

The Hole in the Carpet: Henry James's *The Bostonians*

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"The Hole in the Carpet" examines the ways in which Henry James deflates and nullifies value in The Bostonians. The essay raises a question of whether a novel that has no stable repository for value creates in its stead an ethical vacuum that is costly for a reader.

Henry James repeatedly mused on the "bemuddled question of the objective value" of a "subject," but value for a novel's reader is never abstract.¹ It is uniquely perceptible in the twists of plot, in narrative cues; in the testimony of dialogue; and of course in what Henry James called the "economy of treatment"² whereby the novelist reveals disparities among characters: "one seeing black where the other sees white . . . one seeing coarse where the other sees fine" (P 7). The basis for imputing worth must be developed throughout a novel so the reader can evaluate it.

Sometimes, however, said reader is preemptively alerted to the value of a novel's subject (a word denoting character, and in other instances theme) even before it begins, as in James's preface to the 1907 text of *The Portrait of a Lady* where, prematurely, he identifies Isabel Archer, the protagonist (a "young woman affronting her destiny" [P 8]), and also rhetorically elevates the novel's topic, designated as "the high attributes of a Subject" (P 9). The theme, or matter the novel will divulge, concerns the question of what will happen to "my treasure" – to that "rare little 'piece'" that has been "placed in" James's "imagination" in "the back-shop of [his] mind" (as though he were "a wary dealer in precious odds and ends," ready "to disclose its merit afresh as soon as a key shall have clicked in a cupboard-door" [P 8]). In such hyperboles, James authenticates Isabel's priceless quality even before he opens the "cupboard-door" in the novel's first sentence. The preface is overrun by idioms of compensation (the "living wage" [P 13]; the "gratuity" [P 12]; the "charming 'tip'" [P 13]) by which the author will be remunerated for his work; and by more sweeping calculations of "the high price of the novel as a literary form" (P 7). These computations include James's insistence that "no such provision" for "the creation of an interest" in the subject (the girl, or what happens to her) "could be excessive" (P 11), given the "measure of the worth

of [such] a subject”) which for James includes “the amount of felt life concerned in producing it” (P 6).

How a novelist deflates and even nullifies value is also not theoretical. The erasure of value in James’s *The Bostonians* (1886) is the focus of my essay, but I turn to it only after reflecting on the novel’s comic brilliance in which its ethical vacuity lies buried. For *The Bostonians*, which James published five years after *Portrait*, is a case study in depreciation (of both characters and subject matter). James called *The Bostonians* “a very American tale” that would address “the social conditions” of the times, “the situation of women” – specifically, their emancipation – “the decline of the sentiment of sex” and “the agitation on their behalf.”³ The novel unravels the story of a woman who wants to possess a girl and a man who wants to possess the same girl. The woman is Olive Chancellor, a passionate feminist, who lives in the Back Bay, a fashionable neighborhood of Boston. The novel’s disparaging assessments are disseminated across diverse perspectives, including the narrator’s, and slip in and out of each other unstably. “Olive” is “a spinster as Shelley was a lyric poet, or as the month of August is sultry.”⁴ She is argumentative (“of all things in the world contention was most sweet to her though . . . it always cost her tears, headaches, and a day or two in bed” [B 14]); self-sacrificing (“the most sacred hope of her nature was that she might some day . . . be a martyr and die for something” [B 13]); addicted to unhappiness (“the prospect of suffering was always, spiritually speaking, so much cash in her pocket” [B 97]); ashamed of her wealth and privilege (in mitigation of which “she had an immense desire to know intimately some very poor girl” [B 31], but “the attempt had come to nothing” [B 31]); and idealistic. Olive has “sympathy for reform” (B 30), but with no “talent . . . no self-possession, no eloquence,” she herself can only contribute capital to the “crusade” for women’s rights (B 33). Her adulation for the feminists is tempered by disappointment at their befuddled sense of class and style (B 30). Thus, Mrs. Farrinder, a “mixture of the American matron and the public character” (B 27), who “lectured” on “temperance” (for men) and “rights” (for women) (B 28), strikes Olive as “grand . . . it lifted one up to be with her” (B 30). But Mrs. Farrinder lets Olive down by treating her as “a representative of the aristocracy” (B 31). In “reality,” Olive correctively thinks, “the Chancellors belonged to the *bourgeoisie*,” and it was “provincial” for Mrs. Farrinder not to understand. “There was” also “something provincial in the way she did her hair” (B 31). Though Olive is a mass of contradictions, on this matter she is clear: Olive “hated men . . . as a class” (B 21). Basil Ransom, the man who wants to possess the girl, expresses an equally elementary understanding of how to categorize people: “the simplest division it is possible to make of the human race is into the people who take things hard and the people who take them easy. He perceived very quickly that Miss Chancellor belonged to the former class” (B 11). “It came over him that it was because she took things hard she had sought his acquaintance” (B 17), an assessment that coincides

with Olive's own: "If she had supposed he would agree [with her], she would not have written to him" (B 14).

Basil Ransom, Olive's cousin, is a Mississippian who has fought on the wrong side of the Civil War; believes "Secession" was "a good cause" (B 187); and is a "social and political . . . reactionary" (B 164). He accepts Olive's invitation to visit because "Mississippi seemed to him the state of despair." Specifically, "his family was ruined; they had lost their slaves, their property, their friends and relations" and "their home" (B 13). He has also failed as a lawyer. Though he submits "articles" to "weekly and monthly publications," they are "all declined with thanks" (B 163), except for a paper on "the rights of minorities" to which a "disagreeable editor" replies that "his doctrines were about three hundred years behind the age; doubtless some magazine of the sixteenth century would be happy to print them" (B 163). Basil Ransom arrives in Boston on the eve of a gathering at Miss Birdseye's, an "old Abolitionist" (B 19), at whose dwelling there is to be "inspirational speaking" (B 20) on the emancipation of women. This is where Olive incongruously takes her cousin. Ransom, sizing up the assembly (mostly "ladies" in "bonnets" and some men "in weary-looking overcoats"), "had a general idea they were mediums, communists, vegetarians" (B 29).

Ransom has yet to reveal his conviction that "women" are "essentially inferior to men" (B 167), so the "use of a truly amiable woman is to make some honest man happy" (B 206–207). When Mrs. Farrinder, the "great oratress" (B 40), declines to speak because she can only deliver her message "when I see prejudice, when I see bigotry, when I see injustice . . . massed before me like an army" (B 40) – like the novel's other feminists, she thinks in hyperboles – Verena, the "poor girl" (B 31) with whom Olive and Ransom fall in love, steps up to address the gathering. Olive will be inspired by the girl's platitudes, while Ransom abhors them: "it was all about the gentleness and goodness of women, and how, during the long ages of history, they had been trampled under the iron heel of man. It was about their equality – perhaps . . . even about their superiority" (B 53). Verena too has her conditions. To speak, she must have "her father" (B 47) Selah Tarrant (an itinerant vender of lead-pencils, a "medium," and a mesmeric healer [B 62]) to "start her up" (B 47). When Tarrant puts his hands on Verena's head to get her going, Ransom, looking at the spectacle, "simply loathed him" (B 51), feeling Tarrant was "the cheapest kind of human product" (B 51).

