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The
Tactics
of Sanctity:
Hawthorne and James

THE BOSTONIANS is Henry James's single major effort at a novel not only set entirely on the American scene but populated exclusively by American characters; and it is hardly surprising that, when he came to write it, James's imagination should be more than usually hospitable to the good influence of his major American predecessor in the art of fiction. The Hawthorne aspect of *The Bostonians* is pervasive: so much so that James's novel seems at times to be composed largely of cunning re-

arrangements and inversions—on a lower mimetic level (to borrow Northrop Frye's category) and at a later moment in history—of ingredients taken over from Hawthorne. The several similarities between *The Blithedale Romance* and *The Bostonians*, as between novels dealing respectively with the New England reformist temper before and after the Civil War, have been sufficiently pointed out, and we may accept them as among the valid commonplaces of American literary history. But what is striking is that *The Bostonians* carries forward and downward more interestingly yet from *The Scarlet Letter*, and that it significantly perverts elements derived from *The House of the Seven Gables*. I even suspect that James, for the fullness of his artistic effect, may have depended upon our having the novels of Hawthorne in mind: as, for example, Thomas Mann in *The Magic Mountain* depended upon the reader's recollection of the *Odyssey* and the *Divine Comedy*, on each of which he was ringing a number of ironic and terrible changes. If my suspicion of James is correct, it was splendidly continental and un-American of him: the more so because, when the American writings are juxtaposed, they bring into prominence compulsions and strategies that have become generic to American fiction, in good part because Hawthorne made it possible for James to see those phenomena as generic to any imaginative view of that American world which, in *The Bostonians*, James for the first and last time explored in depth.

They bring into view, among other equally absorbing things, what I find no way to avoid calling the American theme; in James's case, we might call it his own local treatment of the intranational theme. One likes to assume that American fiction has displayed a sufficient variety of themes; none of the novels in question is inclined to reduce reality to a single phase or anything as abstract as a theme, still less a theme transfixed and further reduced by a patriotic adjective. But it remains true that

one idea more than another has agitated American novelists from Hawthorne's generation to our own, and that this idea is what Hawthorne defined as "the sanctity of a human heart." We should cling to Hawthorne's remarkable and precise wording of the formula, and not shrink the matter to a mere question of "identity" or some polemic for the rights of personality. Understood as Hawthorne and James understood it, wrapped in unmistakable religious connotations, the formula has had an almost explosive power of suggestion for the novel in America (and, from Whitman onward, for poetry too).

It has appeared there, persistently, as a kind of touchstone for human behavior and social organization. True and false human relationships have been identified by appeal to it. It is what is at stake when everything is at stake: what has most aroused novelists when they seek to dramatize the periodic clash between new ideas and old; the real issue in fictionalized moments of historic social crisis and ideological change. It is or has been made to seem the measure of progress and reaction, what threatens the old and is threatened by it. It is or has been made to seem the first of all sacraments in any vital religion, what blasphemes the established order and is blasphemed by it. It is even implicated in the distinction of genres to which American fiction has been prone: allegory, legend, romance, satire, the realistic novel. To these large contentions, a whole range of American writers could testify, though I shall not summon them to do so. I want only to reflect, by means of a few notes and notations, on the extent to which Hawthorne and—following him—James felt the radical force of the heart's sanctity; and on how, making that force palpable in narrative, they showed what the American novel can grapple with and how much it can accomplish. I shall be addressing myself to what Hawthorne's generation called a writer's talent as much as to his genius, his craft as much as his vision; nor do I expect to

say anything very new. But the occasion is ceremonial: a time for reaffirmations.

In *The Scarlet Letter*, as in *The Bostonians*, the theme of the heart's sanctity is closely associated with a question about the condition of women, and that question in turn arises out of a supple play of historical perspectives. The patterning becomes evident in the course of the opening scene: though fully so, I shall suggest, rather to the attentive reader than to the actors in the drama. Among the latter, it is Dimmesdale who, for his own mixed private purposes, comes closest to sounding the theme: when, according to John Wilson's report, he argues that "it were wronging the very nature of woman to force her"—as Hester Prynne is being forced—"to lay open her heart's secret in such broad daylight, and in the presence of so great a multitude." Hawthorne has already let us know that he shares Dimmesdale's attitude and goes beyond it, and that in his opinion enforced public exposure wrongs not only the nature of woman but human nature generally, that it violates some urgent, perhaps some sacred, principle of life: "There can be no outrage, methinks, against our common nature . . . more flagrant than to forbid the culprit to hide his face for shame." Unlike Dimmesdale, who is wholly encased within what he believes to be a changeless theocratic structure, Hawthorne is there speaking out of an historical perspective. His voice is that of the humane, nineteenth-century, New England spirit as it broods over the New England of two centuries earlier; and it is the same spirit that had been quick to observe, and from the same historical vantage-point, the awesome dignity as well as the cruelty of Hester's punishment: "On the other hand, a penalty, which, in our day, would infer a degree of mocking infamy and ridicule, might then be invested with almost as stern a dignity as the punishment of death itself." Hawthorne

then goes on to enrich the whole matter by some remarks about the female Bostonians of the 1640's that throw a fascinatingly ambiguous light, in advance, over Dimmesdale's appeal.

