

# **Like Hypatia before the Mob: Desire, Resentment, and Sacrifice in James' *The Bostonians* (An Anthropoetics)**

**Thomas F. Bertonneau**

**Department of English  
Central Michigan University  
Mount Pleasant MI 48859  
3e4kkhr@cmuvvm.csv.cmich.edu**

Imitative desire is always desire to be Another. There is only one metaphysical desire but the particular desires which instantiate this primordial desire are of infinite variety. From what we can observe directly, nothing is constant in the desire of the hero of a novel. Even its intensity is variable. It depends on the degree of "metaphysical virtue" possessed by the object. And this virtue, in turn, depends on the distance between object and mediator. (René Girard, *Deceit, Desire and the Novel.*)

There is no doubt that resentment often finds refuge in moralistic prudery and hypocritical denunciations of those whose real accomplishments one envies. The artist's own resentment, so visible in the Bohemia of Nietzsche's time or in the attitudes of an "antibourgeois" like Flaubert, is transcended in his art, whereas the moralizer creates nothing. But this should only make us all the more respectful of a moral tradition that insists on the right of all to reciprocal relations. \*\*\* Resentment may be defined as the scandal of the peripheral self at the centrality of the other which transforms the equality of the original scene of representation into an absolute polarity of significance. (Eric L. Gans, *The End of Culture*)

|

At the climax of *The Bostonians* (1885), when protagonist Basil Ransom has

delivered Verena Tarrant from his cousin Olive Chancellor's imminent presentation of her at the Boston Music Hall, in what Olive hopes will be the inaugural event in her public crusade for feminism, Olive decides that she herself will have to go on stage before the increasingly agitated and seemingly hostile crowd. It is a crisis, purely and simply, which demands resolute and immediate action. Could Basil have read Olive's face, James writes, "it might have seemed to him that she hoped to find the fierce expiation she sought for in exposure to the thousands she had disappointed and deceived, in offering herself to be trampled to death and torn to pieces. She might have suggested to him some feminine firebrand of Paris revolutions, or even the sacrificial figure of Hypatia" (431-32). This finely calculated allusion makes explicit the sacrificial theme of the novel that James develops from the beginning, when Verena makes her first appearance in the seedy environment of Miss Birdseye's parlor, where Olive has reluctantly taken Basil so that he might get a glimpse, not of Boston but, as she pretentiously phrases it, of "humanity" (50). As a study in desire—that most fundamental motive of human behavior, one which often produces a crisis and which can, in certain circumstances, lead to violence—*The Bostonians* is paradigmatic. We find in *The Bostonians* a conscious and conclusive working-out of James' novelistic meditation on the linkage between desire, resentment, and sacrifice, a meditation which can be traced back to *The American* (1875) and which plays an important, if not fully thematic, role in *Washington Square* (1880) and *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881). While James the theoretician of desire and resentment is well known, James the student of sacrifice as a fundamental gesture of the bewildered community, sometimes of the alienated individual, is less familiar and less understood. A reading of *The Bostonians* from the anthropological perspective provided (as the epigraph suggests) by Girard and Gans will help

to make manifest the role played by sacrifice, as James comprehends it, in human affairs both public and private. We will show that, while James affirms desire as positive and understands that resentment can be turned in a productive direction, he nevertheless condemns sacrifice (defined as the coercion or abuse of the other for purposes not his or her own), viewing it as the subterfuge of an ego unable to free itself from desire mediated by others and therefore condemned by that inability to a state of intolerable resentment from which violence, eradicating a malefactor, seems the only exit. Such an ego, failing to triumph over the supposed malefactor, frequently takes refuge in the idea of martyrdom. But martyrdom sought is a perversion. Sacrifice including self-sacrifice is the opposite of morality and morality can finally be understood only as the systematic recognition of the other in his or her full autonomy, including the recognition of his or her desire (his or her properly defined purpose) as equal to one's own. In what way, precisely, is Olive Chancellor

like Hypatia, whom James suggests that she resembles? Or what-as we must first ask-is the precise significance of Hypatia's story, as James might have known it? Hypatia was the Neo-Platonist scholar-in-chief at Alexandria in the early fifth century A.D., whom a Christian mob murdered in 415 during the burning of the famous Musaeon, or Library. The French poet Leconte de l'Isle celebrated her in a poem, "Hypatie" (1852), and the Victorian novelist Charles Kingsley took her as his protagonist in a full-length narrative, *Hypatia* (1853), which MacMillans reissued in 1881, and which found a wide readership well into the early decades of the twentieth century. In the latter, the climactic moment occurs after the learned woman, described significantly by Kingsley as a person "of the fancy and the religious sentiment, rather than of reason and the moral sense" (289), has been dragged from the Library to a nearby basilica, or church. Hypatia's student Philammon witnesses the sparagmos, for that is what it is, and Kingsley describes it from his (Philammon's) point of view:

