he can speak another’s language, an ability he deems important. Finally, when walking the Cape Cod streets, Ransom “made the reflection, as he went, that to see a place for the first time at night is like reading a foreign author in a translation” (James, 278), an unusual sentiment that ironically continues to situate Ransom, the man without a voice, in a literary, or
linguistic, register.

The narrator works within this linguistic register in order to perpetuate Ransom’s voicelessness while at the same time problematically insinuate Ransom’s ability to communicate:

The historian who has gathered these documents together does not deem it necessary to give a larger specimen of Verena’s eloquence, especially as Basil Ransom, through whose ears we are listening to it, arrived, at this point, at a definite conclusion. (James, 208-209).

Although the “historian” seems to surrender his/her voice to Ransom, only through Ransom’s ears does one glean information. Just as Ransom listens to Verena’s eloquence and arrives at “a definite conclusion,” so too must the reader listen, through Ransom, in order to experience and characterize Verena. Rather than a spokesman for his sex and the reader, verbalizing knowledge, Ransom functions as a medium through which one accesses knowledge. Yet, while a lack of voice seemingly diminishes Ransom’s agency, the cultural situation in which he participates offers different views of how voice functions. The narrator confides, “Though [Ransom] thought the age too talkative, as I have hinted, he liked to talk as well as any one; but he could hold his tongue, if that were more expressive, and he usually did so when his perplexities were greatest” (James, 149). Characterizing the age as “too talkative” depicts an excess of speech, a superfluity, and the resultant emptiness of spoken language. Because Ransom likes “to talk as well as anyone” he asserts a desire for and the ability to possess language, but the image of him “holding his tongue” signals a power associated with withholding one’s voice. The productivity of silence, the potential expressiveness of
holding one’s tongue, marks Ransom as articulate.

But Ransom fails consistently to mediate either his own relation to speech or the relation between speech and more general social communication:

The whole generation is womanized; the masculine tone is passing out of the world; it’s a feminine, a nervous, a hysterical, chattering, canting age, an age of hollow phrases and false delicacy and exaggerated solicitudes and coddled sensibilities...The masculine character, the ability to dare and endure, to know and yet not fear reality, to look the world in the face and take it for what it is – a very queer and partly very base mixture – that is what I want to preserve, or rather, as I may say, to recover...(James, 260)

Predicated on a womanized generation, the “masculine tone” recedes, surrendering to a feminine voice that threatens the efficacy of spoken words; “hysterical” and “hollow phrases” render speech, specifically male speech, ineffectual. Situating his discourse within the cultural context of female emancipation, Ransom illustrates how the question of voice problematizes traditional gender dynamics and concerns more than simply the efficacy of speech; a liberated women’s voice threatens masculinity’s identity. For Ransom, reviving the masculine “tone” means “preserving” or “recovering” the masculine character, a statement reaffirming the performativity, as well as representative ability, of voice; speech can “preserve” or maintain the male figure, “recover” or restore the male figure, and symbolize or embody the male figure. Ransom’s lengthy pronouncement, contrasting with his earlier inclination to silence, displays both a reversion to the established hierarchy privileging a powerful male voice, and also a resistance to voice, the female voice, which threatens that exact hierarchy; the spoken voice is at once “hollow” and “representative,” and the written voice, or silence, is both “expressive” and also passive. In order for Ransom to “look
the world in the face and take it for what it is,” he must preserve an authoritative voice, but that “masculine tone,” or the male/female distinction itself, faces unmitigated revision from emerging female speech. One can deduce from the generation undergoing yet opposing feminization, propounding yet resisting the woman’s voice, a hybrid form of unarticulated language.

Thus, by the end of the text Ransom performs a seeming reversal in his relationship to voice that, in its undecidability, redefines the speech/writing dynamic. At first only a reader, “dipping into literature” (James, 279), and a voiceless representative of his sex who has “written many things, but [who] can’t get them printed” (James, 259), Ransom later emerges a published author. “At any rate, the simple fact that it is to be published makes an era in my life” (James, 287), he confesses, expressing the significance of his first accepted article. “He speaks with the pen” (James, 287) Verena exclaims, provocatively joining the spoken and written word. But Ransom can’t confirm his work’s publication date, and Olive mockingly questions Verena, “Is that what he proposes to support you with – his pen?” (James, 294). Achieving authorial status doesn’t render Ransom any more potent than his ability to remain silent, rather, the responses his performances solicit teach a new means of communication, a language which arises anew from shifting conceptions of the socially constructed speech/writing binary and which surfaces at the novel’s close. The final chapter of James’s text begins with the phrase, “Ransom made no reply; he was watching the door” (James, 341). Initial silence and observation, met with the desired effect of Verena opening the door, marks Ransom’s felicitous response to his struggle
with language. Moments later, in one of his strikingly few lines, Ransom says, “I have been waiting for you – a long time” (James, 341). Thus, with a mix of silence and speech, action and voice, Ransom succeeds in possessing Verena. The “most important personage in [James’s] narrative” (James, 6), Ransom, the reader, performs within the collapsed hierarchy of spoken and written words, and “palpitating with his victory” (James, 349) achieves a desired union, a union which, if meant to recover his masculine dominance, appears successful.