As he looks at the females pushing and crowding around the scaffold and watches them "wedging their not insubstantial persons . . . into the throng"; as he runs his eyes over their "broad shoulders and well-developed busts," and listens to the startling "boldness and rotundity" of their speech, Hawthorne is led to conclude that: "Morally, as well as materially, there was a coarser fibre in those wives and maidens of old English birth and breeding, than in their fair descendants, separated from them by a series of six or seven generations." For Hawthorne, at least in this novel, the nature of woman is susceptible to historical definition. These seventeenth-century New England women, like everything else in the book, are identified within a long process of physical and moral transformation. Hawthorne traces the process backwards half a century and across the waters to sixteenth-century England and the age of "man-like Elizabeth"—an epoch of "beef and ale . . . [and] a moral diet not a whit more refined"; and forward through the years to Hawthorne's time, noticing how "every successive mother has transmitted to her child a fainter bloom, a more delicate and briefer beauty, and a slighter physical frame, if not a character of less force and solidity."

The passage reveals the characteristic narrative tactic of *The Scarlet Letter*, even though the tactical aim reveals itself more slowly. The temper of the Puritan men during the period of the novel's action is, like the nature of the women, established by the tracing out of an historical process, and one which again stretches back to the Elizabethan age, forward into the later generations of Puritans, and on into the nineteenth century. Hawthorne (in Chapter XXI) pauses in his account of the holiday games to insist that "the great, honest face of the

people smiled, grimly, perhaps, but widely too." For they were, he reminds us, "not born to an inheritance of Puritan gloom. They were native Englishmen, whose fathers had lived in the sunny richness of the Elizabethan epoch." They were men, in fact, who, by 1645, were only "in the first stages of joyless deportment"; it was not they but their "immediate posterity, the generation next to the early emigrants, [who] wore the blackest shade of Puritanism, and so darkened the national visage with it, that all the subsequent years have not sufficed to clear it up."

What Hawthorne is doing by means of this recurring dialectic of historical epochs is to create the terms—the very sources of meaning—of the drama he is engaged in describing; and the achievement is a remarkable one. Hawthorne knew, better than any writer of his time, that existence for the Puritan "was completely dramatic, every minute was charged with meaning."¹ In his own words, the Puritans tended to speak of human existence as simply a state of "trial and warfare"—the scene of the great war between God and the devil; a scene overwhelmed by allegory. It was just this quality of Puritan life that made it so attractive a subject for a novelist of Hawthorne's dramatic persuasion. But the crucial point is this: that the meaning with which every minute of the action in *The Scarlet Letter* is charged is never quite the meaning assigned to it by the characters involved; nor could it be. For surrounding the meanings so confidently attributed to events and relationships by the magistrates and the clergymen, the matrons and the maidens, is the creative play of Hawthorne's historical imagination. This is, so to speak, the charging force of the novel; and this it is that invests what I take to be the supreme moment in the story, the swift exchange between Dimmesdale and Hester in the forest, with something like a revolutionary significance.

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Between the opening scene and that encounter, much had been happening and much a-building; one of the many things Hawthorne taught James was to let narrative power accumulate at a fairly measured pace, so as to give maximum resonance to those otherwise slender moments when the entire drama is asked to change course and, in doing so, yield up its central meaning. Among the several developments in *The Scarlet Letter*, we may mention the two most obvious ones. There is, on the one hand, the long patient effort of Chillingworth to drag Dimmesdale out of his psychological hiding-place and onto a private scaffold, a place of moral exposure, of Chillingworth's own making. And on the other, there has been the strange career of Hester's interior musings. The exchange in the forest is the created compound of these two developments—and of Hawthorne's handling of them.

In her lonely cottage by the sea, Hester has come into touch with the array of new ideas that, as Hawthorne says, were stirring the minds of Europe and toppling the systems of "ancient prejudice" ("wherewith," Hawthorne characteristically adds, "was linked much of ancient principle"). But she is able to do so because, in her tragic freedom, she is gifted with the mode of imagination that informs the entire narrative: the historical imagination; and she is the only person in the book to be so gifted. Hawthorne permits Hester to share a little in his liberated perspective; she alone envisages the possibility of significant historical change; and she alone is allowed thereby to escape some real distance from the allegorized world of fixed and changeless meanings and conditions and relationships which all other figures in the book inhabit. As Hester reflects upon "the whole race of womanhood," she arrives at the vision of social and sexual revolution to which, Hawthorne implies, women in her position are always liable.