[Hypatia] shook herself free from her tormentors, and springing back, rose for one moment to her full height naked, snow-white, against the dusky mass around-shame and indignation in those wide clear eyes, but not a stain of fear. With one hand she clasped her golden locks around her; the other long white arm was stretched upward toward the great still Christ appealing-and who dare say in vain?- from man to God. Her lips were opened to speak; but the words that should have come from them reached God's ear alone; for in an instant Peter [her main tormentor] struck her down, the dark mass closed over her again. . . . and then wail on wail, long, wild, ear-piercing, rang along the vaulted roofs, and thrilled like the trumpet of avenging angels through Philammon's ears. (289)

James' allusion makes it plausible that Olive herself has Kingsley's romance in mind, and that she envisions herself, in the moment, as standing in eternal company with the celebrated martyr. Olive is certainly bookish, if not "learned," and she envisions herself *comme femme* as hemmed in by a hostile male society. Nor does the crisis in the Music Hall constitute the only time when Olive has entertained the thought of perishing in defense of her ideals. Invocations of martyrdom abound in *The Bostonians* and Olive's own probable identification of herself with Hypatia would be consistent with her self-dramatizing proclivity. Does Olive indeed make such a connection? She never says so explicitly, but readers know that when she undertakes to instruct Verena, she assigns readings to the girl having to do with illustrious women in history; since James mentions Hypatia,

she likely figures in the curriculum. In Book the First of *The Bostonians*, James confides about Olive that “[t]he most secret, the most sacred hope of her nature was that [...] she might someday be a martyr and die for something” (43). Etymology in fact links the name of the place where Olive must face the crowd, the Music Hall, and the name of the place from which Hypatia was dragged by her killers and with which history most famously associates her, the Musaeon. But others, too, not only Olive, interpret the situation in polemical and immolatory terms. As the expectant audience in the rented Music Hall grows ever more impatient of the delayed agenda (Verena feels belatedly reluctant about cooperating with Olive), Tarrant mere worries aloud to Basil whether in fact he “wants us all murdered by the mob?” (426). Olive, who has earlier opined that it is Basil who wants a “sacrifice” (427), does not exactly fear that the crowd will strike her down when she appears in Verena’s place; but she does anticipate that she is “going to be hissed and hooted and insulted!” (432) which, for someone of her “tragic shyness” (41), would be fully mortifying enough. Olive’s susceptibility to slights is highly marked throughout the narrative; she is one of those persons who can-and who frequently is-slain by a word. James meanwhile records a “great agitation in the hall [which] rose and fell, in waves and surges” (431), a sign of the increasing hostility toward the proceedings among the audience. The debacle implicit in Verena’s failure to appear certainly does threaten Olive’s planned campaign and, therefore, the realization of the feminist utopia for which she has high, almost millennialian hopes. Although Olive’s own appearance on stage in place of Verena does bring an offertory “hush” (433) to the auditorium, the sense of crisis has not entirely abated. Leading the now affianced girl through the “labyrinth” of “hasty groups” outside the Music Hall, Basil deliberately “thrust[s] the hood of Verena’s long cloak over her head, to conceal her face and her identity” (432-33) because he, too, like the girl’s mother and Olive, guesses at the possibility of violence. The very term “labyrinth” plays into the sacrificial atmosphere that James carefully constructs, for it refers to the Cretan maze where, according to myth, the tyrannical Minos regularly offered Athenian virgins to the grotesque minotaur. At the climax of *The Bostonians*, Basil (whose surname, Ransom, suggests a rescuer) plays the role of Theseus-Liberator, delivering Verena from her sacrificial fate. Basil himself, on entering the Music Hall, had likened it to “the Colosseum” (414), evoking a gladiatorial interpretation. On his way backstage Basil had taken stock of the “gathered auditory”:

It had become densely numerous, and, suffused with the evenly distributed gaslight, which fell from a great elevation, and the thick atmosphere that hangs forever in such places, it appeared to pile itself high and to look dimly expectant and formidable. He had a throb of uneasiness at his private purpose of balking it of its entertainment, its

victim—a glimpse of the ferocity that lurks in a disappointed mob. (416)