Supposedly a mouthpiece for women, like Ransom the representative for men, Verena too negotiates the problematic of voice and self-presentation, vacillating between an embodiment of oratorical ideals and a true expression of meaning. Her first words, “It is not me, mother” (James, 44), and the description of “The voice that spoke from her lips” (James, 44), immediately challenges the authenticity of Verena’s speech, classifying it as recitation devoid of meaning. “Oh, it isn’t me, you know; it’s something outside!” (James, 62) Verena exclaims, to which the narrator responds, “She tossed this off lightly, as if she were in the habit of saying it, and Olive wondered whether it were a sincere disclaimer or only a phrase of the lips” (James, 63). Here Verena herself denies genuine speech, Olive challenges that denial as possibly “only a phrase of the lips,” but either reading devalues Verena’s words. Claire Kahane, addressing the role of women’s voices in The Bostonians, describes Verena as the object rather than the subject of speech, and writes, “Verena assumes no agency for her speech; rather, she is a vessel, a medium inspired by her father’s laying on of hands to speak a text that passes through her in a voice that captivates her audience” (Kahane, 66). The image of Verena as a
vessel, and as a medium through which one reads a text, emphasizes the physical rather than verbal nature of her communications, and alerts one to the fact that only through other characters can one hear and evaluate her speech.

Paradoxically, while Ransom’s observations perpetuate Verena’s voicelessness, diffusing the meaning of her spoken words, he also confirms the agency of her elocutionary genius:

The effect was not in what she said, though she said some such pretty things, but in the picture and figure of the half-bedizened damsel (playing, now again, with her red fan), the visible freshness and purity of the little effort. When she had gained confidence she opened her eyes, and their shining softness was half the effect of her discourse. It was full of school-girl phrases, of patches of remembered eloquence, of childish lapses of logic, of flights of fancy…It was simply a personal exhibition…

(James, 49)

Descriptions such as “school-girl phrases,” “patches of remembered eloquence,” and “flights of fancy,” imply borrowed language and render Verena’s discourse false. Instead of a personal confession, a speech illuminating her position on female emancipation, Verena stages a “personal exhibition,” performing remembered words. But Ransom notes the “effect” of her performance, and although the “pretty things” she says lack linguistic force, the way in which she says them, her appearance as a “half-bedizened damsel” exerting little effort, and the “shinning softness” of her eyes, wields tangible power. Jay Fliegelman provides a historical context in which to situate the efficacy of Verena’s performance, as communicated by Ransom, when he describes the elocutionary revolution: “[natural spoken language] was composed not of words themselves, but of the tones, gestures, and expressive countenance with which a
speaker delivered those words”…the credibility of the argument [was] contingent on the emotional credibility of the speaker…audiences listen to tone and not to sense for the true meaning of a speech.”⁶ Verena’s oratory adeptness, where power lies in the presentation rather than content of speech, thus forestalls and contradicts the feminist project; voice deflects progressive meaning rather than embody it:

…Basil Ransom made his reflections on the crazy character of the age in which such a performance as [Verena’s] was treated as an intellectual effort, a contribution to a question…her meaning faded again into the agreeable vague, and he simply felt her presence, tasted her voice. Yet the act of reflection was not suspended; he found himself rejoicing that she was so weak in argument, so inevitably verbose. The idea that she was brilliant, that she counted as a factor only because the public mind was in a muddle, was not an humiliation to him but a delight; it was a proof that her apostleship was all nonsense, the most passing of fashions…(James, 209)

The “crazy character of the age” and muddled public mind conflate performance and verbosity with authentic intellectual articulation; Verena’s appeal lies strictly in her physical force. As Ransom himself admits, “he simply felt her presence, tasted her voice.”⁷ Words merely serve as supplements to physical actions, as Verena’s public success conveys. Ransom’s judgments, because they originate from a representative of the male sex, therefore confirm that women’s emancipation requires more than corporeal verbosity, a demand that continues to illustrate the paradox of a disrupted speech/action binary; a liberated voice necessitates voice, but that voice always

⁷ Kahane articulates Ransom’s reading of Verena when she writes, “Obliterating the words as signifiers, Basil persistently hears only the music of [Verena’s] voice, the erotics of the voice, the voice of the nightingale. She can sing but not signify; she can give pleasure but not ‘mean.’ Thinking that ‘she speechifies as a bird sings” (216), ‘I don’t listen to your ideas,’ he tells her. ‘I listen to your voice’ (316).
emanates from the gendered body that produces it. While Verena can effectively “unroll a coil of propositions dedicated even to a private interest with the most touching, most cumulative effect” (James, 234), thereby remaining in a linguistic system, her “earnest,” “delightful” eyes “seemed to say that the only thing in life she cared for was to put the truth into a form that would render conviction irresistible” (James, 206), a display maintaining her dependence on physical presentation.