As a first step, the whole system of society is to be torn down, and built up anew. Then, the very nature of the opposite sex, or its long hereditary habit, which has become like nature, is to be essentially modified, before woman can be allowed to assume what seems a fair and suitable position. Finally, all other difficulties being obviated, woman cannot take advantage of these preliminary reforms, until she herself have undergone a still mightier change.

The consequence of all this—as Hester, at the book's end, is still telling the unhappy women to whom she ministers—would be to “establish the whole relation between man and woman on a surer ground of mutual happiness.” But until it is revealed to her by Dimmesdale, Hester does not truly perceive the ground of that ground.

Hawthorne reminds us how appalling Hester's speculations would have seemed to the Puritan authorities: “as perilous as demons.” He reminds us, too, how genuinely dangerous, how gravely unsettling, such speculations can be for the person who entertains them: They can quite literally, he suggests, draw one on toward madness. But what Hawthorne most deeply distrusts is not Hester's revolutionary dream, but the essentially intellectual source and nature of it. It is too much a product of the head; and “a woman,” Hawthorne declares, “never overcame these problems by any exercise of thought.” The remark is by no means condescending; for *The Scarlet Letter* is animated by the belief that these problems can be overcome, or at least that the overcoming of them should be among the supreme goals of human effort; and he so far believes that a woman will lead the way, if anyone will, that he grants the woman Hester the unique privilege of entering into his own historical perspective. But his dominant conviction is that the solution must come from the heart; that the problems will themselves vanish when, and only when, the heart “chance to

come uppermost." And this, of course, is what does happen during the meeting in the forest.

There, for a brief and perhaps illusory moment, the relationship between Dimmesdale and Hester, between the man and the woman, stands upon that surer ground of mutual happiness that Hester has dreamed of. One even conjectures that for a few seconds the scarlet letter betokens those words—"angel" and "apostle"—with which Hester hoped to associate herself as the destined prophetess of the new revelation. Such religious titles and allusions are, in any event, not out of place. For what comes flickering into view, what the whole course of the novel has been preparing for, and what terrifies Dimmesdale when he catches a glimpse of it, is something much more far-reaching than social reform. It is, indeed, a religious revolution. "May God forgive us both!" Dimmesdale says sadly. And then:

"We are not, Hester, the worst sinners in the world. There is one worse than even the polluted priest! That old man's revenge has been blacker than my sin. He has violated, in cold blood, the sanctity of a human heart. Thou and I, Hester, never did so!"

"Never, never!" whispered she. "What we did had a consecration of its own. We felt it so! We said so to each other! Hast thou forgotten it?"

"Hush, Hester!" said Arthur Dimmesdale, rising from the ground. "No; I have not forgotten."

In context, the implication is almost breath-taking. It is just because neither of them had violated the sanctity of the other's heart that what they had done—their entire relationship—had had a consecration of its own. Dimmesdale's words release Hester's extraordinary contention and give all her wandering meditations a sudden coherence. It is from the implications of Hester's answer that Dimmesdale shies back in a kind of horror, for he is equipped to appreciate the enormity of them.

He had been trained to pursue his priestly calling among a people for whom "religion and law were almost identical, and in whose character both were . . . thoroughly interfused." But latent in his attribution of sanctity to the human heart, and still more in the suggestion it leads to, that of the sanctification of lawless love, is the seed of a new sacramental order; and one that, from the Puritan standpoint, is altogether blasphemous. No wonder that Dimmesdale rises to his feet, cuts short the exchange, and commands Hester to hush. It is a moment characteristic of Hawthorne: the short glimpse and the speedy covering over of the world-disturbing truth; and Hester hushes. But she does not relinquish her vision, nor will she for the rest of her fictional life.

She takes no steps to bring that new order into being, except for her humane ministrations to the forlorn who come to her door. But Hawthorne tells us that, had matters been otherwise, Hester "might have come down to us in history hand in hand with Anne Hutchinson"—"sainted Anne Hutchinson," as he has called her earlier—"as the foundress of a religious sect." It is the very substance of that projected and unrealized religion that is gradually created by the novel's historical dialectics; and Hester's limited eligibility to lead it can be measured by the limited but real degree of her participation in those dialects. It would be a religion founded on the doctrine of the inviolable sanctity of the individual human heart; and one in which the human relation—above all the relation between man and woman—itsself shaped by allegiance to that doctrine (by the mutual reverence of heart for heart), would become the vessel of the sacred, the domain of the consecrated. It would have provided a sacramental basis for a genuine community of the kind envisaged, for example, by Henry James the elder in *Society, the Redeemed Form of Man*. Indeed, it is tempting to look beyond Hawthorne across a dozen decades, to notice how, from the