Although Verena is a different kind of "product" than her father, she too has a flair – not for quackery (reports of Tarrant's healing lacked facts) or channeling – but, as seen through Ransom's eyes, for the circus: she "had . . . an air of being on exhibition, of belonging to a troupe, of living in the gaslight" (B 51). When, later in the novel, Verena holds forth on the rights of women in the music room of a Mrs. Burrage, the mother of one of Verena's suitors, Ransom stares at her "in very much the same excited way as if she had been performing, high above his head,

on the trapeze" (B 228). To Olive, gazing at Verena's debut performance at Miss Birdseye's: "she . . . seemed to belong to some queer gipsy-land or transcendental Bohemia. With her bright, vulgar clothes, her salient appearance, she might have been a rope-dancer, or a fortune-teller; and this had the immense merit, for Olive, that it appeared to make her belong to the 'people'" (B 70). Mrs. Luna, Olive's sister (who "cared for . . . the fallen aristocracy" in distinction to Olive, "who took an interest only in the lower class, as it struggled to rise" [B 179]), calls Verena "a perfect little adventuress, and quite third-rate into the bargain" (B 176) who "cared as much for the rights of women as she did for the Panama Canal; the only right of a woman she wanted was to climb on top of something, where the men could look at her" (B 177). Whether Verena is "a parrot or a genius," what matters to Farrinder is only that "she would be effective" (B 57), an outcome calculated by the indelicate newspaper man, Mathias Pardon, as profit: "There's money for some one in that girl; you see if she don't have quite a run!" (B 56).

The leitmotif of this onslaught of impressions from characters who have virtually nothing in common is that whether Verena is a charlatan, a "preposterous puppet" (B 293) mouthing inanities she doesn't understand from the "trash" her father fills her with (B 54), or simply a "prima donna" in a "costume" that is sometimes "chastened" and sometimes "parti-colored and bedizened" (B 194), she possesses "a singular hollowness of character" (B 54). Even Dr. Prance, the shrewd female physician, diagnoses Verena as "rather slim" (the pronouncement "leaked" "out of the crevices of her reticence" [B 335]). Only Olive believes that "Miss Tarrant might wear gilt buttons from head to foot, her soul could not be vulgar" (B 70). The plot will prove Olive wrong. The prize Olive and Basil fight over has no intrinsic value.

These are the novel's principals. But Verena is not the only character whose value is marked down, and it is not only Basil and Olive who are the butt of each other's ridicule. Even agreeable characters are magnets for depreciation. Miss Birdseye is extolled for the scope of her philanthropy: her "charity began at home and ended nowhere" (B 25), and for her verdict on the political squabble between the feminists and their adversaries. Thus, her innocently (or is it ignorantly?) rhetorical: "Doesn't it seem as if we had room for all?" (B 314). The question would be ignorant because the dispute is not over an inclusion of all but over the equality of all. When this "confused, entangled, inconsequent, discursive old woman" (B 25) meets Basil Ransom, she gives "the young man a delicate, dirty, democratic little hand" (B 25). Beyond the alliteration of those d's, the restrictive adjectives modifying "hand" are drawn into each other so that the elegance implied by "delicate" is contaminated by "dirty," and its median position in the sequence of qualifiers also sullies the attribute "democratic." In the same paragraph, Birdseye is less subtly tarnished when the narrator downgrades what initially passes for admiration (Miss Birdseye's "best hours had been spent in fancying that she was helping

some Southern slave to escape" [B 26]) by adding "it would have been a nice question whether, in her heart of hearts, for the sake of this excitement, she did not sometimes wish the blacks back in bondage" (B 26).

Similarly, Dr. Prance in some ways enjoys James's favor. Her "hard good sense" (B 51) shines through the blunt judgment: "There is room for improvement in both sexes. Neither of them is up to the standard" (B 37). When at the end of the evening at Miss Birdseye's, Ransom asks Prance her "opinion of the capacity of the ladies," she replies: "They've got a capacity for making people waste time" (B 43). But Prance's gender indeterminacy and even her species indeterminacy (the frisky gait signified in her name obliquely affiliates her with an animal) neuters her for Ransom, through whose perspective we see her: "She looked like a boy. . . . It was true that if she had been a boy she would have borne some relation to a girl, whereas Doctor Prance appeared to bear none whatever" (B 36–37). The narrator's unbridled devaluations of the novel's characters and their snide judgments of each other single out everyone for rebuke, often more than one character in a sentence, even though each is parodied in unique terms, according to varied standards, and to different degrees. These deflations are replicated in the remainder of the plot (summarized below) where all aspects of the conflict between those who contend for possession of Verena are depicted as ludicrous.

Soon after the evening at Miss Birdseye's Verena comes to visit Olive who, "before she had been in the room five minutes jumped to her point": "will you be my friend . . . beyond every one, everything . . . forever and forever?" (B 71). Such a promise involves "renunciation" (B 71) certainly of marriage, but also of everyone who is not Olive and every passion that does not embrace the cause of "the suffering of women" (B 74). In Olive's agonized dread two threats could imperil Verena's mission, which the girl compares to that of Joan of Arc (B 74). The first is the Tarrants, who regard their daughter as a social resource (B 89). Selah Tarrant yearns to see Verena "burst forth" (B 92) in the "*penetralia* of the daily press" (B 91). The second, more ordinary peril is young men who might want to marry her. Olive contemplates a solution to the first danger by imagining that "if she should offer [Mr. Tarrant] ten thousand dollars to renounce all claim" (B 100) to his "remunerative daughter" (B 90), "he would probably say, with his fearful smile, 'Make it twenty, money down, and I'll do it'" (B 100). When she *does* write him "a cheque for a very considerable amount" with the proviso: "'Leave us alone – entirely alone – for a year, and then I will write you another. . . .'" the document disappeared . . . into some queer place on his queer person" (B 144). By these tactics, Olive purchases Verena with an option to renew on a yearly basis.

The suitors are presumptively eliminated by the exaction of a promise not to marry that Olive solicits when she sees that two Harvard men, Mr. Gracie ("short . . . unkempt, almost rustic" who "said good things with his ugly lips"[B 105]) and Henry Burrage (a rich and sophisticated New Yorker with "chains and rings and

shining shoes" [B 106]), pay court to Verena. Mathias Pardon, the newspaper man, takes Verena to the theater, but "gave no sign of offering himself either as a husband or as a lecture-agent" (B 129). Yet "It was amazing," Olive thinks, "how many ways men had of being antipathetic" (B 106). Burrage is the most immediately alarming (what if he should "fall in love with her and try to bribe her . . . to practise renunciations of another kind – to give up her holy work" [B 106] and become his "wife"? [B 106]). "Young men in search of sensations" is how Olive regards all three (B 106).