There has, moreover, been a hint, an ominous prefiguring, of sparagmos: the “photographs of Miss Tarrant” (415) being hawked in the Hall that disperse the girl into multiple, portable tokens of herself, supplied in advance, which can be carried away from the scene and which will ever afterward refer back to it. The popularity of these tokens indicates that Verena has become the object of the crowd’s mounting desire, a phenomenon which replicates en masse the effect that the girl has produced individually on both Olive and Basil, not to mention on the hopeful suitor Henry Burrage and the celebrity-hunting journalist Matthias Pardon. Olive has unwittingly provoked and heightened this desire

4

by secreting Verena away, “enshrin[ing her] in mystery” (416), James writes, while she prepares her for the role of public champion in the cause. The emptiness of the Music Hall stage, which Olive herself will shortly have to fill, is the negative figure signifying Verena’s absence; and Olive has kept Verena out of the limelight exactly because she grasps the value of absence as a stimulus of interest. The crowd’s density (the people are “densely numerous”) presages an outburst, for it is the tendency of desire exacerbated to precipitate in a melee of attempted appropriation from which, rationally, no one can expect to come away genuinely repleted. One might even say that the desire of the crowd, if not of Olive and Basil, has become metaphysical, and that the competition among parties for possession of the girl (her value mythically inflated by their desire) has grown more important than the girl herself. According to Girard:

Desire is the mimetic crisis in itself; it is the acute mimetic rivalry with the other that occurs in all the circumstances we call “private,” ranging from eroticism to professional or intellectual ambition. (*Things Hidden* 288)

\*\*\* The value of an object grows in proportion to the resistance met with in acquiring it. And the value of the model grows as the object’s value grows. Even if the model has no particular prestige at the outset, even if all that “prestige” implies—*praestigia*, spells and *phantasmagoria*—is quite unknown to the subject, the very rivalry will be quite enough to bring prestige into being. (295)

Gans explains how difficult it is for the subject to escape the mimetic element in desire:

[In highly] differentiated society[,] the resentment of others, like the jealousy of the central figure, is an essentially agonistic sentiment. The resentful [also the desiring] imagination is a reaction against real perceptions that are painful in that they show another in the place that the self would like to occupy. Irrealizable desire is faced with the scandal of a humanly realized centrality. It is thus through resentment [in which desire is always implicated] that the individual comes to feel his essential unfreedom within the social order[.] This is as true of kings as of commoners. (*The End of Culture* 225)

Olive and Basil do appear to be, in Girard's terms, rivals and models of one another; indeed, the incipient riot at the Music Hall can persuasively be shown to stem from the original copresence of the two at Miss Birdseye's on the evening, represented in *The Bostonians*, Book the First, where Verena speaks before the heterogeneous group of feminists, spiritualists, and social dissenters, united only by their eccentricity and consolidated only by the mediation of the girl. (Before her appearance, the company is fractious and downright catty.) It appears that Olive and Basil become rivals from that moment. More than models and rivals, they became doubles, converging disastrously on the same object, the initially characterless Verena herself. It is moreover particularly true in Olive's case that, as Gans suggests, desire reveals to the subject the limitation of his, or her, own freedom, reveals in fact an "essential unfreedom" against which the ego necessarily and desperately rebels. The "seance" at Miss Birdseye's, as Basil calls it before the fact without Olive's contradicting him, anticipates the rebellious convention in the Music Hall in a number of ways. In fact, the occasion for Verena's speaking in the first instance lies in the refusal of "the celebrated" (50) feminist, Miss Farrinder, to address the group, as had been promised by Miss Birdseye. Miss Farrinder's refusal can itself be understood mimetically.

II

Olive describes Miss Farrinder as "the great apostle of the emancipation of Women" and adds that Miss Birdseye, too, is "a celebrity, a woman of the world [...] who has laboured most for every wise reform" and who was, among other things, "one of the earliest, one of the most passionate, of the old Abolitionists" (50). Yet "passion" in a noble sense appears oddly lacking in the seance, which exhibits a subdued and disorganized character when Olive and Basil arrive. A certain tension nevertheless hovers in the air. Before leaving for the affair, Olive has opined out loud that Basil might indeed be put off by Miss Birdseye's abolitionist past, since he is a

Southerner, a Mississippian, who fought in the Civil War who might be supposed to sustain a certain bellicose animosity; but the prospect puts him off not at all, and he shows considerable interest, in fact, in meeting the much celebrated personage. At this stage, Olive quite suddenly “repent[s] of having proposed to [Basil] to go” (51). Ostensibly, she credits this to Basil’s irony, as he refuses to take her grave anticipation of the affair as seriously as she would like him to take it. It might well be, however, that Basil’s interest in the event as such is what disturbs Olive. Olive has casually designated an object, the seance, which attracts her, only to find that it attracts Basil, too, however casually or mockingly. (She suspects him of mocking her.) When Basil, undeterred by the opportunity of coming face to face with an “old Abolitionist,” reports that he “want[s] so much to meet [her]” (51), Olive’s resistance to his company spontaneously increases. And yet, like Hypatia’s at the instant of her immolation, Olive’s power of expression fails. She has thoughts, a maelstrom of them no doubt, but she finds no voice in which to convey them. She is carried along as though by an external force:

She was now trying to think of something she might say that would be sufficiently disagreeable to make him cease to insist on accompanying her; for, strange to record—if anything, in a person of that intense sensibility, be stranger than any other—her second thought with regard to having asked him had deepened with the elapsing moments into an unreasoned terror of the effect of his presence. (51)

As James writes, Olive’s character conforms to an “intense sensibility,” by which the novelist means that she feels insults to her dignity even where none exist and constantly calculates how she stands in the opinion of others. In this cause plausibly lies self-encloisterment (for that is what it amounts to) as does her preference for the “exotic” (42) as opposed, by implication, to the domestic. The familiar, or what stands near to hand and therefore cannot be avoided, rather than the outrageous, is what is likely to sting Olive: “It was the usual things of life that filled her with silent rage” (42), as though ordinary human limitations were the same as deliberate iniquity. Thus the “exotic” serves for Olive the compensatory function of an imagined place where she stands out as different, for what really bothers her about the indignity of the “usual” is that she, too, might be “usual.” Olive also suffers from a powerful emotive impulse directed at whole categories of persons; these categories reduce actual persons to convenient caricatures by means of which passing whims, dissimulated as elements in a social program, may be easily rationalized. To absolve herself from the breach of courtesy inherent in revoking her invitation to her cousin (she has, in fact, invited Basil from New York to Boston for the purposes of making his cousinly acquaintance), Olive falls back, in

James' phrase, on "a moral resource that she could always fall back upon" (51). James puts it this way: "it had already been a comfort to her, on occasions of acute feeling, that she hated men, as a class, anyway" (51). It is the case, then, that Olive's original inclination to be charitable to Basil, because he and his people had lost everything in their defeat and because as a Southerner he would be in a manner "exotic," metamorphoses abruptly into something very like its diametrical opposite. Of course, both dispositions (liking him or disliking him) are metaphysical, substituting doctrines and images for actual persons, and both may therefore be characterized as psychological stratagems whose purpose is the concealment of something unseemly. The something unseemly that needs to be concealed is Olive's own resentment, her venality, her duplicity. On the assumption of those traits one can easily imagine the mental contortions that constitute Olive's reasoning. Thus: if the defeated, as a class, should be pitied, then Basil, as an individual belonging to that class, should be pitied; if men, as a class, should be hated, then Basil, as an individual belonging to that class, should be hated. As long as Basil plays the role of the defeated, he can be evaluated charitably; but as soon as he manifests any non-defeatist assertiveness, as soon as he intimates that Olive (the Northerner) is not in some manner his victor and he her vanquished, he reverts to the other category and can become the object of righteous vituperation. It is in such schematic dispensations that Olive's sacrificial impulse begins to reveal itself. One would be justified in asserting, at least metaphorically, that Olive tends to sacrifice persons to doctrines, including perhaps her own person. Rationally and ethically, she ought to respond to Basil as an individual; but she responds to him according to categories that have little connection with empirical facts. In James' summary, indeed, "the logic of her conduct was none of the clearest" (52). Nor can Olive so much as bring herself to say directly to Basil that she would rather he not accompany her. Olive cannot state her own desire because she is unsure what that desire really is. Basil goes with her to Miss Birdseye's.

Olive's interaction with Miss Farrinder, once they reach Miss Birdseye's, repeats her clash with and arbitrary reassessment of her cousin. Miss Farrinder makes it clear that she is reluctant to speak: "She had addressed so many assemblies, and she wanted to hear what other people had to say" (60). One suspects that Miss Farrinder wants her audience volubly to insist on her speaking, the more to gratify her ego; and knowing of Olive's shyness, she asks her why she (Olive) does not speak, no doubt to delectate in her (Miss Farrinder's) own superior talent and oratorical experience. The so many assemblies which Miss Farrinder reminds Olive that she has addressed serve as a pedigree of public approval. Olive owns no such badge. Miss Farrinder quickly compounds this insult. She subtly mocks Olive by remarking Olive's bourgeois status. (James' spiritualist-radicals have the typical

radical disdain for the bourgeoisie.) Miss Farrinder “urged upon her companion,” James writes, “the idea of labouring in the world of fashion, [and in so doing] appeared to attribute to [Olive] familiar relations with that mysterious realm, and wanted to know why she didn’t stir up some of her friends down there on the Mill-dam?” (61). This implies that Olive is not a radical or a reformer at all, but a dilettante from the assertive middle class, inappropriately slumming among the real agitators for change. Farrinder carefully chooses her words to suggest that the bourgeoisie, the world of “fashion,” are “mysterious” to her but “familiar” to Olive. Given Olive’s fear that she is bourgeois and that, basically, she belongs among the detested middle class, this amounts to powerful incitement carefully aimed. Indeed, Farrinder’s remark provokes strong resentment in

