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Love and Politics in "The Bostonians"

A Note on Motivation

The fate of Henry James's novel *The Bostonians* strangely resembles that of Shakespeare's dark comedies: the novel was written in a period of transition in its author's career, it was late in winning recognition, it resists classification and abounds in difficulties and contradictions.

The Bostonians was written with optimism and ambition after James had already been widely acclaimed as the author of *Daisy Miller* and *The Portrait of a Lady*. It was serialized in 1885—1886 and published in book form in 1886, but to the dismay of its confident author, it was almost universally criticized and rejected. The novel remained in disfavour and was not reprinted for nearly 60 years, until its publication by the Dial Press in 1945. Although James wished to revise the novel and include it in the New York edition, he was discouraged from doing so by his publisher and complained about it more than once. "I should have liked to write that Preface", he said.¹ We cannot but wish that he had written it. It might have helped us to determine James's attitude towards the finished novel after both his initial hopes and disappointments had been subdued and corrected by time. What he said about it later on in life was not much and it was contradictory. He complained that it had "never received any sort of justice", but he also wanted to submit it to very extensive revision and admitted that it may partly have failed because he knew "so terribly little"² about the kind of life he had described. The only extensive text written by James on *The Bostonians* is an entry in his *Notebooks* for April 8, 1883, some time before

¹ *The Notebooks of Henry James*, ed. by F. O. Matthiessen and K. B. Murdock, Oxford University Press, 1961, p. 69.

² *Ib.*, p. 49., and Philip Rahv, *Introduction to "The Bostonians"*, Dial Press, New York, 1945, pp. VI—VII.

he began the novel. Along with its usefulness in understanding the attitude of the author and some of his critics, it also shows that the novel was written as a conscious effort to prove that he *could* make an American story, as a kind of challenge to those who doubted his ability to write about "social conditions". If we approach the novel as a challenge and *tour de force*, we shall perhaps understand some of its shortcomings more easily. James writes:

The scene of the novel is laid in Boston and its neighbourhood; it relates an episode connected with the so-called »woman's movement". The characters who figure in it are for the most part persons of the radical reforming type, who are especially interested in the emancipation of women, giving them the suffrage, releasing them from bondage, co-educating them with men, etc. . . . The subject is strong and good, with a large rich interest. The relation of the two girls should be a study of one of those friendships between women which are so common in New England. The whole thing as local, as American as possible, and as full of Boston: an attempt to show that I *can* write an American story. There must, indispensably, be a type of newspaper man — the man whose ideal is the energetic reporter. I should like to *bafouer* the vulgarity and hideousness of this — the impudent invasion of privacy — the extinction of all conception of privacy, etc. . . . At any rate, the subject is very national, very typical. I wished to write a very *American* tale, a tale very characteristic of our social conditions, and I asked myself what was the most salient and peculiar point in our social life. The answer was: the situation of women, the decline of the sentiment of sex, the agitation on their behalf.³

It is perhaps owing to this statement, apart from the novel itself, that a number of our contemporaries have singled out the political and social preoccupation of James and tried to stress its connection with the sexual theme of the novel. Professor Dupee calls *The Bostonians* "the most considerable product of the social historian in James."⁴ In his essay "The Bostonians", Professor Trilling sees James inferring "the political macrocosm from the personal micromosm"⁵ of the novel, and Irving Howe includes part of his preface for the Modern Library edition of *The Bostonians* in his book *Politics and the Novel*. Howe writes:

The Bostonians charts the parallel disarrangement, sometimes verging on a derangement, of public and private, political and sexual life. James was bold enough to see that the two spheres of experience could not be kept apart, and that it would be a fatal error for a novelist if he tried to. He was even bolder in supposing that the ideological obsessions which form so constant

³ *Notebooks*, pp. 46—47.

⁴ F. W. Dupee, *Henry James*, William Sloane Ass., New York, 1951.

⁵ Lionel Trilling, "The Bostonians", *The Opposing Self*, The Viking Press, New York, 1955, p. 109.

a peril for public life will leave their mark, not merely on social behaviour, but also on the most intimate areas of private experience...

Mr. Howe believes that James is "thoroughly in command of the relation between public and private experience".⁶ Professor Trilling also devotes a large section of his essay to the sexual theme, which he sees as a consequence or cause of the political.

It is the aim of this paper to discuss James's social criticism, political awareness and his treatment of the interrelationship of the public and the private in *The Bostonians*, laying special emphasis on their mutual relationship and relative importance in the novel.