The second half of the text further problematizes Verena’s relationship with the conflated speech/meaning, voice/action dichotomies. Despite “all that pretty moonshine” (James, 71), and lack of authorial potency, Verena utilizes her “human voice” as a means of influence, but ultimately that “voice,” which only appears through others, fails her. After Ransom openly declares his love for Verena, the narrator documents a confrontation between Olive and Verena:

It was Verena who talked incessantly, Verena who was in a state entirely new to her, and, as any one could see, in an attitude entirely unnatural and overdone…one must bear in mind […] her familiarity with the vocabulary of emotion…She had learned to breath and move in a rarefied air as she would have learned Chinese if her success in life had depended upon it; but this dazzling trick, and all her artlessly artful facilities, were not a part of her essence, an expression of her innermost preferences. (James, 296)

Here Verena’s voice and attitude, “unnatural and overdone,” founder, and her “familiarity with the vocabulary of emotion” signal its own incoherence with her “innermost preferences.” Verena’s “dazzling trick” of oratory simply masks her “essence.” Ironically, the sudden effusion of speech marks Verena’s transition to silence, albeit a communicative silence. In a later interaction with Olive, Verena,
"expressed [her shame] by no protest and no explanation; she appeared not even to wish to hear the sound of her own voice. Her silence itself was an appeal…” (James, 321). The narrator attempts to fully undermine Verena’s performative power, asking, “A woman who listens is lost, the old proverb says; and what had Verena done for the last three weeks but listen?” (James, 313), yet the novel’s final scene suggests the futility of the narrator’s attempt.

At first, Ransom’s words, “the most effective and penetrating he had uttered, had sunk into [Verena’s] soul and worked and fermented there. She had come at last to believe them…They had kindled a light in which she saw herself afresh…” (James, 299). Now a listener rather than a speaker, Verena experiences penetration by a masculine language, but that language never fully attains its aim and Verena returns to Boston with Olive. Only when Ransom physically inserts himself between Verena and Olive does Verena relent. Depicted as an assassin (James, 333), Ransom exerts silent but deadly force and “thrust[ing] the hood of Verena’s cloak over her head, to conceal her face and identity” (James, 349) he renders Verena, the speaker, mute; he literally cloaks Verena’s physical performance, and figuratively endeavors to cloak her verbal performance. Consistent, however, with the collapsed speech/action, voice/meaning hierarchies plaguing one’s reading, Verena gets the last word. Although unsuccessfully calling for Olive, she sheds tears, an authentic communication unmediated by other characters’ judgments, and the narrator confides, “these were not the last she was destined to shed” (James, 350). Verena no longer works with the literal medium of words but she continues to perform nonetheless, and from her action arises unspoken
words for her audience to articulate. While failing to precipitate female emancipation, or to speak a voice distinct from her socially perceived body, Verena exits the text with silent but suggestive tears. She exhibits a bodily response (whether conscious or unconscious) that by resisting the social institution into which Ransom carries her, preserves the potential for her voice; silent tears assert that Verena Tarrant will continue to be heard by those who witness her neither fully silent, nor fully spoken, production.

While Verena and Ransom both represent characters manipulated by but also advantageously working from within the collapse of traditional hierarchies, Olive perhaps embodies the most poignant product of social deconstruction. A feminist seeking women’s emancipation, Olive paradoxically lacks a public voice, instead exerting her influence through physical transactions and private communications. “Morbid” and “subject to fits of tragic shyness” (James, 10), she exclaims, “I can’t talk to those people, I can’t…I want to give myself up to others; I want to know everything that lies beneath and out of sight…I want to do something – oh, I should like so to speak! (James, 29-30).” Juxtaposing speech with the ability to “know everything that lies beneath,” Olive describes and craves a penetrative, masculine voice, but her desire to “give [herself] up to others” resonates with a feminine inclination to silence and submission. So with “earnest” (James, 30), “extraordinary” (16), “strange, uneasy” (225), and “glittering” (348) eyes, perpetually fixed on the ground, Olive performs a silent communication with others. She seeks to “enter into” (James, 66) Verena’s life, and “it was with [a] quick survey, omitting nothing, that Olive took possession of her” (James, 62). In a similar demonstration of wordless action that completes her
“possession” of Verena, Olive presents Mr. Tarrant with a cheque and “looked at him with a face in which she intended to express that there was nothing that need detain him longer” (James, 129). Olive thereby seems to substitute the performative language of the body for her absent vocalizations.

But physical communication, such as the expressive but ultimately futile “silent kiss” (James, 234), cannot succeed alone, and Olive demonstrates this tension with her latent oratory prowess; she fluctuates between corporeal and vocal, public bodily displays and private verbal articulations. Through Verena one learns:

…she seems to show all that’s in herself…It’s so interesting to me to hear what I have always felt. If [Olive] wasn’t afraid of facing the public, she would go far ahead of me. But she doesn’t want to speak herself; she only wants to call me out…[Olive] makes my speeches – or the best part of them. She tells me what to say – the real things, the strong things…(James, 78-79, 175).

If Olive can “show” herself when speaking to Verena, and express what Verena feels, she possesses verbal aptitude. She bestows Verena with words, “the real things, the strong things,” which implies the strength of her voice, a voice that Verena believes “would go far ahead of me.” Olive’s voice however, never asserts itself in public; only through the medium of Verena do her words penetrate the public ear, an exchange that both privileges the power of the word and also subordinates the word to a physical presence. “The touch of Olive’s tone work[s] a spell” (James, 108) but Verena takes “the words from her friend’s less persuasive lips” (James, 122) and re-speaks them with her own “gift of expression” (James, 303). Contrasting the agency of Olive’s words with the “conscious, anxious silence to which she was so much of the time condemned” (James,
the narrator portrays a character stripped of social voice yet simultaneously maintaining social influence.