7

Olive, who reasons (or emotes) as follows. Miss Farrinder, whose social position is lower than Olive’s precisely by bourgeois standards, thinks (as Olive imagines) that “the Mill-Dam” (bourgeois Boston) is spiritually beyond redemption but can be coaxed into an alliance with the reformers which would contribute much to the feminist cause, and that Olive is the key to this. Olive, who belongs by circumstance of birth to the bourgeoisie (“the oldest and best” [61]) and lives in a fine house on Beacon Street, but who herself disdains the bourgeoisie, suspects that Miss Farrinder is right; Olive frankly regards the bourgeoisie as comprised of “all sorts of inferior people” (61), inferior, that is, to herself, according to a spiritual measurement. She wants, in fact, to have nothing to do with them, as is consistent with her loathing of the “usual” and the “familiar.” At the moment, however, Miss Farrinder has the spiritual upper-hand and the rhetorical initiative. Olive, confronting Miss Farrinder, thus finds herself in a nasty double-bind: she secretly agrees with Miss Farrinder about the bourgeoisie and secretly suspects that the taunting Miss Farrinder is correct in estimating that she (Olive) is a dilettante thoroughly steeped in bourgeois values; but Olive cannot, of course, admit this. James has previously revealed, for example, that Olive “mortally disliked” (57) the surroundings in Miss Birdseye’s parlor, finding its cheap decor and impoverished haphazardness an offense to her highly cultivated taste. Neither, however, can Olive rise to Miss Farrinder’s bait and speak to the crowd, for the doubts that she has about herself paralyze her. At the same time, James gives evidence that Olive’s utopian feminism is a diversion, a false front to hide what she really wants, or to hide the fact that she does not know what she wants. Farrinder’s use of the word “fashion,” meanwhile, has a mimetic implication, since “fashion” is what people follow for no good reason other than the fact that other people are keen to follow it too. In this sense, Olive reveals that “fashion” really does dominate her, since she takes her behavioral cues from other people and seems powerless to generate any desire genuinely her own.

What Olive really and profoundly wants, James adds by way of a peculiar *non sequitur*, is “to know intimately some very poor girl,” which, although it “might seem one of the most accessible of pleasures” (62), eludes her. She maintains acquaintance with “two or three pale shop-maidens” (62) but cannot deflect their interest from “Charlie[,] a young man in a white overcoat and a paper collar,” for whom “in the last analysis” (62), they cared the most. Olive’s momentary rivalry with Miss Farrinder reminds her, by the most general of associations, of her rivalry with “Charlie.” The confrontation with Miss Farrinder, then, does not constitute the first time (by any means) that Olive has located her desire in the desire of another, a rival, a blocking-agent.

Olive’s emotional extremity of character derives from desire and from her sense of being closed about by rivals. Such extremity, in turn, is rationalized in dogmatic terms in a remarkably bloodthirsty inner monologue which, as one must suppose, Olive indulges in while she is being mildly insulted (perhaps not so mildly insulted) by the crudely clever Miss Farrinder. (And it ought to be added that Farrinder’s mistreatment of Olive provides a telling index about Farrinder’s own self-image; the fact that Olive is self-absorbed and manipulative does not mean that Farrinder escapes the charge of being a snob and a bully who calculatedly uses someone else’s shyness to gain a sense of personal superiority.) It ought to be noted, however, that Olive could disengage from the morbid company that she cultivates at any time if she so wished. They could all disengage from each other. What afflicts Olive, then, afflicts her community as a whole. These people are so intermediated that they cannot turn away from

the torment that they cause each other. Wincing thus over Farrinder’s put-down, Olive feels that “she had been born to lead a crusade” which would redeem “that dreadful image that was always before her.” This image is:

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. Ages of oppression had rolled over them; uncounted millions had lived only to be tortured, to be crucified. They were her sisters, they were her own, and the day of their delivery had dawned. This was the only sacred cause; this was the great, the just revolution. It must triumph, it must sweep everything before it; it must extract from the other, the brutal, blood-stained, ravening race, the last particle of expiation! (64)