Let us first glance briefly at the plot, which embodies all those aspects. After a rather broad, panoramic view of a group of Boston reformers in the 1880's, the plot tightens around the struggle between the feminist Olive Chancellor and the Southern conservative Basil Ransom for the beautiful Verena. James presents both Olive and Verena as ardent feminists who believe — with varying degrees of intensity — that marriage would greatly harm their cause. Ransom falls in love with Verena, but makes it clear that if she married him, she would have to give up her public appearances as inspirational speaker. After a prolonged struggle, Verena finally renounces Olive and their cause, and consents to marry Basil. Reduced to essentials, Verena's struggle, as presented in the novel, is clearly that between love and belief, between duty and desire. This old human dilemma (by no means limited to James's Boston), seems to acquire special importance in the eyes of 20th century readers, who live in an organized world increasingly dominated by ideology and politics. It seems to me that Mr. Trilling and Mr. Howe have shown a tendency, in the essays quoted above, to magnify the importance of the public and political themes in *The Bostonians*, and overlooked their limitations. I should suggest that these themes, as presented in the novel, are greater in their promise than in their fulfilment. In spite of its brilliance the novel lacks unity, which can, I think, be traced to the discontinuity and change in tone and method of presentation that begins after the first third of the novel and is clearly revealed from the beginning of Book II. This is, in turn, reflected in the motivation of the main female characters, Olive and Verena.

The first part of the novel is a lively, mocking view of the Boston reformers. The political theme is realized entirely

⁶ Irving Howe, *Introduction to "The Bostonians"*, The Modern Library, New York, 1956, p. XIV.

in terms of characters and their actions; feminism glides into the story in the person of Olive Chancellor. In her appearance there is an intimation of evil things to come: "A smile of exceeding faintness played about her lips... It might have been likened to a thin ray of moonlight resting upon the wall of a prison".⁷ Her white hand "was at once cold and limp" and her eyes glittered like "green ice". Still, the first encounter of Olive and her cousin from the South is pervaded by humour. The unpleasant note is kept in the background, and so, to a certain extent, is Olive. She has to share the limelight with the strange crowd of "mediums and spirit-rappers and radicals", namely her fellow-politicians. Here James is obviously preoccupied with the "pictorial quality" which he mentions in his *Notebooks*.⁸ The descriptions bristle with vivid, concrete detail: movements, attitudes and looks of the characters, their apartments, their dress. There is a marked tendency towards caricature. The caricatures are at the same time a devastatingly funny and farcical view of feminism. They are a triumph of James's comic sense. Miss Birdseye — the name itself is a masterpiece — had a face which

looked as if it had been soaked, blurred, and made vague by exposure to some slow dissolvent... She belonged to the Short-Shirts League, as a matter of course; for she belonged to any and every league that had been founded for almost any purpose whatever... She looked as if she had spent her life on platforms, in audiences, in conventions, in phalansteries, in *séances*; in her faded face there was a kind of reflection of ugly lecture lamps... (and) she had no more outline than a bundle of hay.⁹

Then, there is the celebrated Mrs. Farrinder, the feminist leader with "something public in her eye", who with her self-confident ways "at almost any time had the air of being introduced by a few remarks... She had a husband, and his name was Amariah". Like the sentence he appears in, Amariah seems to be appended to his wife like an afterthought. To complete the list, there are Dr. Tarrant, the mesmeric healer and his wife and daughter, and Pardon, the newspaper reporter. They are obviously a queer lot, and James, with a directness of approach rather unusual for him, leaves us in no doubt as to how to take them. Although there are occasional sinister notes (in Olive and in Dr. Tarrant who had "big, even, carnivorous teeth" and seemed to dishonour his daughter by touching her), the dominant tone in Book I is that of genial and sometimes malicious humour. The agitators may be pompous,

⁷ H. James, *The Bostonians*, p. 8. All quotes from *The Bostonians* are from the Modern Library edition.

⁸ *Notebooks*, p. 47.

⁹ *The Bostonians*, pp. 26—27 and 29.

pathetic, egocentric or shady, but they are plainly harmless and ineffectual. Their doctrine and political activity follow the same pattern, although they are kept in the background as James, for the moment at least, seems to be much more interested in laying out the scene and the characters and bringing out their "pictorial quality". Most of the reformist activity anyhow seems to exhaust itself in talk, although Miss Birdseye "was always trying to raise money for some cada-verous Pole". This talk is either pompous and vulgar, as when Mrs. Farrinder with a wonderfully observed mixture of snobbishness and vulgarity talks of "the ladies of Beacon street", or charming nonsense, like Verena's inspired little tirade on "the universal sisterhood". Even Olive, with her superior education and supposedly fervent reformist attitude, had a very vague idea of reform. She kept thinking about "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"¹¹ The inflated style of the passage is itself sufficient proof of James's ironical attitude, but he also adds his own comment: "she saw the matter through a kind of sunrise mist of emotion which made danger as rosy as success".¹²