Succinctly illustrating Olive’s position, the narrator relates,

…Olive perceived how fatally, without Verena’s tender notes, her crusade would lack sweetness, what the Catholics call unction; and, on the other hand, how weak Verena would be on the statistical and logical side if she herself should not bring up the rear. Together, in short, they would be complete, they would have everything, and together they would triumph. (James, 122)

Verena’s voice clothes Olive’s words, and Olive’s words condition Verena’s voice. Emphasizing togetherness and the resultant attainment of “everything,” the narrator locates Olive’s power within a collapsed dynamic of speech and action in which Olive lacks a public voice but performs private manipulations that allow her to be heard, and in which Olive’s private speech prepares Verena’s “tender notes” to effect audiences. The novel’s ambiguous conclusion, seeming to resist closure, implies the productive potential attainable by this conflation of voice and bodily performance. Claire Kahane writes, “there is another final scene, one that we can only hear, since it takes place on stage while the reader is behind the scenes. At the same time Verena is abducted into private service, Olive enters the public arena; she goes on stage in Verena’s place” (Kahane, 79). Ironically, one never discovers whether Olive actually speaks but one can “only hear” the final scene, and while Olive herself approaches the platform, she “goes on stage in Verena’s place.” Olive holds the potential to assert a public voice but because she stands in for Verena, like an actress, that voice never escapes a performative quality; one never hears Olive’s voice but one always witnesses Olive’s performance. While
some critics suggest the tragic quality of the novel’s conclusion, others suggest the redemptive potential of Olive’s position. Olive masters the ability to work within the deconstructed social norms of speech/action male/female relationships. Despite her subversive lesbian tendencies and the loss of Verena, she survives, and despite the ambiguity surrounding her voice she always achieves, and possesses the possibility for, communication, whether silent, spoken, or performed.

Thus, on a surface-level reading, James’s characters appear to undergo reversals in their relationship to speech; an initially impotent Ransom attains a voice through publication, the renowned orator Verena falls silent, and Olive’s private eloquence achieves possible public recognition. But a deeper reading reveals that the characters never completely assume one role over the other; their successes and/or failures depend upon their negotiation of collapsed hierarchies, on their ability to utilize, simultaneously, speech and silence, speech and writing, speech and action. Ransom’s writing asserts his masculine voice at the same time it suggests empty feminine chatter;

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8 For example, Claire Kahane writes that “James likens Olive to ‘a feminine firebrand of Paris revolutions, erect on a barricade, or even the sacrificial figure of Hypatia, whirled through the furious mob of Alexandria…offering herself to be trampled to death and torn to pieces’ (425). Although this discourse points again to Olive’s ‘morbid’ desire for martyrdom, James does not gratify this desire in the text. At the climax of the novel, the crowd falls silent, leaving open the possibility of an alternative ending to the story of feminine desire…Finally, then, it is Olive who emerges as the figure of tragic and heroic loss, the real interest of the novel, the enigmatic subject to be explored. The character who will never marry, whose most passionate relations are with her own sex…” (Kahane, 79). Similarly, Terry Castle in her text, The Apparitional Lesbian, writes, “though her defeat at the end of the novel is presented as devastating, Olive is never reduced to a state of complete moral or psychic abjection. We sense her residual grandeur even in the midst of fiasco. Something of this felt power undoubtedly arises form the fact that at various points in the novel James has already shown his sympathy for her…And, at the last, James is careful to show Olive ‘upright in her desolation’ – despite the staggering psychic blow Basil and Verena together conspire to deal her. Not only is Olive the first woman in mainstream Anglo-American writing to desire another woman and survive: in her own awkward, purblind fashion she is the first to approach the heroic.” (Castle, 174-177). These readings both suggest that while Olive never successfully completes her feminist project, she paves the way for future feminist discourses.
he must woo Verena with words but also physically carry her away. Verena’s speechifying commands attention but her physicality underlies the efficacy of her words; she must use language but not just spoken language. Olive’s silent communications and private verbalizations assert power but women’s emancipation requires a public voice; she must act in private but speak in public. Returning to the discussion of James’s narrative itself, the text manipulates the reader but in doing so enables the reader to establish his/her own interpretive syntax; the text and reader hold simultaneous power. The subversion of binaries by productive difference present in The Bostonians powerfully resonates with Derrida’s differance and the practice of deconstruction.

James’s novel denies the elevation of speech over writing, speech over action, and vice-versa, and couches meaning, or its lack, in the experience of difference, the interplay between speech and writing, speech and action. Only through the deferral of meaning, the simultaneous depiction of chatter and eloquence, physical actions and written words, does James enable his characters, and text itself, to approach the...