A few lines later, Olive imagines that such a violent overturning of the existing order would bring about “a new era for the human family” and that “the names of those who had helped to 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” (64). James adds by way of comment, however, that “it was not clear to this interesting girl in what manner such a sacrifice (as this last) would be required of her, but she saw the matter through a kind of sunrise mist of emotion which made danger as rosy as success” (64). The violence and fantastic character of this monologue require comment. Olive’s ferocious musing corresponds in its rhetoric to a certain type of radical discourse exemplified, for example, by Manichaean descriptions of the Day of Judgment or Marxian predictions about the Revolt of the Proletariat against the capitalist tyranny culminating in the foundation of Socialist Utopia. All such outpourings, as Nietzsche recognized around the time that James was writing *The Bostonians*, stem from resentment. A weak character, as Nietzsche argued, finding itself blocked in the acquisition of what it wants and unwilling or unable to assert itself against the blocking agent, turns its thwarted desire into a putative virtue and cultivates it, rhetorically. Thus the meekness celebrated by Christianity amounts simply, according to Nietzsche, to the slave’s inability to act, tropologically revalued as meritorious rather than contemptible; the positing of damnation for “sinners” (for the triumphantly non-meek) functions similarly to explain away humiliating empirical facts. One need not accept Nietzsche’s peculiar and rather biased claim that Judaism and Christianity uniquely embody resentment of this especially crude type in order to accept his general diagnosis that resentment explains a great deal of human behavior rather neatly. The twentieth century indeed offers many examples of inflated resentment seeking expression in massive rhetorical distortions of reality, not to mention in technically orchestrated pogrom and massacre. It might nevertheless be worth noting en passant that Olive’s feminism has its context in a quasi-Christian, spiritualist milieu populated by clinically ineffective types such as Selah Tarrant and the prematurely gray Matthias Pardon. These are by no means self-reliant characters and they do indeed appear to seek indemnity for their ineffectiveness in various theological or quasi-theological displacements. Perhaps Olive’s turning to thoughts of “triumph” in which the mocking other abjectly yields “the last particle of expiation,” on being snubbed by Miss Farrinder, is not as arbitrary as it seems; nor is her indulging in an obviously erotic reverie about shop-girls. It only needs to be added that, if sublimated, resentment can be, as Gans describes it, “constructive of the self.” This is because “the resentful imagination sees in the suspension of

of its own peripheral position into a new center" (*The End of Culture* 206). Olive's dream that her name might one day burn with brightness in "the tables of fame" resonates with Basil's sense of Verena in Book the Second as a source of light. Olive wants to be the brightness or light that Verena already is, but she also wants to be Basil, the one who ardently desires that light. The question is whether Olive can sublimate her resentment or not, whether she can convert her peripherality into centrality or not. The indices at Miss Birdseye's seance do not appear favorable. We will return to this.

It is while the testy *tete-a-tete* between Olive and Miss Farrinder is going on that the moderately poor young girl, to whom Olive will soon transfer her unappeased cathexis, enters Miss Birdseye's home.

Basil is the first of the two to see Verena. He notes merely that "[t]he girl was very pretty, though she had red hair" (60). Olive must take notice of Verena soon after, but she does not at first date on the girl. (The text suggests that Verena is about sixteen years old when she first appears in public at Miss Birdseye's.) Indeed, Olive thinks of Verena, whose name she does not yet know, only as a source of potential relief to what she takes to be Basil's boredom with the proceedings (she characteristically refers his tedium to herself, as a kind of unspoken insult): "[I]f he was bored, he could speak to someone; there were excellent people near him, even if they were ardent reformers. He could speak to that pretty girl who had just come in—the one with red hair—if he liked; Southerners were supposed to be so chivalrous" (66). We note that, in James' sentence, Olive's attention moves from Basil to Verena. James' syntax therefore suggests the precise mimetic course by which Olive becomes interested in the girl. Basil converses, meanwhile, with the skeptical Doctor Prance, and it is she who identifies Verena for him:

She was Miss Tarrant, the daughter of the healer; hadn't she mentioned his name? Selah Tarrant; if he wanted to send for him. Doctor Prance wasn't acquainted with [the girl], beyond knowing that she was the mesmerist's only child, and having heard something about her having some gift—she couldn't remember which it was. [...] Yes, she was pretty appearing, but there was a certain indication of anemia, and Doctor Prance wouldn't be surprised if she didn't eat too much candy. Basil thought she had an engaging exterior. (70)