Burrage proposes marriage to Verena (B 148), but Ransom is the real danger. No matter how long Olive and Verena burrow deeply into the "history of feminine anguish" (B 158); take "in the red sunsets of winter" together (B 152); discuss the ways in which "women . . . intrusted with power . . . had not always used it amiably" ("the public crimes of Bloody Mary, the private misdemeanours of Faustina, wife of the pure Marcus Aurelius" [B 153]); listen to "symphonies and fugues" that "excited their revolutionary passion" (B 155), these cozy exertions in which the two misconstrue what they encounter – the music of Bach and Beethoven is not a call to rebel against misogynists who deplore female oratory – have no weight to withstand the assault of Basil Ransom's amorous interest in the girl. When Verena lectures in Mrs. Burrage's drawing room with Ransom in attendance, he silently denounces her speech as "vague, thin, rambling, a tissue of generalities" (B 232). But "he found himself rejoicing that she was weak in argument" (B 233); tone-deaf; (earlier: a "ranter and a sycophant," yet "so engaging" [B 203]) because "he was falling in love with her" (B 232). Falling in love means that though he assesses her ideas as "third-rate palaver" (B 277), "if he should become her husband he should know a way to strike her dumb" (B 278). To start her up, to strike her dumb, or to teach her to dislike "men, as a class, anyway" (B 21) can all be accomplished by handling her.

Ransom takes Verena for a saunter in Central Park (B 283), where he becomes a ranter himself against a "generation [that] is womanized" (B 290). "My plan," he tells her, "is to keep you at home and have a better time with you there than ever" (B 291), seducing her with an image that pivots between the absurd and the erotic: "the dining table itself shall be our platform, and you shall mount on top of that" (B 337). For while women are "second-rate" for "public, civic uses . . . privately, personally, it's another affair" (B 294). Ransom follows Verena to Cape Cod where Olive has unsuccessfully sequestered her from his advances and there proposes marriage (B 317). When she is past all saving (from Olive's point of view), Ransom rescues her from the music hall – it "reminded him of the vomitoria that he had read about in descriptions of the Colosseum" (B 371) – where Olive has slated her to speak to "the city of Boston" (B 382). Ransom's abduction of Verena (on which the novel closes) mirrors Olive's earlier seizure of the girl from the Tarrant's parlor when she, "with a sort of blind, defiant dash," bolts into "the dark freshness" of

"a splendid sky" (B 115), tearing Verena away from Gracie and Burrage who clamor for entertainment: "give us the whole programme" (B 113).

Once outside, Olive importunes: "Promise. . . Never to listen to one of them. . . Promise me not to marry!" (B 117). As she exacts this vow, Olive flings "the fold of a cloak that hung ample upon her own meagre person" (B 117) over Verena. Rushing out of the theater, Ransom also shrouds the girl: "by muscular force" he "wrenched" her from Olive and "thrust the hood of Verena's long cloak over her head, to conceal her face and her identity" (B 389). But Verena *has* no discrete identity. She is a conduit for alternative domestic and political arrangements. She likes to be "overborne" (B 285), and when the romance of the lecture hall cedes to the romance of the dinner table, the narrator glosses the switch chiastically: "She was to burn everything she had adored; she was to adore everything she had burned. . . The truth had changed sides" (B 332). If this is a betrayal of Olive, it also scraps the political topic (was that ever the novel's subject?) and replaces it with a juicy love story that plays itself out first in a homoerotic and then in a heterosexual union, a sequence that starkly reveals the thrall of male allure. In Olive's bitter analysis: "A man had only to whistle for" Verena "and she who had pretended most was delighted to come and kneel at his feet" (B 327). But Olive has also whistled for Verena: her high-minded interest in the girl is equally "personal, not controversial" (B 275). As Mrs. Luna insists Olive "wants to keep" Verena "above all, for herself" (B 224) – a claim echoed in Ransom's: "She's mine or she isn't, and if she's mine, she's all mine!" (B 383). Though Ransom gets the girl, it's a pyrrhic victory: "beneath her hood, she was in tears. It is to be feared that with the union, so far from brilliant, into which she was about to enter, these were not the last she was destined to shed" (B 390). In other words, though "the truth had changed sides" (B 332) and the options are not identical, it's a lose-lose choice.

The satiric pleasures of *The Bostonians'* plot and the thrill of James's comedic writing are nowhere exceeded in his *oeuvre*. But these don't compensate for, and in fact they contribute to, the novel's ethical vacuity, and not only because James's farce can't be extricated from its mean-spirited glee at the imbecility of its characters. One source of the desolation – a strange but apt word for my experience of the novel's enduring bleakness – are perspectives that cancel each other out or that are absent in the first place, as, in the novel, is the omission of James's own point of view – never clear – on *The Bostonians*, which he once implausibly called "rather a remarkable feat of objectivity."⁵ Thus, unlike "the figure in the carpet" – that image for a secret, discovery of which would explain everything in James's story of that title – in *The Bostonians*, there's a hole in the carpet, a void, nothing that identifies the overarching perspective that would allow us to decipher the target of the satire.⁶ Here are some possibilities. This is a misogynist novel because of its venom toward the feminists; or because Verena

is an empty vessel; or because if the “truth” can “change sides” (B 332), a political position is evacuated of meaningful difference from its antithesis. Or: this is a parody of a misogynist novel, because the idea of feminism as “balderdash” (B 275) is Ransom’s, not James’s. Or: this is a misogynist novel because, as evidenced in his 1906 “The Speech of American Women,” James shares Ransom’s point of view about the dangerous “license” taken by a woman who speaks “as she likes” without “submission . . . to form”: “we might accept this labial and lingual and vocal independence as a high sign of the glorious courage of our women if it contained but a spark of the guiding reason that separates audacity from madness.”⁷ Or the source of James’s disparagement is not hysterical feminism or unhinged male chauvinism, but the confusion of public and private space and what should transpire in each.⁸ What James called the “effect” of Verena’s “verbal gush”⁹ and of her exhibitionism assumes center stage in the novel’s plot. But the novel also asymmetrically takes aim at and bombards other targets with comic disdain, often in the same passage, even the same sentence, as when Olive’s insulting adjective for Tarrant’s deposit of her check “into some queer place on his queer person” (B 144) rubs off on her, since that word also characterizes her perverse bid to purchase Verena.¹⁰ Sentence after sentence provides evidence that there’s little to admire in any point of view, for if scorn is tucked into one corner, it nonetheless also sticks out from another.