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9 Harold Coward’s “Derrida and Bhartrhari on Speech and Writing,” from Derrida and Indian Philosophy, provides a concise reading of Derrida’s methods which echoes James’s work: “Writing, form the logocentric perspective, is seen as a secondary representation of speech to be used when speaking is impossible. The writer thus puts thought on paper, distancing it from the immediacy of speech and enabling it to be read by someone far away, even after the writer’s death. All of this is seen as a corruption of the self-presence of meaning, an opening of meaning to forms of corruption that the presence of speech would have prevented. Derrida’s critique is not aimed at reversing this value system, and showing writing to be superior to speech. Rather, his critique attempts to dissect the whole system of metaphysical opposition upon which the speech versus writing debate is grounded. In doing so Derrida finds that both speech and writing are beginninglessly structured by difference and distance. The very experience of meaning is itself an experience of difference, and is shown by Derrida to inhabit the very heart of what appears to be immediate and present” (53-54).
possibility of meaning. In a revealing depiction of James’s writing Ross Posnock explains,

By omitting from his simmering process a synthetic, harmonizing moment producing an absolute (as in Hegel), James emphasizes instead the production of difference generated by the dissolving of identity. Difference is what makes for a ‘richer saturation’ of an ongoing process that avoids closure.¹⁰

Latent in Posnock’s description, his interpretation of unattained closure and dissolved identity, lies the vocabulary indicative of a paradoxical but productive Derridian mode of thinking. The “difference generated by the dissolving of identity,” while seeming to suggest permanent dissemination of meaning, is precisely what re-solves the potential for meaning; “dissolving” maintains generative power.¹¹ James’s blurring of hierarchical boundaries thereby revises the function of difference; difference, instead of prioritizing one term over the other, identifies the terms as inextricably linked in a constant process of (re)defining each other, a concept repeated in Verena, Ransom, and Olive’s unresolved relationships to voice, action, and writing. Like Derrida, who inverts, destabilizes, and finally renders undecidable, hierarchies, James leaves his characters in undecidable relationships to voice, writing, and action.

¹¹ M.H. Abrams’s A Glossary of Literary Terms concisely explicates Derrida’s identity in difference in his summary of the deconstructive practice: “Derrida expresses his alternative conception that the play of linguistic meanings is ‘undecidable’ in terms derived from Sassure’s view that in a sign-system, both the signifiers (the material elements of a language, whether spoken or written) and the signifieds (their conceptual meanings) owe their seeming identities, not to their own ‘positive’ or inherent features, but to their ‘differences’ from other speech-sounds, written marks, or conceptual significations…the feature that, in any particular utterance, would serve to establish the signified meaning of a word, are never ‘present’ to us in their own positive identity, since both these features and their significations are nothing other than a network of differences…To Derrida’s view, then, it is difference that makes possible the meaning whose possibility (as a decidable meaning) it necessarily baffles” (Abrams, 57).
Locating Derridian theory within James’s novel epitomizes how Derrida himself engages in, and identifies, the practice of deconstruction, not through his own written explication of the process but through the use of other texts. But, while such a practice involves the disruption of the literature/criticism hierarchy, representing literature as criticism and criticism as literature, this essay seeks to propose otherwise. Rather than simply mapping the Bostonians onto Derrida, I want to introduce performance and attempt to demonstrate how the Bostonians, as performance, opens up a different lens through which one can read deconstruction. I want to build upon Derrida’s framework and suggest first, that the performative dimension of literature represents a differance within literature itself, and secondly, that criticism evolves out of that difference. To read literature as performance treads precariously on the contentious ground of postmodern performance studies, but several critical perspectives, as well as James’s novel itself, support the characterization of texts as performative.

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12 Abrams suggests that among literary critics, a demonstration of Derrida’s destabilization of hierarchies is “to take the standard hierarchical opposition of literature/criticism, to invert it so as to make criticism primary and literature secondary, and then to represent, as an undecidable set of oppositions, the assertions that criticism is a species of literature and that literature is a species of criticism” (58).

13 According to Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, in her chapter “Shame and Performativity: Henry James’s New York Edition Prefaces,” “‘Performative’ at the present moment carries the authority of two quite different discourses, that of theater on the one hand, of speech-act theory and deconstruction the other. Partaking in the prestige of both discourses, it nonetheless, as [Judith] Butler suggests, means very differently in each. The stretch between theatrical and deconstructive meanings of ‘performativity’ seems to span the polarities of, at either extreme, the extroversion of the actor, the introversion of the signifier. Michael Fried’s opposition between theatricality and absorption seems custom-made for this paradox about ‘performativity’: in its deconstructive sense performativity signals absorption; in the vicinity of the stage, however, the performative is the theatrical” (207). The scope of this paper cannot account for an extended discussion of the ontology of “performative” but for further reading on this topic see Janelle Reinelt’s “The Politics of Discourse: Performativity meets Theatricality” in SubStance 31.2 & 3 (2002) 201-215. Reinelt describes three scenes of performance/performative/performativity development and ultimately proposes an interconnection between the three sites. My own conception of literature as “performative” follows from this line of thinking.
Especially helpful, Julia Walker’s essay, “Why Performance? Why Now? Textuality and the Rearticulation of Human Presence,” reveals a late-20th century urge to collapse the text/performance split. After discussing previous conceptions of literature and performance as oppositional, Walker traces literary critics’ debunking of the “anti-performative bias.” To accomplish this, she rethinks the speech/writing dynamic by expanding upon Derrida, his criticism of Antonin Artaud and his argument against J.L. Austin’s performative speech acts (Walker, 157). Walker explains,

the chief difference between writing and speech lies in the fact that the conceptual register is not the only one to which speech speaks…language is not simply an ideational medium, but ‘speaks’ to the heart and the gut as well as the head. I think Artaud had it right after all: only by appealing to all of our senses could something be ‘known’ in a way that surpasses merely conceptual cognition…the turn to performance in contemporary social and cultural theory would suggest that recent attempts to reassert the body’s materiality in fact reveal a desire to recover a lost sense of agency in this, our postmodern moment. (Walker, 160, 167, 171)