Prance remains invulnerable to whatever poignant charms the "mesmerist's only child" might possess; indeed, she shows less susceptibility to mimesis than any of the novel's other characters except Basil. There is no reason to believe, in fact, that Prance's diagnosis of "anemia" is incorrect. It is at least metaphorically correct,

since Verena has been exploited by her charlatan father, Selah Tarrant, whose cynical purpose is to bleed the girl's talent (however meager) for all the money and notoriety that it is worth. Contrast of age and maturity no doubt makes Verena stand out among the other company; but this hardly implies that, in a less funereal situation, she would be outstanding or attractive. She seems, however, naturally to resist the obligatory sobriety and preposterous moralism of the setting, or has not yet succumbed to it, and that is enough to differentiate her from all others, and not only in Basil's eyes. (Miss Farrinder regards her as, possibly, a "minx" [77], which we read as a defensive dismissal.) Whatever the cause, Verena at

10

this moment strikes Basil as "the first pretty girl he had seen in Boston" (70), even though, perhaps precisely because, she is "restless," fidgeting with "her large red fan," and unaffectedly returning the gaze of all who gaze on her. Many do gaze upon her; her lively presence has, for a moment, distracted the gathering from Miss Farrinder's stagey delay. But "[b]y this time a certain agitation was perceptible" (71) and some of the women begin remonstrating with Miss Farrinder to speak. Miss Farrinder now says that she needs opposition in order to speak effectively and Olive, thinking that Basil might provide it, introduces him to her. It would be consistent with Olive's attitude toward Basil that she hopes that Farrinder will outargue and humiliate him on some topic that pits them against one another, but this does not occur. During Miss Farrinder and Basil's exchange, Verena at last makes herself heard, opposing to Miss Farrinder's deprecating assessment of the possibilities of a Southern speaking-tour her own experience of having "had a magnificent audience last spring in St. Louis" (75).

Verena has not deliberately contradicted Miss Farrinder; she has, rather, reported her own experience spontaneously, unaware of the fierce hostility circulating among the agitated company. In a purely unconscious way, Verena is at this moment free from resentment and, to that degree, innocent of the nasty subterfuge that seems to be almost everyone else's style at Miss Birdseye's. To report a fact does not imply, for Verena, taking up the rhetorical cudgel. (We must begin to modify, therefore, our contention that Verena is characterless; her character is nascent, and the question is only whether it will be born or not.) When attention gravitates to Verena, Miss Farrinder gives up any intention of speaking; she especially will not provide a mere introductory performance in a show in which the girl herself would be the main attraction. But Verena proves oblivious to any subtle, or not so subtle, dig, and she steps in, exercising that "strange spontaneity in her manner," that "air of artless enthusiasm"

(77), that mark her off increasingly from the stultifying style of Miss Birdseye's seance. "Who is that charming creature?" (77) Basil overhears his cousin say at that moment.

### III

Basil Ransom "had never seen such an odd mixture of elements" (82) as those that added up to Verena. To Olive, Verena no doubt appears enticingly "exotic," exactly because she is really ordinary, a shop-girl in other circumstances, onto whom Olive projects the compensatory opposite of her own drab self-image. In many ways bizarre (she has a "melodramatic" [83] appearance, amplified by a parti-colored outfit of garish reds and yellows set off with amber beads, the whole of which gives the suggestion of her belonging perhaps to some kind of a circus troupe [82]), Verena appears to be exploited by her mesmerist father as a kind of spiritualist circus-act. In conformance with Prance's diagnosis, Verena exhibits a blanched complexion, "very pale, white as women are who have that shade of red hair; they look as if their blood had gone into it" (82). Before Verena speaks at Miss Birdseye's, she allows her father to put her into a kind of trance. Selah Tarrant makes "grotesque manipulations" around his daughter's bowed head which, in Basil's estimation, do "a dishonour to the passive maiden" (83). The speech itself offers contradictory features. Its content is hackneyed and inane, 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" (84), but Verena delivers it with an "impertinence" (86) which makes Basil break into "a genial laugh" (86), and in this

11

Basil, like Verena, demonstrates spontaneity and freedom from the oppressive resentment of the occasion. Whether for content or delivery, however, Verena steals the show, becoming the focus of all attention. Olive, Basil notices in a telling metaphor, "had felt the universal contagion[:]

Her eyes were fixed on the floor with the rigid, alarmed expression of her moments of nervous diffidence; she gave no sign of observing her kinsman's approach. [...] [S]he bored the carpet with her conscious eyes. He said something to Miss Farrinder, something that imperfectly represented his admiration of Verena. (88)