Nor is Olive the only character who pays to wrest control of Verena. In another “pecuniary transaction” (B 100), though Mrs. Burrage sends Verena the “largest cheque this young woman had ever received for an address . . . it was as if it [the check] came to” Olive “as well” (B 263). Mrs. Burrage “seemed to be offering Olive all the kingdoms of the earth if she would only exert herself to bring about a state of feeling on Verena Tarrant’s part which would lead the girl to accept Henry Burrage” in marriage (B 264 – 265). Olive waves away Mrs. Burrage’s bribe, just as she dismisses Mathias Pardon’s proposal, to which it is akin: “She was a great card and some one ought to play it” (B 123); “Couldn’t they run Miss Verena together?” (B 124). When at the music hall Verena hesitates to take the stage, Mr. Filer, who counts the money, bypasses Olive and Verena and addresses himself above their heads directly to her father: “Is she aware that every quarter of a second . . . is worth about five hundred dollars?” (B 381). “Who is Mr. Filer?” Ransom asks. Answer: “He’s the man that runs Miss Chancellor. . . . Just the same as she runs Miss Tarrant” (B 378). So the appropriation comes full circle. At each turn of the novel (except the denouement, where Ransom’s medium of exchange is sweet-talk), the girl or her fate is secured by legal tender, the currency shared by all but Ransom, who is poor.

The co-optation of agency, whether it is bought (by Olive and Mrs. Burrage); or manipulated (by Dr. Tarrant whose “grotesque manipulations” [B 52] “start” his daughter “up” [B 47]); or exploited for profit (as Pardon proposes); or simply

transacted as an exchange of property to the highest bidder (from Olive to Basil), authenticates Verena's cry at the novel's beginning to explain the impact of her motivational speaking: "'It is not *me*, mother.' . . . It was some power outside" (B 49). Some outside – scopic – power also nullifies the distinctive features of Miss Birdseye and Dr. Prance. Basil Ransom's initial vision of Miss Birdseye shifts to the narrator's: "She had a sad, soft, pale face which . . . looked as if it had been soaked, blurred, and made vague by exposure to some slow dissolvent. The long practice of philanthropy had not given accent to her features; it had rubbed out their transitions, their meanings" (B 24), while Dr. Prance "except her intelligent eye . . . had no features to speak of" (B 37). The quick disparagement, or "slow dissolvent" (B 24), of the features that identify a person, or distinguish a person, or, most generally, attribute value to him, are compounded by the nihilistic activity James delegates to intersecting perspectives of *The Bostonians*' characters and its narrator.

According to her sister, Mrs. Luna, Olive is not a "radical. She's a female Jacobin – she's a nihilist" (B 7). But no person in *The Bostonians* is as ruthless as the freewheeling and shifting perspectives, since the novel's frequent free indirect style – a third-person narration that slips in and out of a character's consciousness – in *The Bostonians* also atypically merges with the narrative voice.¹¹ Thus, Ransom's jumbled impression of Miss Birdseye when he shakes her "delicate, dirty, democratic little hand" (B 25) degenerates into the narrator's skeptical question of whether "she did not sometimes wish the blacks back in bondage" (B 26) so she could free them, without so much as a mark that punctuates the distinct perspectives that constitute this sliding evaluative scale. Devaluation is thus not only a privilege novelistically accorded to Olive and Ransom vis-à-vis their rivals, but also is the lens through which characters in *The Bostonians* see each other and are seen. In contrast to *The Portrait of a Lady*, in *The Bostonians*, vision is de-idealized. To see is to impoverish the value of what is seen.

Thus, Mathias Pardon on Mr. Tarrant: "Mathias had a mean opinion of Mr. Tarrant, thought him quite second-rate, a votary of played-out causes" (B 108). One paragraph later, this is Olive on Mr. Pardon: "She thought him very inferior; she had heard he was intensely bright, but there was probably some mistake": he had "a mind that took merely a gossip's view of great tendencies" (B 109). Reciprocally, Mr. Pardon on Olive, who has asked "whether he took a great interest in the improvement of the position of women": "The question appeared to strike the young man as abrupt and irrelevant, to come down on him from a height with which he was not accustomed to hold intercourse. He was used to quick operations" (B 111). And Olive on Mrs. Burrage's request that Verena visit for two weeks: "People like Mrs. Burrage lived and fattened on abuses, prejudices, privileges, on the petrified, cruel fashions of the past" (B 264). But then, Mrs. Burrage on Olive: "she was considerably exasperated . . . at seeing herself regarded by this dry, shy, obstinate, provincial young woman as superficial. If she liked Verena very

nearly as much as she tried to convince Miss Chancellor, she was conscious of disliking Miss Chancellor more than she should probably ever be able to reveal to Verena" (B 270).

Further, a sanguine perspective is often indistinguishable from a deluded one, as when Verena ascribes to "the temperance of" Olive's "speech" about "Verena's accessibility to matrimonial error... an antique beauty" that "reminded her of the qualities that she believed to have been proper to Electra or Antigone" (B 121). But the qualities of Greek tragedy are not Olive's qualities. So in *The Bostonians*, in one direction or another, perspective warps value. Or the disparity between what is praised and what the reader sees denatures the attribute – heroic courage – here illegitimately attributed to Olive, while discrediting the perspective of anyone who could make such a blunder. If James's satire fixes on opposite but equally foolish ideologies, where is its value – whose value is being espoused – if there is no edge to the irony, thus leaving no one and nothing unscathed?

Against the perspectival assaults leveled by *The Bostonians*, the novel represents three unimpaired visions immune to the degradations considered above. I will treat them as the single phenomenon that, I argue, they constitute. In the first, when Henry Burrage plays Schubert and Mendelssohn in the Burrage drawing room, at once

soothed and beguiled. . . . It was given to Olive, under these circumstances . . . to surrender herself, to enjoy the music . . . to feel as if the situation were a kind of truce. Her nerves were calmed, her problems – for the time – subsided. Civilization under such an influence, in such a setting, appeared to have done its work; harmony ruled the scene; human life ceased to be a battle. (B 134)

That this near-happiness lasts only for "half an hour" is irrelevant to its solace or its dignity (B 133 – 134).

In the second passage, clandestinely walking with Basil Ransom around Cambridge, Verena guides him to Harvard's Memorial Hall, pausing especially in

a chamber . . . consecrated to the sons of the university who fell in the long Civil War . . . they lingered longest in the presence of the white, ranged tablets, each of which, in its proud, sad clearness, is inscribed with the name of a student-soldier. The effect of the place is singularly noble and solemn, and it is impossible to feel it without a lifting of the heart. It stands there for duty and honour, it speaks of sacrifice and example, seems a kind of temple to youth, manhood, generosity. Most of them were young, all were in their prime, and all of them had fallen; this simple idea hovers before the visitor and makes him read with tenderness each name and place – names often without other history, and forgotten Southern battles. For Ransom these things were not a challenge nor a taunt; they touched him with respect, with the sentiment of beauty

... he forgot, now, the whole question of sides and parties. . . . The monument around him . . . arched over friends as well as enemies, the victims of defeat as well as the sons of triumph. (B 209 – 210)

Though the narrator proclaims the unique nobility of the place, Ransom's perspective, rendered midparagraph in free indirect style, deepens the recognition that discord in the face of death could only be trivial. The "beauty" Ransom experiences washes over and dissolves individual passions and allegiances, making it possible to see the similitude of "sides and parties," "friends" and "enemies" (B 210) (and even, implicitly – curving over a larger opening, like the arch of the monument that calls it to mind – the neutrality and "beauty of general benevolence")¹² that elicits "tenderness" not as a principle but as a "sentiment" (B 210). In the same way, Olive's "surrender" to the "harmony" (B 134) of Schubert and Mendelssohn opens into affability toward the once-odious people listening to that same music.