While speech and writing both “speak to a conceptual register,” speech “is additionally characterized by voice and gesture” (Walker, 160). Speech thus communicates to “emotional” and “spatio-temporal” as well as conceptual registers, and because performed voice resists “citationality,” “any attempt to analogize vocality or gesture to language is ultimately limited. ‘Meaning,’ in other words, is self-present” (Walker, 160).

So to truly “know” something, Walker agrees with Artaud, requires engagement of the senses; one must hear and feel, as well as read, meaning. Thus, because of the way in which the voice differs from written word, using the trope of performance revives the

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necessity of the senses; it “reassert[s] the body’s materiality” and restores individual
agency, a feat achievable because language “speaks to the heart and gut as well as the
head.” Revising the “metaphor of culture as text” (Walker, 157), performance
establishes a model “that can represent the actual dynamism of [social, cultural, and
political] relations” (Walker, 157). Embedded in Walker’s work, the desire for
immediacy, self-presence, and interaction, productively joins performance and
literature. If performance restores the body’s materiality and agency, then the text
embodies the ultimate performance.

Joseph Roach offers a reading of performance that constructively merges with
Walker’s analysis when he examines and links several definitions of performance.
Citing an anthropologist, an ethnologist, and a theorist, Roach first notes that
performance functions “to complete,” “to actualize a potential” or execute an action,
and “to restore a behavior.” 15 He then concludes that, “performance offers a substitute
for something else that preexists it. Performance, in other words, stands in for an
evasive entity that it is not but that it must vainly aspire both to embody and to
replace.” Combining Walker and Roach’s readings, literature functions as a
performance because it literally stands in as a substitute for a physical presence, the
reader’s, at the same time it figuratively revives that reader’s presence; a text can never
“replace” the reader but the trope of performance pictures the text as a speaking
presence which ultimately calls into being the reader who possesses the senses to
experience that speaking. A substitute for the pre-existing reader in Roach’s sense,

performance successfully re-materializes the reader in Walker’s sense. The reader “preexists” the performance, performance strives to “embody” that reader’s voice, and in doing so, performance “re-asserts” the reader’s agency. The text, as it engages the reader, his senses, his agency as a reader, validates the reader; the text “completes,” “actualizes,” and “restores” the necessary function of reading, a function that simultaneously “completes,” “actualizes,” and “restores” the text as a surrogate presence. Thus, to designate the text as performative restores the text’s authority, but the text performs only, “in an activity of production” (Barthes, 157), the readers’ reading, a paradox reconciled by conceptualizing performance as a substitute; the text serves as a catalyst and place-holder for the reader’s emergence.

The image of literature as a performative substitute introduces a final concept essential for understanding the functional significance of reading texts as performances. In The Practice of Everyday Life, Michel de Certeau’s characterization of stories as “spatial practices” builds upon the meaning of Roach’s “surrogate.” De Certeau writes,

> [stories] do not merely constitute a ‘supplement’ to pedestrian enunciations and rhetorics…They make the journey, before or during the time the feet perform it…space is a practiced place…an act of reading is the space produced by the practice of a particular place: a written text, i.e., a place constituted by a system of signs…stories ‘go in a procession’ ahead of social practices in order to open a field for them.  

Instead of simple “supplements,” additions to or substitutes for “something else,” texts resemble places, which when read, open up spaces. Roach’s substitute, standing in for something it seeks to embody or replace, when read through de Certeau’s lens provides

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the ground for journeys and opens up fields for practices. The text substitutes for a reader, the reader’s reading turns the place of the text into a space, and from out of that space the reader materializes, the reader speaks. Although De Certeau says that “modern writing cannot be in the place of presence,” as performance, writing serves only as a temporary substitute that calls the reader into presence by giving that reader a voice through the practiced space of the text. As de Certeau suggests, “A spatial story is in its minimal degree a spoken language, that is, a linguistic system that distributes places insofar as it is articulated by an ‘enunciatory focalization,’ by an act of practicing it” (de Certeau, 130). To summarize: literature as performance denotes a substitute, a place of potentiality, for a reader’s presence, and upon reading, that place/substitute/performance provides a space for the reader’s voice; literature “opens a legitimate theater for practical actions” (de Certeau, 125).