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two Henry Jameses onward, writer after writer has reflected the same curious but persistent brand of religious humanism—and usually in an escape from traditional religious institutions and dogmas, and in despite of the world's irreverent practices. But no writer ever succeeded in making this epochal possibility as compelling as did Hawthorne: for no American writer possessed the vision, both historical and transcendent, to set the new possibility amidst and against the stiffening vigor, the hard historical actuality, of the older order. In the clarity of his perception and in his unsentimental compassion, Hawthorne was able, as well, to do honor to both the old and the new, while seeing each as an absolute challenge to the other. If Hester had become the destined prophetess, she "might, and not improbably would, have suffered death from the stern tribunals of the period, for attempting to undermine the foundations of the Puritan establishment." Within the world of *The Scarlet Letter*, the establishment triumphs; but within the novel as a novel, its foundations are constantly and quietly undermined by a play of perspectives to which only Hester is privy; and the fusion of religion and law is giving way to a new conception of sanctity.

II

About *The House of the Seven Gables*, there is for present purposes less that needs to be said; but we can begin by remarking that its narrative method to some extent reverses that of *The Scarlet Letter*, and that the Hawthornian formula emerges here from a different direction. In *The Scarlet Letter*, an action set in the past completes its meaning under the pressure of a shifting later-day perspective; in *The Seven Gables*, events occurring in the present—or anyhow in "an epoch not very remote from the present day"—draw much of their force from the shifting pressure of a long past, through a series of what seem about to

be fated re-enactments and turn out to be reversals. *The Scarlet Letter* projects forward, beyond the consciousness of its characters, from the 1640's to Hawthorne's own time; *The Seven Gables* reaches backward from Hawthorne's time almost to the age of *The Scarlet Letter*, touching upon happenings that took place in or around 1670 (Hawthorne's arithmetic is casual), 1707, 1820, and 1850. In *The Scarlet Letter*, Hawthorne, observing the robust physiques of the Puritan matrons, glances ahead to the fainter bloom and briefer beauty of their descendants. In *The Seven Gables*, almost everything is described as diminished or decaying and contrasted with the heartier qualities of earlier times. Even Jaffrey Pyncheon, for all his wicked strength, carries in his face the marks of a physiological decline:

The Judge's face had lost the ruddy English hue that showed its warmth through all the duskiness of the Colonel's weather-beaten cheek, and had taken a sallow shade, the established complexion of his countrymen.

The brother and sister are dreary relics: Hepzibah is a "far-descended and time-stricken virgin," and Clifford, until the book's climax, is no more than an elderly wreck of what had been a beautiful and brilliant young man. Their habitation, the moldering house with its garden-plot "so unctuous with two hundred years of vegetable decay" and its "ugly luxuriance of gigantic weeds" is dimly appropriate, an objective correlative for their weedy spirits. It is within such an atmosphere that Hawthorne's historical imagination—working with no less agility than before, but, as it were, reversing its direction—once again brings into dramatic play the principle of the heart's sanctity.

The principle, is, no doubt, less central here than in *The Scarlet Letter*: ideas in general are less central in *The Seven Gables* than in its much more dramatic predecessor. But it does

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make its important appearance, and it is, as formerly (though less tightly), related to a cluster of "new ideas." Given the time-laden atmosphere of the story, we may expect the new ideas in this case to be mainly ideas about newness itself: about getting rid of the past which, as the daguerreotypist Holgrave proclaims oratorically, "lies upon the Present like a giant's dead body," in every conceivable physical, psychological, social, legal, and religious form. Holgrave's rhetoric is, of course, excessive; it warrants the recoiling comment of Phoebe about the ferocity of his hatred for everything old; and it is countered by the very figure of Clifford, by the infinite pathos of a man who really has gotten rid of the past, or been bereft of it. It is Holgrave's personal destiny, in the novel, to come to terms with the past, including his own genealogy. Nonetheless, Holgrave (and Hawthorne goes on to say as much) deserves our attention and that of his fellow characters; for more than anyone else in the novel, Holgrave understands the necessary basis of any new system of life: a quality he himself possesses and which Hawthorne—in the milder and properly more modern but still religious idiom of *The Seven Gables*—describes as "the rare and high quality of reverence for another's individuality."

The phrase occurs (in Chapter XIV) at a moment when Holgrave has very nearly mesmerized Phoebe by his histrionic reading of the story about Alice Pyncheon. The latter, one remembers, was herself completely mesmerized by one Matthew Maule, grandson of that Matthew Maule who had been executed for witchcraft upon the false testimony of Colonel Pyncheon, and who thus takes his family's revenge upon the wicked Colonel's granddaughter. Alice is held in thrall until Matthew's marriage, whereupon she wakes from her "enchanted sleep" and straightway dies—leaving Matthew "gnashing his teeth, as if he would have bitten his own heart in twain," not unlike Chillingworth on the occasion of Dimmesdale's death.