The third passage from which I excerpt the sentences below records Olive's premonition that Verena will abandon her:

Olive lived over, in her miserable musings, her life for the last two years; she knew, again, how noble and beautiful her scheme had been, but how it had all rested on an illusion of which the very thought made her feel faint and sick. What was before her now was the reality, with the beautiful, indifferent sky pouring down its complacent rays upon it. The reality was simply that Verena had been more to her than she ever was to Verena . . . the girl had cared for their cause because, for the time, no interest, no fascination was greater. . . . These hours of backward clearness come to all men and women, once at least, when they read the past in the light of the present. . . . The journey behind them is mapped out and figured, with its false steps, its wrong observations, all its infatuated, deluded geography. They understand as Olive understood, but it is probable that they rarely suffer as she suffered. The sense of regret for her baffled calculations burned within her like a fire, and the splendour of the vision over which the curtain of mourning now was dropped brought to her eyes slow, still tears, tears that came one by one, neither easing her nerves nor lightening her load of pain. (B 354 – 355)

It was, above all, that she felt how *she* had understood friendship, and how never again to see the face of the creature she had taken to her soul would be for her as the stroke of blindness. (B 356)

Though amity suffuses the first two passages, and torment the third, a deeper basis for accord argues their consonance. In each, vision no longer disfigures what Olive calls "the reality" that is "before her now . . . with the beautiful, indifferent sky pouring down its complacent rays": thus a "reality" whose beauty (B 354) is

indivisible from impartiality. Here James bestows on his characters an objectivity he claimed for his own perspective in the writing of the novel, even though for Olive, searing clarity, cleansed of delusion, only arises from miserable hindsight. “Reality” (B 354) dislodges grotesque perceptions and puts in their place an optics purged of bias and enmity, yielding serenity for Olive, neutrality for Ransom, and, again for Olive, grief before each vision recedes. Structurally – the structure is one in which confusion falls away – the passages are identical. “Reality” (B 354) is staid, not opulent: in contrast to the splendid delusion that dazzles, and also in contrast to Olive’s “pain” whose extreme violence bequeaths her a vision no longer fatally at odds with truth.¹³ In the novel’s penultimate pages, before they return to farce, Olive’s vision of herself is mirrored in Ransom’s lucid vision of Olive when she sees in “the hours of backward clearness [that] come to all men and women, once at least” (B 355), as though, momentarily, Olive and Ransom saw through the same pair of eyes, so that the monocular vision of harmony each is initially given to perceive in segregation from the other is here superimposed:

She was upright in her desolation. The expression of her face was a thing to remain with him for ever; it was impossible to imagine a more vivid presentment of blighted hope and wounded pride . . . her pale, glittering eyes straining forward, as if they were looking for death. Ransom had a vision, even at that crowded moment, that if she could have met it there and then, bristling with steel or lurid with fire, she would have rushed on it without a tremor, like the heroine that she was. (B 388)

Seeing “backward” into “deluded geography” (B 355) that one’s deformed vision has led one astray is punctuated as a climax across James’s novels, as when in *The Portrait of a Lady* Isabel Archer sees her husband accurately: “she had imagined a world that had no substance . . . she had not read him right” (P 357); as when Maggie Verver in *The Golden Bowl* suddenly sees that her marriage is a structure from which she is excluded;¹⁴ and as when in *The Wings of the Dove* Densher sees that Milly Theale knows he has betrayed her and, wanting to die, “has turned her face to the wall.”¹⁵ In *The Bostonians*, however, such insight is neither a focus nor a turning point: it is the *value* term in the novel, even as the brief passages glossed above cannot withstand the novel’s pull in the other direction toward travesty.

In Aristophanes’s satiric plays, everything is tarred: no lofty attributes or virtues can be identified in either politics or human nature; in Twain’s *Pudd’nhead Wilson*, satire equally savages antebellum racism and its obdurate survival after Emancipation; and in “A Modest Proposal,” Swift levels universal contempt against all for England’s legal and economic exploitation of Ireland. These classic examples exhibit the generic privilege of satire in which an impersonal, sweeping, global negation is itself a value that reveals by inversion how things should or might be otherwise. Thus, the satiric deformation of value, when flipped, evinces an ideal – in the instance of Twain and Swift, a political ideal – that has been des-

erated. For this reason, satire, while comedic, is also shadowed by tragedy. *The Bostonians* doesn't fit the model because incommensurable objects, some trivial, some substantial – hair style, suffrage, lesbianism, chauvinism, exhibitionism, slavery, publicity, and the jaundiced points of view held by all including the narrator – indiscriminately provoke scorn, from which no legible counterideal could be extracted. Moreover, the logic that from one perspective explains in what sense James's novel evades the satiric coupling of nihilism and idealism is compounded by the recognition that it equally slips free of such a paradigm because the value perceptible in the three passages discussed above registers only evanescently, melting away as of no consequence. Thus, in *The Bostonians*, it's not just the objects of satire that lack a common measure, but also that satire's relation to questions about value is now one thing, now another. From either vantage, the vacuity in *The Bostonians* is neither grand nor tragic.

It might be that value is never stable because the mind's fidelity to its allegiances – its avowed truths – is not stable, or that value cannot endure because nothing endures. But that insight (or truism) is far from the drift of the novel's sustained interests.

The *Bostonians* was not a success. James omitted the novel from the New York Edition, and in one explanation of the exclusion, he wrote: "I left it out partly because I hadn't the courage really to look at it again – & felt that revision would be formidable."¹⁶ When the novel was serialized, critics condemned its "tedium"; its "over elaborate and alembicated passages"; and the "nebulous mazes" that replace "discernible plot." With "no sense of real strength anywhere," the novel was thought to be "unreadable."¹⁷ Readers also flinched at the "indefensible liberties" of James's "portraits" in which character is transmuted into caricature.¹⁸ Horace Elisha Scudder's review of *The Bostonians* identified a more involuntary response: "When we say that most of the characters are repellent, we are simply recording the effect which they produce upon the reader by reason of the attitude which the author of their being takes toward them. He does not love them. Why should he ask more of us?"¹⁹