The first 15 chapters of the novel differ in several subtle ways from the rest of the story. They are a splendid, if somewhat narrow social satire, with a vividness and conciseness of description not often found in James, with plenty of dialogue and action. The sentences are short, witty or "pictorial" as the situation requires; many characters are introduced and marvellously presented, enacted in mutual contacts and relationships. The range of characters is considerable, but they all get essentially the same treatment: vivid presentation, not too much psychological analysis, and a laugh or smile from both author and reader. The doctrine or ideology that they are supposed to believe in, and work for is presented as hazy and ineffectual: it is symbolized by a displaced pair of spectacles worn by a muddled and vague old lady. Such presentation of feminism may be considered as limited, but need not be inadequate as long as the political theme is not required to carry too much weight, as long as it is not used as serious motivation for personal action. This is, however, exactly what begins to happen towards the close of Book I. The main turning point can, I think, be found in the scene between Olive and Verena on the occasion of Olive's visit to the Tarrants. Olive

¹⁰ *Ib.*, p. 30—31.

¹¹ *Ib.*, p. 37.

¹² *Ib.*, p. 38.

rises to leave, jealous of Verena and disgusted with the vulgarity of the company.

Olive had got herself out of the little parlour with a sort of blind, defiant dash... Tarrant wished to guide her down the steps... But she begged him to let her alone, she almost pushed him back; she drew Verena out into the dark freshness... Olive knew now very definitely what the promise was that she wanted Verena to make... "I am so afraid I shall lose you. Verena, don't fail me — don't fail me." Olive spoke low, with a kind of passion... "Promise me one thing, and I shall be — oh, so tender!"

"What a strange place for promises" said Verena with a shiver, looking about her into the night.

"Yes, I am dreadful; I know it. But promise..." And Olive drew the girl nearer to her, flinging over her with one hand the fold of a cloak that hung ample upon her own meagre person, and holding her there with the other...

And then Verena heard

sharply, low as they were spoken, five last words from Olive, who now abruptly released her and passed swiftly over the path from the porch to her waiting carriage... "Promise me not to marry" that was what echoed in her startled mind... the idea, uttered as her friend had uttered it, had a new solemnity, and the effect of that quick, violent colloqui, was to make her nervous and impatient, as if she had had a sudden glimpse of futurity...¹³

James has dramatised this scene very carefully. The five last words spoken by Olive are allowed to echo in Verena's mind and we anticipate their ominous ring even before we hear them. They are spoken in the dark, with Verena imprisoned in the folds of Olive's cloak suggestive of weird evil powers, of black magic and indecent embraces. The language is very suggestive: Olive "draws" Verena behind or near her twice, her manner is "sharp", "violent", "abrupt", "passionate" and "blind". In spite of humorous descriptions of the other characters, the tone has changed, it has become serious. We sense very clearly that Verena is in danger, that she is threatened. And the danger is not political, it is of another kind: Olive's plea delivered in the name of feminism, is carefully kept in the first person.

From now on, the surrounding characters are pushed more and more into the background. Some of them, like Verena's parents, Mrs. Farrinder and Pardon reappear only at the very end of the novel, as if to take the curtain call. Others are allowed to appear in certain episodes — the Burrages in New York and Dr. Prance in Cape Cod, mainly to forward the action or throw some light on its development, not to take

¹³ *Ib.*, pp. 136—137.

part in it. The conflict is concentrated on the Olive—Verena—Basil trio with Mrs. Luna in reserve.

Instead of remaining an amused spectator of a comedy of manners, the reader is drawn into a prolonged conflict of consciences and wills which, in spite of frequent flashes of grim humour and occasional intimations that James may be telling us the whole story with his tongue in his cheek, does become serious, and in fact has no justification unless it can be taken seriously. The method of presentation also changes: the predominantly pictorial and scenic quality of the beginning is superseded by long passages of what James himself later called "descriptive psychology". Still, the problem of appreciating this novel as a whole does not primarily arise from the fact that there has been a change of tone and method in the course of the novel, but rather in the fact that this change was not accompanied by a strengthening of its motivation. The actions and conflicts of the second part of the novel are raised to a pitch of intensity which requires a more serious and more complex presentation of the political theme. James himself was probably aware of this when he wrote to his brother in an attempt to account for the failure of his book. After confessing that he knew "terribly little about the kind of life I had attempted to describe", he adds: "I should have been much more rapid and had a lighter hand, with a subject concerned with people and things of a nature more near to my experience".¹⁴ As far as it goes, this self-criticism should, I think, be accepted. James knew little about radicals and feminists, and he could not continue in the vein of the first 15 chapters, which was indeed rapid and light, because he would either have had to show them in political action, which apparently he couldn't, or remain on the level of light comedy, which he was probably not prepared to do. So he let the public and political theme recede into the background and he concentrated on the private and personal which he knew so well.