This is the supreme instance, in *The Seven Gables*, of the violation of Hawthorne's first principle, a literally murderous invasion of another person's individuality: Maule "had taken a woman's delicate soul into his rude gripe, to play with—and she was dead!" Retelling that story almost a century and a half later, another Maule (who temporarily calls himself Holgrave) comes to the verge of re-enacting that earlier sin and of casting a similarly fatal spell over the susceptible spirit of young Phoebe Pyncheon. "A veil was beginning to be muffled about her"—one thinks of the veilings and mesmerizings of *The Blithedale Romance*—"in which she could behold only him, and live only in his thoughts and emotions." Holgrave's gesture at this point not only liberates Phoebe's potentially enslaved self; it is a victory over his own dangerous and inherited power—and insofar a reversal and a rejection of the past.

To a disposition like Holgrave's, at once speculative and active, there is no temptation so great as the opportunity of acquiring empire over the human spirit; nor any idea more seductive to a young man than to become the arbiter of a young girl's destiny. Let us, therefore,—whatever his defects of nature and education, and in spite of his scorn for creeds and institutions,—concede to the daguerreotypist the rare and high quality of reverence for another's individuality. Let us allow him integrity, also, forever after to be confided in; since he forbade himself to twine that one link more which might have rendered his spell over Phoebe indissoluble.

And, with a gesture of his hand, he restores Phoebe to herself.

It is because he refuses to repeat his ancestor's blasphemous act and to make his spell over the girl indissoluble that Holgrave becomes fitted for that highest kind of human relationship: a marriage, based not on human empire but on mutual reverence, a modest example, one supposes, of the right relation between man and woman prophesied by Hester Prynne. Holding back

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from the indissoluble spell, Holgrave makes possible the indissoluble union, something that will have a consecration of its own. Quite the opposite is the case with Jaffrey Pyncheon.

The Judge is totally bent on acquiring "empire over a human spirit"—a diabolic empire over the spirit of poor Clifford; and he acquires it by repeating the actions of his ancestor, by a combination of murder and false testimony. Those crimes were monstrous enough, but the final sacrilege, the very sin of the crimes as it were, is the utterly debilitating spell the Judge has cast and continues to exercise over Clifford: "That strong and ponderous man had been Clifford's nightmare. There was no free breath to be drawn within the sphere of so malevolent an influence." Clifford is released from his psychic imprisonment only by Jaffrey's death. Jaffrey, who had believed too much in the past, who believed that the past could endlessly repeat and re-enact itself, and who even believed in the inherited tale of buried treasure: Jaffrey is himself destroyed by the past, by the inherited disease—"the physical predisposition in the Pyncheon race"—and he dies with the legendary blood on his lips. The Judge, as we may say, is defeated by the legend, as he ought to have been; for in the deepest sense, it was a heartless legend, and he is a heartless man. By his defeat and death, Clifford is released from the legend, enough at least to recover something of himself. Holgrave escapes further still from the confines of the legend, as Hester Prynne had—in her thoughts and in her gentle advices to the wretched—moved somewhat outside the confines of allegory. As a work of fiction, *The House of the Seven Gables* moves similarly away from the legendary and toward the more modern and realistic, and arrives at a form, the romance, in which Hawthorne could present his steadiest belief about human nature and its relationships, not as an ideal dimly visible in the far future, but as an immediate possibility among the modern realities.

III

"Every one will, in his way—or in her way—plead the cause of the new truths. If you don't care for them, you won't go with us."

"I tell you I haven't the least idea what they are! I have never yet encountered in the world any but old truths—as old as the sun and the moon. How can I know? But do take me; it's such a chance to see Boston."

The new truths to which, in the opening scene of *The Bostonians*, Olive Chancellor so passionately appeals and which her kinsman from Mississippi, Basil Ransom, makes courteous mock of are, like those of *The Scarlet Letter*, ideas bearing chiefly upon the unhappy condition and possible future status of women. There are times, indeed, in *The Bostonians* when Olive Chancellor (though her surname more suitably if very faintly echoes that of Chillingworth) markedly resembles Hester Prynne. Or more accurately, there are times when James is plainly drawing both his rhetoric and his subject matter, not from contemporary historical developments, but—as literary artists tend to do—from existing literature, and especially from *The Scarlet Letter*. "The unhappiness of women! The voice of their silent suffering was always in her ears, the ocean of tears that they had shed from the beginning of time seemed to pour through her own eyes." That is Olive, in James's articulation of her. "Women . . . —in the continually recurring trials of wounded, wasted, wronged, misplaced, or erring and sinful passion,—or with the dreary burden of a heart unyielded, because unvalued and unsought,—came to Hester's cottage, demanding why they were so wretched, and what the remedy." That, of course, is Hawthorne; and if Hester has once "imagined that she herself might be the destined prophetess," so "it seemed to [Olive] at times that she had been born to lead a crusade." It is, like the movement meditated by Hester, to be a religious