Love – or the attributes that contribute to the worthiness or substantiality that renders characters fit objects of a reader's attention, if not of his affection (even if they are evil, or merely hateful) – is not the only novelistic value. Whether in a personal, social, or novelistic context, value – even so-called universal value – is heterogeneous and contingent, shifting from one site to another; for some, from one moment to another; and certainly from one novel to the next. In James's *The Portrait of a Lady*, for instance, value inheres in Isabel Archer's fidelity to the choice that defines her autonomy; in *The Wings of the Dove*, in Milly Theale's uncompromised ethical purity; in *What Maisie Knew*, in the child's farewell to her beloved, adulterous step-parents. For James, urbanity is also a container of value;

thus, in *The Ambassadors*, Lambert Strether, the “hero” from Woollett, Massachusetts, arrives in Paris and learns how to relish pleasure. James described this “process” as “the expression, the literal squeezing-out, of value.”²⁰ To glance at other nineteenth-century novels: in Melville’s *Moby-Dick*, value abides in the vastness of the ocean and in the white whale’s embodiment of that sublime inscrutability. In Hawthorne’s *The House of the Seven Gables* and “Ethan Brand,” value is lodged in the “universal throb” that magnetically binds a character to humanity, even when he resists the bond.²¹ In James Fenimore Cooper’s *The Last of the Mohicans*, it lies in the silence of the seas: “the roar of a waterfall” and “at no great distance water” that “seemed piled against the heavens.”²² In *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, in the battle for freedom. Value is secured in the acerbic title of Melville’s *The Confidence-Man*, for although the trust there signified is continuously betrayed, it is also repeatedly extended. Whatever the archive of novelistic value, a novel, at least a nineteenth-century American novel, must not only establish and endorse a source of value but also sustain it, to ward off the odium expressed in the early reviews of *The Bostonians*. Novelistic value must reside somewhere, even if only by inference.

The imperative – for the presence and endurance of novelistic value – is not to humanize the reader. It is not to educate, indoctrinate, prescribe, provide information, model understanding (though it may do all of these). It is not to yield pleasure that might arise from the thrill of compound sentences whose diverse lines of thought go now in one direction, now in another, or from the marvel of a novel’s architectonic structure. Nor is the imperative of value to distract from what lies outside a novel’s covers, though diversion may be one consequence. As with negative theology in which one may only say what God is not, or Dostoevsky’s insistence that “religious essence” can only be defined as “*ne to*,” or “not that,”²³ so novelistic value, which might grip a reader (is it in an ethical vise?), eludes any attempt to pin it down categorically, or to any category. At the same time, one could move from an enumeration of what value is not to what it might be – or where its necessity might inhere – for a specific author or novel. James makes it easy for us when he declares an *interest* to be a *value*. “Really,” he wrote, “at bottom” it is “only difficulty that interests me.”²⁴ To unearth the necessity of novelistic value from the banalities in which it is buried is – at least for James – to touch on an optics in which the difficulty of a complex problem or character is not eroded or degraded by its representation. In *The Bostonians*, value shows its face briefly in the three passages touched on above, where vision – James’s vision of his characters (and, only subordinately, their visions of themselves and each other) – is almost sufficient ballast, but *not* sufficient ballast, to countermand the diatribe against nearly everything in the reader’s line of sight. For those passages that transiently locate value – in the peace of musical harmony; in the names of the Union dead memorialized by stone; in Olive’s backward look – are also outside the fray: that is, outside the coordinates of the social conflict around which the novel bounds

its subject. Of course, the insufficiency of value is the point, and maybe even the achievement, of James's parsimonious treatment of value: in the passages discussed above he offers us a glimpse of value, then snatches it away, insisting on its scarcity in the world the novel reflects. As for ballast: readers have different needs. For some, there's an ethical problem experienced as an omission. They find something left out or scanted in *The Bostonians*, while others read for pure enjoyment of the satire and find it good enough value. The reader who enjoys can become the reader who also craves more than enjoyment, but I don't suppose the reversal occurs in the other direction, for that would mean a subtraction.

A reader of *The Bostonians* might conclude, as does Verena – the character least equipped to render a sound judgment – that, listening to Ransom, she “had never encountered . . . so much bitterness as she saw lurking beneath his exaggerations, his misrepresentations,” his “disparagement” and his “sarcasm” (B 283), an analysis whose depreciation also applies to Olive's, to Mrs. Farrinder's, to the Tarants', to Mathias Pardon's, to Mrs. Luna's, and certainly to the narrator's disfiguration of a reality that Olive and Ransom each briefly discern as such before their eyes cloud over. The vision of the cherished Miss Birdseye is not exempt from James's blackening, along with her politics and her motives. Notwithstanding her “eighty years of innocence and activism,” she is said to wear “undiscriminating spectacles” (B 158). In an unrelated passage, her “large, benignant face” is “caged in by the glass of her spectacles, which seemed to cover it almost equally everywhere” (B 183 – 184). Does the expanse of glass provide a sharp as well as a sweeping view of things as they are, or does it contort her view? Still elsewhere, Ransom injuriously wonders whether Birdseye sees through “open” eyes or whether her “closed, tired, dazzled eyes,” phrases sealed tight, despite the commas, by dental liaisons at d/t/d/d, only see the world through “imagination aiding” (B 310). This fundamental contrast of pellucid vision and vision stupefied by enchantment (the latter intensified by the adjective “dazzled”) echoes as a transient half-rhyme against Olive's splendid (but imaginary) vision of a future with Verena. When at the novel's end Birdseye is given the task of fathoming what turns out to be Ransom's proposal to Verena, she only “dimly made out” what transpires between the figures viewed “at” a “distance” (B 317). Is everything Birdseye sees similarly indecipherable, including the causes that inspire her activism? Birdseye may be heroic, but James's successive descriptions of her flawed or bedazzled vision insist that she too is someone who can't see straight. The bleak world of *The Bostonians* unwittingly calls up these reflections about novelistic value that rise up in its absence.

In hearing the expressions *valuable jewelry* and *valuable life*, we immediately understand the difference between these two points on the scale of value: for one pertains to appurtenances while the other evokes the vital purposes that

enrich a life from within, rather than lending it external value in possessiveness or display. Yet both usages of the term *valuable* are relative, since there is no agreement about what counts as a valuable life, and perhaps also for what counts as valuable jewelry. In his 1929 *Lecture on Ethics*, Wittgenstein wrote that when we try to express “absolute value” – in ethical and religious language – we are constantly using “a simile” or an “allegory,”²⁵ in distinction to relative values which can be expressed in propositions to which *true* or *false* could be applied. He writes: “If I want to fix my mind on what I mean by absolute or ethical value . . . the best way of describing it is to say when I have [the ‘experience’ of it] *I wonder at the existence of the world*. And I am then inclined to use such phrases as ‘how extraordinary that anything should exist’ or ‘how extraordinary that the world should exist.’”²⁶ He adds: “the experience of wondering at the existence of the world . . . is the experience of seeing the world as a miracle.”²⁷ Manifestations of novelistic value are a far cry from this epiphanic expression in which the “existence of the world” is viewed as “supernatural,” a “miracle,”²⁸ but nor can novelistic value be only monetary (in the sense in which jewelry that can be pawned and then redeemed is valuable) or momentary without cost to the reader.