It is at this point that motivation becomes increasingly important. From the beginning Olive and Verena had been presented, at least partly, as public figures, their motivation was more public than private, their loyalty to the feminist cause was at least supposed to be the mainspring of their action. At the beginning we felt no need to inspect motivation more closely, because the tone was not serious enough, but now this becomes increasingly important. What makes Olive act as she does? What makes Verena accept Olive's actions? — these are the two questions we keep asking ourselves as the novel progresses. James has motivated the two girls as

¹⁴ *Notebooks*, p. 49.

feminists and he apparently has not much choice but to go on doing so as long as the sexual theme cannot be stated. Olive's behaviour is, however, only accidentally feminist, while sexual imagery keeps breaking through all the time. Most of Olive's actions and reactions seem to be of a non-ideological, indeed predominantly biological order. Olive hates men because all the girls she had been interested in "always ended by being odiously mixed up with Charley... They cared far more about Charley than about the ballot".¹⁵ But does Olive really care about the ballot? Throughout the novel there is a significant discrepancy between the unpleasant, fierce vividness with which Olive's behaviour towards Verena is rendered, and the flatness and vagueness of her vision of feminism. This can only be accounted for by James seeing and feeling her as a "rapacious" female and not seeing and feeling her as a public figure.

James's portrayal of Olive's "friendship" is masterful. This friendship is extremely personal and hysterical, and James presents it with startlingly violent imagery. After Verena's first speech Olive is transfixed in a kind of rigid trance and then overcome by hysterical agitation. When the girl visits her for the first time, Olive meets her with exaltation and tremor; she looks her "all over" (it is worth noticing how often the eyes of people in the novel travel all over the bodies of others), holds her hand and passionately asks her to come "and live with" her; then "pants" and "cries in rapture" when she thinks of it and "puts out her hand to hold her" when Ransom enters the room. During their last great crisis she first "collapses, quite prostrate" with horror at the thought that Verena may leave her, then reacts with "a sudden violence, a spasm", flings herself on the couch, tumbles the cushions and moans. In these, as in other confrontations of Olive and Verena, James chooses the physical detail which is often violent and ugly, but always highly suggestive of Olive's intense friendship or passion.

The presentation of Olive's humanitarian activities is absolutely pale and lifeless in comparison. This may perhaps also be interpreted as a conscious device used by James to suggest that all public and political action tends to be motivated by fumbling or base private attitudes, that feminism was prompted by morbid sexual forces. This is, it seems to me, the approach of Howe and Trilling. Still, even if James had this feeling, he failed to dramatize the connection in the central conflict of the novel. James was absolutely unable to present the political vividly as anything but farcical nonsense.

¹⁵ *The Bostonians*, p. 35.

When he tries to do more, as when he needs it as a motivation for Olive's further actions, he is unconvincing. We rarely, for instance, see Olive or her associates directly in action. We either hear about their exploits from characters that take an ironic view of them, like Dr. Prance or Mrs. Luna, or from those James himself has presented ironically, like Miss Birdseye or Pardon. In both cases we are encouraged to laugh (with a few exceptions regarding Miss Birdseye's past). Yet when Olive or Verena are shown talking or thinking about feminism James often tries to be serious, as in this passage

I have intimated that our young friends (Olive and Verena) had a source of fortifying emotion... This consisted in the *wonderful insight* they had obtained into the history of feminine anguish. They perused that chapter *perpetually and zealously*, and they derived from it the purest part of their mission. Olive had poured over it so long, so earnestly, that she was in *complete possession of the subject*; ... She was able to exhibit it to Verena with the greatest authority and accuracy, to lead her up and down *in and out, through all the darkest and most tortuous passages*... All the bullied wives, the stricken mothers the dishonoured, deserted maidens... She had analyzed to an *extraordinary fineness* their susceptibility, their softness...¹⁶

The general vagueness and verbosity of this and other similar passages in Book II of *The Bostonians* is not relieved by irony and is meant, I feel, to give a new, more serious and humane facet of both the movement and its main representative, Olive. Still, James is often flat, abstract and repetitive, he fails to convince us and much that is said in the novel boils down just to "more and more talk about the long martyrdom of women". James needs this new serious attitude towards his subject to motivate an increasingly complex analysis of a human relationship. He is not quite successful for want of knowledge about his subject, but also, perhaps, because, as we know from his *Notebooks*, he wrote the novel partly as a challenge to his critics. As a result, the flimsy fabric of the doctrine gives way under the massive weight of physical detail constituting the superbly felt and rendered sexual and emotional theme of the story. So the book falls apart, as it were, to form an uneasy alliance of two brilliant, but not completely realized possibilities, two themes, two tones and two methods which never quite achieve unity.