Literature as performance thereby displays a differance within literature, a text-reader, substitute/presence, writing/voice, split wherein occurs a constant play and deferral of productive power. Counter intuitively, performance points to this difference, necessitating the reader’s reading, and simultaneously stems from its collapse, granting the reader elocutionary power; performance publicizes its own presence. The text remains the ultimate site of production because while the reader aids production, the performance, or text itself, consolidates the reader’s role. From the space that emerges out of a disrupted text-reader binary, or from the product of the difference that performance itself displays, arises the potential for a new critical voice.
Before finally reintroducing The Bostonians itself, I want briefly to note James’s critical perspectives, implicit in his texts, and explicit in reviews by other critics, which further validate literature’s performative power. In his essay, “The Curious Narration of The Bostonians,” Philip Page quotes James saying, “In every novel the work is divided between the writer and the reader; but the writer makes the reader very much as he makes his characters” (Page, 374, my emphasis added). Maintaining the collaborative process central to the text’s fulfillment, but claiming that the writer, or by extension the text, makes the reader, James bestows the text with a creative force verbalized by what that text creates. Barbara Hochman echoes this sentiment when investigating the theme of voice in The Bostonians:

…throughout this text, the sound of ‘a human voice’ is itself seen to constitute a formidable stumbling-block to written representation. ‘It is not in my power to reproduce by any combination of characters this charming dialect,’ says the narrator, introducing Basil Ransom, ‘but the initiated reader will have no difficulty in evoking the sound’. While such a formulation underscores the elusiveness of spoken words and their unrepresentability through written ‘characters,’ it also affirms the possibility of bringing fictional characters to life - voice and all – by relying on the active collaboration of a reader.17

While the written “character” itself denies tangible vocality, the writing does recruit the reader’s collaboration, and through that reader the text vocalizes what it silently performs. To read is to (re)act to a text’s performance, voicing aloud what the text enacts in silence; the literary performance enables the reader to “hear” the text and the text to “speak” through the reader. Eerily prefiguring Julia Walker, James advises his

readers: “read with the senses as well as the reason,” a suggestion denoting his belief that literature “speaks to the heart and the gut as well as the head” (Walker, 160). Like Walker, James envisions a performative aspect of language that transcends the limitations of the written text and establishes the reader as an active human subject, a participant. Sarah Blaire further illuminates this literature-as-performance presence in James’s critical stance, stating,

*His novels and criticism throughout the 1880s and early 1890s pointedly but unevenly consider the role literature will play as a cultural force in this ‘age of new revelations’…James understands literature as a contestant in the volatile, highly theatrical, public sphere of modern America – a contestant for the power to create, shape, and redirect fictions of country, community, and self. (Blaire, 154)*

Words such as “role,” “cultural force,” and “contestant,” boldly foresee literature, as a substitute, a performance, completing, actualizing and staging a claim to the redirection of modern American narratives. More than a mere re-presentation of culture, the text, for James, potentially presents, through culture, a new voice for culture.

An icon of James’s “own artistic convictions,” *The Bostonians* epitomizes a literary performance. 18 What occurs within the text between characters explicates what occurs outside of the text between the reader and the novel, so one first must venture into the place of the story. The central question of voice and performance challenges, collapses, revises, and renders ambiguous, traditional speech/action binaries; Ransom can’t secure Verena on the strength of his publication alone, Verena can’t present herself, or others, through speech alone, and Olive can’t emancipate women through Verena’s

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18 Richard Lansdown, in an Introduction to *The Bostonians* writes, “James wanted *The Bostonians* to ‘illustrate some of my own artistic convictions’” (xv).
words alone. While the characters attempt to master their performances of either the written word, the spoken word, or simply physical action, the interplay between modes of communication constantly defers and redirects their efforts; the difference between communicative faculties, instead of hierarchizing them, intertwines them, leaves them in a flux of potentiality, which deems the characters’ successes or failures ambiguous. However, performance, as previously discussed, marks these differences but also evolves from their conflation; the undecidability with which James leaves his characters generates the possibility for their greatest success. Performance represents a place of difference and substitution, indicating disrupted speech/action oppositions, but the characters’ performances (Ransom’s writing, Verena’s speaking, or Olive’s presence), when read and reacted to by others, simultaneously bestow those characters with new communicative power. Ransom learns that to win Verena and secure his masculinity he must utilize both words and also action; he attains a physical voice, carrying Verena away with the power of his utterances. Verena learns that while authentic self-expression depends upon language, a liberated voice involves more than just spoken language; she attains a physical voice, crying tears that impart unvoiced and unmediated thoughts. Finally, and problematically, Olive learns that women’s emancipation requires her continued private speaking but also public communication; she too attains a physical voice, but her silent presence on stage waits for a “human voice,” for the reader to articulate her yet unspoken text.

Olive’s waiting presence now allows one to step outside of the text’s place and into the space that the reader’s reading creates. The characters’ performances within the
novel materialize into the text’s performance itself. Like Ransom, Verena, and Olive, whose performances provide them with physical voices, the text’s performance reinvests its characters, figurative and literal, with elocutionary authority through the reader. Reading is (re)acting to the text’s performance; it’s an acting (speaking) again, not a repetition or citation but speaking anew with the grammar that the text provides; it’s reusing the text’s grammar but articulating it in novel enunciations. Here marks my turn back to Derrida. Recall mapping The Bostonians onto deconstruction, recognizing within the text typical deconstructive moves such as the disruption of hierarchies. This practice of reverse reading, using a text to read theory, with the help of performance, allows one to re-conceptualize deconstruction as productive rather than merely de-hierarchizing the literature/criticism binary. The Bostonians, through the lens of performance, offers a constructive (re)reading of deconstruction.