The Bostonians raises a question of how much value is too little or too fleeting; of whether value isolated to individual perception but restricted from the social arena where the novel defines its conflict demonstrates a scarcity that is a dearth or a singularity whose exception should strike us as a marvel – that any plenitude should flash before us when its glimmer is all but extinguished in *The Bostonians* as a whole. Yet the privileging of sight in those evanescent moments when Olive and Ransom see authentically rather than deceptively is nonclimactic, and calls up by contrast the paucity (or is it the absence?) of that laudatory sense of the visionary as transcendent, which simply does not register here except fugitively.

At the time James wrote *The Bostonians*, the achievements of women activists like Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, and Julia Ward Howe were palpable, but James was not interested in depicting a political movement that had substance. Rather, the savage comedy of the novel arises from his skewering of fringe types: failed utopians, quacks, and media celebrities. The same could be said about James’s marginal representation of the Civil War. Though at Harvard’s Memorial Hall Ransom becomes a “generous foeman” who feels “respect” and “tenderness” for “the sons of triumph” as well as “the victims of defeat” (B 210), nothing in the novel disputes Olive’s assessment of Ransom’s bitterness at the Union victory – at losing not only his “home,” but also his “slaves” (B 13). Thus, the representations of the Civil War, as well as of the suffrage movement – and of course of those warring ambassadors of romantic love and principle respectively caricatured in Ransom and Olive – are travesties of fact as well as of value, with insubstantial reference to the very “reality” James extols in the moments of perspicacity he grants to his characters and then withdraws. *The Bostonians* dramatizes

(almost it seems unconsciously) the actual schism in the culture between the erotic pleasures of the body and the ethical satisfactions of the mind committed to the rigors of social justice. The novel's aggressive antagonism between these two compensations is perhaps the foundation of its satire, as though there were no hard question about how such clashing desires might be related or even consolidated. Since in James's representation of that rift neither source of attainment is shown to have value, there is nothing to integrate or even to ponder.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ Henry James, preface to *The Portrait of a Lady*, Second Norton Critical Edition, ed. Robert D. Bamberg (New York: W. W. Norton, 1994), 6. All quotations of the novel are from this edition, hereafter abbreviated *P* and cited parenthetically in the text.

James's reflections on value are articulated in the prefaces to the works that James revised and republished in the twenty-four volumes of the New York Edition (1904–1907). In David McWhirter's description, in the New York Edition: "James entered into a massive work of self-monumentalization: revising the texts extensively; writing prefaces that have become classic texts on prose aesthetics and the novelist's art; and omitting many works, among them some major novels"; see David McWhirter, ed., *Henry James's New York Edition: The Construction of Authorship* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1995), text on book flap. The prefaces often reveal James to be conceptually rewriting his novels as much as describing how it came to him to write the novels. I elaborate in Sharon Cameron, *Thinking in Henry James* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 32–82.

- ² Henry James, preface to *The Wings of the Dove*, Second Norton Critical Edition, ed. J. Donald Crowley and Richard A. Hocks (New York: W. W. Norton, 2003), 12.
- ³ Leon Edel and Lyall H. Powers, eds., *The Complete Notebooks of Henry James* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 20. The entry is a transcription of part of a letter written to J. R. Osgood, James's publisher for *The Bostonians*.
- ⁴ Henry James, *The Bostonians* (London: Penguin, 1966, 1969), 17. All references are to this edition, abbreviated *B* and cited parenthetically in the text.
- ⁵ The phrase occurs in a letter from Henry James to Edmund Gosse, August 25, 1915; *Henry James: A Life in Letters*, ed. Philip Horne (New York: Penguin Classics, 1999), 559.

- ⁶ “The Figure in the Carpet” is a short story published by James in 1886 in which a critic sets out to discover the meaning of an author’s writing, the secret of which he likens to “a complex figure in a Persian carpet” that, discerned, will be the key to the author’s literary work. Henry James, *Complete Stories, 1892 – 1898* (New York: Library of America, 1996), 586.
- ⁷ Henry James, “The Speech of American Women,” *Harper’s Bazaar*, 1906, reprinted in Pierre A. Walker, ed., *Henry James on Culture: Collected Essays on Politics and the American Social Scene* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2004), 62. See also James’s “The Question of Our Speech,” an address at Bryn Mawr, June 8, 1905, reprinted in the same volume.
- ⁸ In Philip Fisher’s analysis, the novel is “a response to the historical rise of ‘conspicuous’” performances during the 1880s when too much “high visibility,” along with “a magnification of personality,” leads to a “society...of self-display”; hence in James’s “romance of fame,” Verena becomes a star. See Philip Fisher, “Appearing and Disappearing in Public: Social Space in Late Nineteenth Century Literature and Culture,” in *Reconstructing American Literature*, ed. Sacvan Bercovitch (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1986), 155, 163, 174, 178.

Earlier strands of classic twentieth-century criticism on *The Bostonians* align James with the political ideology of his characters. Thus Lionel Trilling’s claim that James found Ransom’s position traditional and therefore natural, while Olive, a radical, is unnatural; Lionel Trilling, “The Bostonians,” in *The Opposing Self: Nine Essays in Criticism* (New York: Viking Press, 1955). Judith Fetterley oppositely argues James means us to see Olive, the stronger character, as a victim of an oppressive patriarchal system that is social, not natural; Judith Fetterley, “*The Bostonians*: Henry James’s Eternal Triangle,” in *The Resisting Reader: A Feminist Approach to American Fiction* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978). Irving Howe demonstrates that the novel offers *competing* ideas of the natural; Irving Howe, Introduction to *The Bostonians*, Modern Library College Edition (New York: The Modern Library, 1956). David Van Leer concludes that nothing in the novel is normal or natural, not Boston marriages and not “the compulsory heterosexuality” that is its ostensible antithesis; David Van Leer, “A World of Female Friendship: *The Bostonians*,” in *Henry James and Homoerotic Desire*, ed. John Bradley (New York: Macmillan, 1999), 107. Alfred Habegger historicizes the idea of the natural and the normal via James’s response to John Stuart Mill’s profemale *The Subjection of Women* and Horace Bushnell’s antifeminist *Women’s Suffrage: The Reform Against Nature*, and also via a biographical incident in which an intimate detail (Henry James Sr.’s “apparent admission that his wife had not afforded him full sexual satisfaction”) appeared in 1874 in “the most outrageous American scandal-sheet of the nineteenth century.” Habegger writes: “From this point on, the novelist would repeatedly associate social reform with the violation of family life”; Alfred Habegger, “Henry James’s *Bostonians* and the Fiction of Democratic Vulgarities,” in *Henry James and the Culture of Publicity*, ed. Richard Salmon (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 111, 115.