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crusade: "This was the only sacred cause; this was the great, the just revolution." And the nature and scope of it, as they form themselves in Olive's over-heated mind, resemble those of the social upheaval Hester had pondered, with sacrificial death once more the probable and even desirable outcome:

It must sweep everything before it; it must exact from the other, the brutal, blood-stained, ravening race, the last particle of expiation! It would be the greatest change the world had seen; it would be a new era for the human family, and the names of those who had helped show the way and lead the squadrons would be the brightest in the tables of fame. They would be the names of women weak, insulted, persecuted, but devoted in every pulse of their being to the cause, and asking no better fate than to die for it.

In the near hysteria of tone and the savagery of attitude toward the male race, the passage diverges markedly from the passage quoted earlier from *The Scarlet Letter*. It is, indeed, the meaningful differences between the two novels, the different ways in which Hawthorne and James assemble and, as it were, orient quite similar materials, that I eventually want to stress—and that James himself, as I believe, wanted to stress; for James (to repeat my remark) seems to have counted upon our remembering Hawthorne and to have striven for his ultimate effects by means of a combined echo of, and contrast with, Hawthorne. But we should notice, meanwhile, that if *The Bostonians* shares with *The Scarlet Letter* an interest in revolutionary ideas about the condition of women, those ideas palpitate in *The Bostonians* within a general atmosphere of decline oddly similar to that of *The House of the Seven Gables*. In James's novel, as in Hawthorne's romance, almost every item participates in a pattern of diminution. The historical distance spanned in *The Bostonians* is nothing so vast as that of *The Seven Gables*: it is at most the four-score years of the saintly fool, Miss Birds-

eye; and James's impressionistic and allusive evocation of even so short a stretch of history illustrates perfectly the remark of T. S. Eliot that Hawthorne's sense of the past "exercised itself in a grip on the past itself," but that "in James it is a sense of the sense." To which we should add, I think, that James had in particular a sense of Hawthorne's sense; and this made it possible for James to include in his own pattern of decay a much larger variety of elements than Hawthorne, and to cover a great deal more of the national landscape.

To begin with, the reformers who gather in Miss Birdseye's rooms appear aimless, bemused, rhetorically corrupted by comparison with "the heroic age of New England life," the age before the Civil War, an age "of plain living and high thinking, of pure ideals and earnest effort, of moral passion and noble experiment." And the social crusade, the marshaling of the feminist squadrons, sounds suddenly almost tawdry when James invokes "the simple emotion of the old fighting-time," the war itself, escorting us, with Basil Ransom and Verena Tarrant, into Harvard's Memorial Hall and remarking upon the "singularly noble and solemn effect" of the "temple" for the fallen soldiers, its symbolism of "duty and honor . . . sacrifice and example." But the conservative temper in *The Bostonians* is in no less sorry a state than the reformist: there is, on the one hand, the virtual medievalism of Ransom and, on the other, the mere muddled snobbishness of Adeline Luna, who, though she liked to think that the word "conservative" was "the motto inscribed upon her own silken banner" (the motto, in short, of her own crusade), limited her conservatism to prattle about the inferiority of republics and the bad manners of servants.

Places share in the general decay and are analogues of it. The entire Boston area is seen as disappearing into the spreading jungle of factories and engine-shops. In James's famous and

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eloquent description of the western view from Olive's apartment on Charles Street, there is observed "something inexorable in the poverty of the scene," something

shameful in the meanness of its details, which gave a collective impression of boards and tin and frozen earth, sheds and rotting piles, railway lines striding flat across a thoroughfare of puddles, and tracks of the humbler, the universal horsecar, traversing obliquely this path of danger; loose fences, vacant lots, mounds of refuse, yards bestrewn with iron pipes, telegraph poles, and bare wooden backs of places.