The differance that performance points too, the literature/criticism or text/reader split, represents a space for becoming, like the text experienced “in the activity of production,” a production penned by the text and spoken by the reader. Deconstruction occurring within the text (performance) serves not as an undecidable conflation of speech/action but a process in which performance holds open a space out of which “characters” speak; similarly, the deconstruction occurring between the text (performance) and reader serves as not an undecidable conflation of literature/criticism but a process in which performance holds open a space out of which readers speak new

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19 De Certeau suggests that modern society represents a “recited society,” “defined by stories...by citations of stories, and by the interminable recitation of stories” (186). I, however, propose that the performative dimension of literature recruits the reader’s participation and therefore the reader doesn’t simply “recite” the story but uses the story’s logic to verbalize original theories.
critical voices. Terry Eagleton, describing Wolfgang Iser’s reception theory, writes, “The most effective literary work for Iser is one which forces the reader into a new *critical awareness* of his or her customary codes and expectations...the valuable work of literature violates or transgresses these normative ways of seeing, and so *teaches us new codes for understanding.*”\(^{20}\) Invoking performance in an Austinian sense, one can read *The Bostonians* as a felicitous performative because it enacts what it says; the text proposes re-reading deconstruction at the precise moment it enables the reader to voice that re-reading. De Certeau writes, “It is thus social hierarchization that conceals the reality of the practice of reading or makes it unrecognizable...The creativity of the reader grows as the institution that controlled it declines” (De Certeau, 172). Deconstruction, as re-read through *The Bostonians*, collapses social hierarchies and opens a stage for the practice of liberated voice, free from social boundaries and capable of articulating hitherto unvoiced critical perspectives.

But re-reading the function of dismantled binaries alone does not fully recover voice from the historical discourse noted earlier, the discourse in which speech vacillates between culturally constructed registers. Ransom, Verena, and Olive’s new voices inevitably bear traces of the social scene that precipitated them, a social scene containing conflicts reminiscent of Jay Fliegelman’s “oratorical revolution,” conflicts “between self-control and passionate expression; between self-effacement and self-assertion; between transcendent representativeness and personal revelation; between

theatrical and natural models of rhetoric,” “between action and speech; between sincerity and hypocrisy; between self-willed agent and other-directed instrument; between rational persuasion and affective appeal,” “between words and sounds” (Fliegelman, 190). The oratorical revolution serves as a “site” for “mediating” these social tensions, a site out of which the Declaration of Independence seeks to found an independent nation. Similarly, the disruption of binaries in The Bostonians serves as a site out of which female emancipation seeks to found an independent female voice. While voice, or independence, may never escape the culture that conditions it, the site of conflicting social codes, reapplying the concept of performance opens up that cultural place to negotiation. De Certeau suggests that performances reveal contradictions “because they make publicly visible through symbolic action both the tangible existence of social boundaries and, at the same time, the contingency of those boundaries on fictions of identity, their shoddy construction out of inchoate otherness, and, consequently, their anxiety-inducing instability” (de Certeau, 39). By revealing the fictive quality of social boundaries, performance legitimates the possibility of voicing new fictions within those boundaries. According to De Certeau, a story “founds,” serves as “both a renewal and a repetition of the originary founding acts,” “provides space for the actions that will be undertaken”; “This founding is precisely the primary role of the story. It opens a legitimate theater for practical actions” (de Certeau, 124-125). The Bostonians, then, as performance, “founds” a space for re-reading destabilized social constructs and de-fictionalizes the potential for an independent voice inside of culture’s borders. By extension, the question of women’s emancipation within the text
perhaps “founds” a space for re-reading the Declaration’s “founding” moment; female emancipation in The Bostonians re-thinks the question of independence itself. Thus, one never transcends the contradictory social networks within which one lives, but literature-as-performance always transforms the place of culture into a space out of which readers continually re-found the discourse of voice.

To read The Bostonians in the role of a producer, writing meanings of one’s own, remains in the vein of post-structuralism. But if post-structuralism positions readers as writers, from where do those “writers” attain a voice? First reading James’s novel, preserving the reader’s interpretive authority, but then locating and unraveling theory from within that novel, reestablishes the power of the text. The precise terms that post-structuralists, specifically Roland Barthes, use when describing texts, those “polysemic,” “irreducible,” “intertextual,” “processes of demonstration,” “plurals,” speak to the performative nature of literature; literature’s language is active. Barthes claims that, “for the plural text, there cannot be a narrative structure, a grammar, or a logic,” and that, “Narrative is determined not by a desire to narrate but by a desire to exchange: it is a medium of exchange, an agent, a currency, a gold standard.”

A text therefore invites a reader’s co-production, and while the text may not contain a definitive grammar of its own, it’s performance, in conjunction with the reader’s interpretation, bestows the reader with linguistic potential. A bit of a stretch, one can read The Bostonians as performing Derrida, but more likely, the performance of the text, and literature in general, provides Derrida, and critics in general, with a previously

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undiscovered voice; a voice lurking backstage but not yet published. The “social
magic” of literature-as-performance is its ability to found a space for an inter-historical
voice, a voice inevitably encoded in past historical registers but a voice anticipating yet
unfounded historical moments. More than a “form of writing,” reading perhaps offers
a novel form of speaking.