The presentation of Olive remains at the heart of this problem. The basic inconsistency of her character as developed in the novel does not derive from the fact that James refrained from telling us she was a lesbian — he shows us vividly enough that consciously or unconsciously she was one — but from the

¹⁶ *Ib.*; p. 185. Italics S. B.

fact that he kept telling us she was a high-minded feminist and public worker and failing to show her as one. James, luckily, never entirely abandons the irony and humour of the beginning (in the last chapter he recaptures much of the atmosphere of the opening chapters of the novel) and this is, I think, one of the main reasons which make so much of this book delightful reading... There remain, however, a number of instances (i. e. in Ch XX) in which James is obviously unable to embody the public life of the girls into significant images and situations.

A certain discrepancy in structure and motivation is also reflected in the character of Verena. In the first part of the novel she appears as charming and good-natured, but slightly vulgar. She left the impression of a "mountebank" on Ransom, had "an air of being on exhibition, of belonging to a troupe", while her dress was "fashioned evidently with an attempt at the histrionic". After she becomes Olive's protégée, she is supposed to undergo a great change. Still, her fantastic development is not quite convincing. Again James tells us that Verena "assimilated all the delicacies and absorbed all traditions", that she "traversed the fields of literature with her characteristic lightness of step", "read quickly and remembered infallibly", "could do anything she tried". On the other hand, when we watch her thinking or talking in the novel she does not strike us as brilliant, she is far from the complexity and fineness of an Isabel Archer or the intelligence of Christina Light. In watching her struggle while choosing between feminism and Ransom the reader is again confronted with a problem. If Verena is serious about her reformist beliefs and her role of public speaker, and James as the novel proceeds obviously wants us to believe she is, then we cannot take her seriously. If we can't, then we are bound to lose interest in the prolonged, supposedly agonizing struggle between her "politics" and her love.

In conclusion I would like to suggest that the great, although imperfectly realized theme of *The Bostonians*, which asserts itself at the expense of political awareness, is the struggle of natural and unnatural human relationships realized with a stunning awareness of their sexual undercurrents. And although the natural wins in the end, it is the unnatural which is more fiercely and intensely realized. The reader remembers Basil's handsome, dark figure and the lurid yellow light in his eyes. He also remembers Verena's strong and supple body, her splendid hair, her figure dressed in white with roses in her bosom. But he remembers most intensely the pale, rigid, moaning and tremulous Olive. Trilling has very finely observed that *The Bostonians* is "full of malign, archaic influences",

comparing Olive to "a deteriorated Minerva, presiding . . . over the Athens of the New World",¹⁷ and Dr. Tarrant to "a kind of shaman, gloomily doing sexual service of some dim, grim, shameful kind to deprived Boston ladies".¹⁸

The Bostonians may be, as the quotations from Trilling and Howe indicate, interpreted as an attempt to relate political to sexual experience. It is the opinion of this critic, however, that, as far as it is enacted, this relationship does not have much significance for the modern reader. The political theme is effectively dealt with only as farce. When we are asked to take it seriously, in the long analyses of the relationships of the three main characters, we are exasperated by its limitations. Compared with the political awareness of a Stendhal, Tolstoy or Dostoevsky, not to speak of 20th century writers, James's political vision is very narrow. Socially his politicians are entirely negligible, they are charlatans and fools with no power whatever. Spiritually only Olive has a certain stature, and in her there is a potential of political realization which cannot be fulfilled because we cannot take her feminism seriously. In her relationship with Verena there was a possibility of showing politics used as a deadly weapon concealing deprived private impulses, but the politics in the novel is just a toy gun and we cannot accept it as a motive of Verena's dependence on Olive. The deadly weapon in the novel is Olive's perversity, and Verena's danger is not ideological enslavement, but rather enslavement by another person, a violation of her nature and her sex. To reverse Mr. Howe's statement characterizing the conflict in *The Bostonians* as a "struggle of love, but in its depth a struggle of politics", I should rather say that it appears on the surface as a struggle of politics, but is in its depth a struggle of love.

¹⁷ Lionel Trilling, "The Bostonians", p. 114.

¹⁸ *Ib.*, p. 115.