(It is characteristic of Vercna that she thinks this view lovely, just as at first she had secretly wished to emulate Adeline Luna rather than her sister Olive.) But if the northern landscape is thus being devoured by an industrial version of those ugly gigantic weeds that smothered the terrain in *The House of The Seven Gables*, the post-war South—"the poor, dear, desolate old South," as Ransom calls it—lies in utter ruin; and swift recollections of its former splendor sometimes flash through Ransom's consciousness, and into ours, as a measure of its present desolation. Within the novel, in fact, and by a pattern of allusion more intricate than I can here suggest, the entire country is represented as having suffered some strange and terrible reversal of fortune (to borrow the phrase used about "the great drawing-room of Europe" in *The Wings of the Dove*). And this aspect is perhaps best summed up in the picture of the Cape Cod town of Marmion (i.e., Marion) which "was a good deal shrunken since the decline in the shipbuilding interest; it turned out a good many vessels every year, in the palmy days, before the war," but now Ransom gathers the impression "that it had had a larger life, seen better days." The larger life, the better days, stand everywhere behind the elements of the novel—persons, places, movements, ideals, interest—and testify to the present unhappy shrinkage.

In a much-quoted notebook entry for 1883, James wrote that—as his novel's main concern, and as “the most salient and peculiar point in [American] social life”—he had chosen “the decline in the sentiment of sex.” That, certainly, is a major phenomenon in *The Bostonians*, and one which many of the other instances of “decline” explain and illuminate. But it is, I think, as much a symptom as a cause; and what the novel's action as well as its rhetoric more profoundly reveals is the decline of the religious sentiment—that is, of the specific religious sentiment to which, with and following Hawthorne, James was himself most profoundly committed. What is happening in this regard is indicated at a stroke, a single casual remark, almost an aside: when James reports that the Harvard library was “a diminished copy of the chapel at King's College,” and that Verena Tarrant introduces Basil Ransom into it “with the air of a person familiar with the sanctified spot.” These are lines that, in the theater idiom, James is quite willing to “throw away,” and we miss nothing but a momentary pang of aesthetic pleasure and admiration if we fail to notice them. Nonetheless, in context, they fairly bristle with meaning.

We can best formulate that meaning by reference once again to *The Scarlet Letter*. There, Hawthorne set his action among a people—the Bostonians of the 1640's—for whom “religion and law were almost identical, and in whose character both were . . . thoroughly interfused.” James set his own American novel among a people—the Bostonians of the 1870's—for whom *religion and ideology* were becoming almost identical, and in whose character both were already dangerously confused.² And both pairings are portrayed as the absolute enemy of the fundamental religious sentiment: the sense of the sanctity of the individual human heart. *That* is the sense that characterized “the heroic age of New England life”; that is the sense that has most fatally declined; and that is the sense which the novel, though not the

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characters in it, seeks in its own subtle and dramatic manner to re-establish.

Olive Chancellor, as we have seen, regards her feminist crusade as a sacred cause. Later in the story, she is made by James very tellingly to reflect that "without Verena's tender notes, her crusade would lack sweetness, what the Catholics call unction"; and with Verena, all during the winter of 187—, she looks forward across "the solemn vista of an effort so religious as never to be wanting in ecstacy." Basil Ransom—who in this regard, as in others, may be thought of as a deliberate inversion of Hawthorne's *Holgrave*—invests his own reactionary ideas, and especially his passionate anti-feminist speeches, with no less ardent a religious quality; and though with much of what he says James would probably have agreed (in a quieter tone of voice), still Verena responds for James and for us when she is impressed "by the novelty of a man taking that sort of religious tone about such a cause." These are persons, Olive Chancellor and Basil Ransom, who really are violated by ideas, to draw again upon T. S. Eliot's inexhaustibly useful commentary and phrasing; who corrupt their feelings with ideas (the language is still Mr. Eliot's); who "produce the political idea, the emotional idea, evading sensation and thought"—and who make a religion out of the result. They are, in short, ideologues; and worse still, they are ideologues in action. They are not only violated by ideas, they use ideas to violate others; and in particular, of course, they violate, and fight to the death for the privilege of violating, the vulnerable individuality, the susceptible human heart, of Verena Tarrant.

The process need not be spelled out; to do so would be to rehearse most of the book's plot, for the plot turns exactly upon the effort and countereffort of Olive and Basil to possess themselves of Verena, and each in the name of Verena's perfect freedom and the holiness of the conflicting creeds. Two mo-

ments may stand for many. When Verena comes to live with Olive, the latter emphasizes the fact that the younger girl "should be as free as air, to go and come." But by that time, James informs us,

Verena was completely under the charm. The idea of Olive's charm will perhaps make the reader smile; but I use the word not in its derived, but in its literal sense. The fine web of authority, of dependence, that her strenuous companion had woven about her, was now as dense as a suit of golden mail.