A second strand of criticism concerns James’s representation of the contemporary derangement of private and public life, a topic introduced by Howe in 1956, extended by Fisher (see above), and recently taken up by John Sampson’s focus on the situation of women in James’s novel as “related not simply to sexual/gender difference but to the separate functions of men and women in the production of urban space”; see John Sampson, “The Re-formation of Urban Space in *The Bostonians*,” *The Henry James Review* 37 (2) (2016): 163. Adelais Mills avers that *The Bostonians* records what Charles Taylor called an “emergent ‘politics of difference’” in “individuals’ deepening allegiance to sectarian

identities – northern, southern, male, female, radical, reactionary” as these threatened “the imagined community of nationhood”; Adelaïds Mills, “‘Absolutely Irresponsible’: Representations of Life in *The Bostonians*,” *Henry James Review* 40 (2) (2019): 97.

Value as a topic does not figure in these discussions.

⁹ James, “The Speech of American Women,” 80.

¹⁰ In a brief diagnostic analysis of *The Bostonians*, Eve Sedgwick maintains that James’s “vindicative” assaults against his characters might be fueled by his refusal to ask how “the ventriloquistic, half-contemptuous, hot desire of Olive Chancellor for a girl like Verena Tarrant” is parallel to “the ventriloquistic, half-contemptuous, hot desire of Henry James for a boy like Basil Ransom.” To the extent that neither “same sex desire” nor a “cross-gender liminality” is acknowledged, the “authorial surface of James’s writing” is “rupture[d]” and what “shoves through” is not the representation of a male erotic but “less daringly of a woman-hating and feminist-baiting violence of panic”; Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, “Willa Cather and Others,” in *Tendencies* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1993), 172–173. Implicitly, were James able to identify how forms of desire can become alibis for each other, and can move in more directions than one, including affirmation and negation, what I have called a “hole” would become a totality or an ambiguous, fragmented whole. But this utopic repair of the hole (or of what Sedgwick calls a “rupture”) is not James’s vision.

Emerson, not James, celebrated such inclusiveness when he wrote: “Hermaphrodite is then the symbol of the finished soul”; cited in George Kateb, *Emerson and Self-Reliance* (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: SAGE Publications, 1995), 123.

¹¹ An early critic missed the point of free indirect style when he described James’s “habit of reporting the mind as well as the conversation of his baser characters” as “a sort of third personal evasion of elegance”; Horace E. Scudder, *Atlantic Monthly*, June 1886, reprinted in *Henry James: The Contemporary Reviews*, ed. Kevin J. Hayes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 170. There is a problem of clarity, not elegance, with free indirect style, which relays the perceptions of all the characters—not just the “base” ones. In one helpful diagnosis, the narrator is “neither wholly internal nor wholly exterior to the fiction” but is “caught in an interstice between diegesis and action,” where it is impossible to “integrate . . . perspectives in the name of a shared reality”; Mills, “‘Absolutely Irresponsible.’”

¹² Jonathan Edwards’s expression in *The Nature of True Virtue* for “consent and good will to Being in general,” the only foundation of “true virtue”; *Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 8, ed. Paul Ramsey (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1989), 540–541.

¹³ Georg Lukács would call this redemption through violence, in which a character achieves an objectivity ordinarily reserved for narrative as a whole, “metaformal grace,” a counterweight to satire; Georg Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel: A Historico-Philosophical Essay on the Forms of Great Epic Literature*, trans. Anna Bostock (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1971), 102. Garrett Stewart’s *Novel Violence: A Narratology of Victorian Fiction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009) examines the ways in which such brutal moments punctuate the stories that give them context.

¹⁴ Henry James, *The Golden Bowl* (London: Penguin Classics, 1985 [1904]), 327.

¹⁵ Henry James, *The Wings of the Dove*, Norton Critical Edition, ed. J. Donald Crowley and Richard A. Hocks (New York: W. W. Norton, 1978), 331.

¹⁶ James, *A Life in Letters*, 532.

¹⁷ *The Springfield Republican* [Massachusetts], April 18, 1886; *The London Daily News*, February 1886; *The Boston Evening Traveler*, March 19, 1886; *Contemporary Review* [England], August 1886; and *The Independent*, April 22, 1886, are reprinted in Hayes, *Henry James: The Contemporary Reviews*, 166, 153, 157, 171, and 167, respectively.

¹⁸ *The Springfield Republican*, April 18, 1886.

And what a transmutation. William and Henry James Sr. were both fascinated with the spiritualism that James made seedy in the squalid Dr. Tarrant. The lifelong companionship of Alice James, Henry's sister, with Katherine Peabody (and that Olive desired with Verena) is mocked as risible in *The Bostonians*. The dotty Miss Birdseye, alternately praised and pilloried, was thought to be modeled after Elizabeth Palmer Peabody, the nineteenth-century reformer. When *The Bostonians* was issued in volume form, the New York agent of Macmillan, its publisher, noted: "I never knew a book being more thoroughly condemned." See Michael Anesko, "Friction with the Market": *Henry James and the Profession of Authorship* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 99.

As for the novel's theme—the rights of women—one critic denounced the "triviality of the object analyzed"; another argued that "the real nobility of the movement for equalizing women with men in the rights of a government by the people is utterly scorned" by James; and a third, that *The Bostonians*' "aim is to justify the life of women in the sphere most natural to it—the sphere of home and family influence, and to show how much is lost alike to her and to the world whenever she makes any attempt to pass beyond it" (*British Quarterly Review*, April 1886, in Hayes, *Henry James: The Contemporary Reviews*, 160)—three opposing takeaways. See *Chicago Tribune*, April 3, 1886; *Springfield Republican*, April 18, 1886; and *British Quarterly Review*, April 1886.

¹⁹ Scudder, *Atlantic Monthly*, June 1886.

²⁰ Henry James, *The Ambassadors*, Second Norton Critical Edition, ed. S. P. Rosenbaum (New York: W. W. Norton, 1994), 4.

²¹ Nathaniel Hawthorne, *Nathaniel Hawthorne's Tales*, Norton Critical Edition, ed. James McIntosh (New York: W. W. Norton, 1987), 241.

²² James Fenimore Cooper, *The Last of the Mohicans* (Ware, United Kingdom: Wordsworth Classics, 1992), 38.

²³ See Nancy Ruttenberg's analysis of Dostoevsky's "ne to" to indicate "the inadequate expression or enactment of an as-yet inarticulable . . . belief, idea, or ideal." Nancy Ruttenberg, *Dostoyevsky's Democracy* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2008), 18.

²⁴ This is the whole passage from James's letter of December 31, 1908, to William Dean Howells: "I find our art, all the while, more difficult of practice, and want, with that, to do it in a more and more difficult way; it being really, at bottom, only difficulty that interests me." Percy Lubbock, ed., *The Letters of Henry James*, vol. 2 (New York: Scribners, 1920), 528.

²⁵ Ludwig Wittgenstein, "Lecture on Ethics," in *Philosophical Occasions 1912–1951*, ed. James Carl Klage and Alfred Nordmann (Cambridge, Mass.: Hackett Publishing Company, 1993), 42.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 41.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 43.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 40, 43.