The literal sense of "charm" is, of course, a magic spell or incantation; and the suggestion of spells and webs carries us back instantly to the story of enchanted Alice Pyncheon in *The Seven Gables*; while, in a passage that draws attention to its verbal play, the word "mail" cannot but indicate in an ominously punning way the twisted sexual basis of this particular mesmeric process. That masculine suit of mail, anyhow, retains its power, and its nature is reinforced by frequent allusions to actual or metaphoric cloakings and imprisonments: until, on an early spring afternoon in New York's Central Park, Basil Ransom casts his potent counterspell over the impressionable Verena. The sexual element is here all the more notable, since the ideas Basil expounds to her are, from her viewpoint, monstrous. The girl's reflections

softly battled with each other as she listened, in the warm, still air, touched with the faraway hum of the immense city, to his deep, sweet, distinct voice, expressing monstrous opinions with exotic cadences and mild, familiar laughs, which, as he leaned toward her, almost tickled her cheek and ear. . . . There was a spell upon her as she listened.

As a dramatic construct—combining as it does the oratorical statement of social theory and of attitudes to history with a sort

of psychological-cum-sexual hypnosis—the whole scene derives without much doubt from the long scene between Holgrave and Phoebe that extends from Chapter XII through Chapter XIV in *The Seven Gables*. The resemblance is worth emphasizing: because in certain essential aspects, James is carefully reversing Hawthorne, and the force of his accomplishment depends in no small part on our awareness of this. It is not only that all of Basil Ransom's eloquence goes toward getting rid of the present in the name of the past, rather than, as with Holgrave, the other way round. It is also that, Holgrave, for all his temptation to acquire "empire" over Phoebe's spirit, does have the high quality of reverence for her individuality, and releases the girl from her momentary enslavement. Ransom persists in his imperial design to the end of the scene and the end of the novel.

That kind of reversal characterizes the relation consciously aimed at (as I am maintaining) and achieved between *The Bostonians* and the novels of Hawthorne. In the same way, the social revolution proposed by Olive Chancellor would, in its consequences, reverse those of the movement that Hester Prynne might have led. Hester's new sect would bring with it a relationship between man and woman grounded on mutual reverence; Olive apparently would like to see that relationship destroyed once and for all. The relationship Olive does establish in the novel (and even she perhaps comes to realize this) is a sort of paradigm of falsehood: it is sexually wrong, morally wrong, even politically wrong; and from the Hawthornian viewpoint of Henry James, it is religiously wrong. Its radical wrongness is one justification for Basil Ransom's ambiguous victory in the denouement; he is, after all, a man and a manly man. And beyond that—though Basil's crusade to "rescue" Verena from "ruin" is deeply suspect (there are too many examples in James's fiction of the lethally selfish nature of the rescuing impulse)—

there is in Basil some faint occasional glimmer of the distinctive value of another person's individuality, or at least of Verena Tarrant's.

But "value" thus circumscribed is the strongest word we can use. There is no one in *The Bostonians*, like Hester or Dimmesdale (for his moment of insight) or Holgrave, who has and acts upon a clear sense of the heart's sanctity. The person who most nearly does is Miss Birdseye: she, as Verena exclaims, is "our heroine . . . our saint," exactly because she thinks only of others. There is evidence that James adjusted his attitude of Miss Birdseye as the novel progressed: in the early pages, she is the victim of some of James's most brilliant comic writing; but from the second book onward, she grows into truly heroic and saintly proportions, and in her final moments she is affectively larger than the life about her. But she is the ancient relic of an older epoch, the old heroic age; and in the book's most portentous scene, she does die. And that, of course, is James's point and the motive of his reversals: the antiquity and the death of the old selflessness, the old sanctity, the old sense of sanctity.

James, in *The Bostonians*, is exploiting Hawthorne to suggest a view opposite to Hawthorne's about the fundamental *course* of human affairs, at least as those affairs were being conducted in America. James saw the American character moving away from, not toward, a belief in the sanctity of the human heart; away from, not toward, relationships consecrated by that belief. Where Hawthorne, in *The Scarlet Letter*, made tragic drama out of the possibility of religious legalism yielding to individual reverence, James, in *The Bostonians*, in an equally impressive display of prophetic power describes individual reverence yielding to a religion of ideology. The world in which that is happening is, as James makes almost appallingly clear, a world without sacrament, without any sort of sacramental sensibility: a world, from

the point of view of the literary artist, unavailable to either allegory or legend, and fit primarily for satire and realism.

This, of course, is James in mid-career. During his major phase twenty years later, James for various reasons felt himself liberated in part from the clutch of the contemporary. He was then able to return to something like Hawthorne's tragically hopeful vision, and he would then adopt in consequence something not wholly unlike Hawthorne's artfully contradictory use of allegory and legend—and precisely to suggest that the sacramental consciousness, of a sort unmistakably close to that of *The Scarlet Letter*, could be brought into being even within a world characterized by its lust for violation. But in *The Bostonians*, James made his comment upon the American scene by casting a Hawthornian eye upon a non-Hawthornian world: by reassembling themes and motives and devices and language from Hawthorne and then by twisting and reversing them. It was a comment as well upon American literature, upon what the novel in America had once done and could now do.