The "contagion" in Basil's figure of speech refers to the charisma that passes from Selah's mesmeric gesticulations through Verena's "trance" to the centripetal

interest of all. Basil's figure is thus a figure par excellence of mimesis. Basil himself feels this too, of course, but, as his figural assessment of it suggests, he also possesses a consciousness of the phenomenon not possessed by others. Basil now makes known his admiration of the girl to Miss Birdseye, who obliges his approval by leading him across the floor to meet the young sensation. At this moment, however, "Olive arose abruptly from her chair and laid her hand, in an arresting movement, on the arm of her hostess. She explained to her that she must go, that she was not very well, that her carriage was there; also she hoped that Miss Birdseye, if it was not asking too much, would accompany her to the door" (89). Before taking leave, however, Olive finds the opportunity to speak briefly with Verena and invites her to visit her at Beacon Street. Olive's repressed courtship of Verena, who duly visits the next day, begins. Olive gradually takes charge of the girl, making a particular effort to shield her from Basil, as from other suitors, by isolating her from the world. Shortly, Verena has left the seedy household of her parents, on the tantalizingly named Monadnac Street in a neighborhood in Cambridge, to domicile herself on Beacon Street with Olive, who will tutor and cultivate her, preparing her for the particular role that Olive thinks the girl ought to fill. Most commentary remarks the repressed lesbianism of the relationship. Here, however, with Kingsley's novel in mind, one might well call attention to its quasi-ritual character, with Olive acting as priestess and Verena ("perfectly uncontaminated" [105]) as catechumen, further purified of worldly taint as she is instructed in what amounts to an apocalyptic doctrine.

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," threw her into the social dusk of that mysterious democracy which Miss Chancellor held that the fortunate classes knew so little about, and with which (in a future possibly very near) they will have to count. (101)

Despite Verena's commonplace exterior, Olive believes that Verena's inner character ("her soul") "could not be vulgar" (101). But this is merely a narcissistic judgment projected on the other, for, as we have seen, Olive fears that she herself might be essentially vulgar, even while she hopes that she is not. Note that, in essence, Verena is to serve Olive in a scheme of social revenge involving the toppling of the bourgeoisie. At least that is how Olive imagines it. Actually, as her own musings have revealed, her animosity stems from male blocking agents like "Charlie," the Don Juan among shop-girls, and Basil. Although cohabiting platonically with Olive, Verena occasionally returns to her parental home in Monadnac Place for brief visits,

and it is during one of these, a full year after she first appeared at Miss Birdseye's, that Basil calls on her, taking her up on a casual invitation to visit uttered quite offhand and pro forma at an unexpected meeting at Olive's which Olive had been unable to prevent. (Olive was out when Basil called; had she been home, she would have kept him apart from the girl.) Basil has in fact made no effort to contact Verena, although he has seen her speak at a trial-outing arranged by Olive. Verena has nevertheless been on his mind, even while he made an effort, perfunctory and against his better judgment, to court Olive's sister, the widower Miss Luna, in New York. Basil has not, in fact, come to Boston with the idea of seeing Verena (that is not his ostensible purpose, at any rate), but he is on his way to pay his respects to Olive when he meets Miss Birdseye and has his attention redirected by her to the girl. When Verena appears in the foyer to receive Basil, he notices that "she had developed and matured": "She had appeared to him before as a creature of brightness, but now she lighted up the place, she irradiated, she made everything that surrounded her of no consequence" (229). This meeting, unlike the couple's previous encounters, remains unencumbered by mediating parties. Basil's bedazzlement may therefore be taken as spontaneous and genuine, and so, too, Verena's pleasure at seeing him, which is much more than mere enthusiasm feigned out of politeness. Verena speaks to Basil "as if she had seen him the other week" (230), an indication that he has been on her mind as she has been on his. We learn from the banter between the two that Olive has been coaching Verena. Olive, Verena says, "makes [my speeches]-or the best part of them. She tells me what to say-the real things, the strong things" (230). Verena soon after amends this in stronger terms: "Miss Chancellor has absorbed me," she says (234 [emphasis altered]). Perhaps to dispell a certain tension between them stemming from a disagreement over Olive's feminist principles, which Verena claims are her own as well, the two decide to promenade, Verena offering to show Basil the local sights, including the Harvard campus.

Basil heartily admires the college architecture, which Verena is happy to show him. But "there is one place," she opines, "where it would perhaps be indelicate to take a Mississippian[:]

"I mean [she says] the great place that towers above the others—that big building with the beautiful pinnacles, which you see from every point." But Basil Ransom had heard of the great Memorial Hall; he knew what memories it enshrined, and the worst that he should have to suffer there; and the ornate, overtopping structure, which was the finest piece of architecture he had ever seen, had moreover solicited his enlarged

curiosity for the last half-hour. (245)

The Memorial Hall, which the two now enter, stands as a monument to the fallen, the martyrs, of the Civil War, in which Basil had fought on the Southern side. Particularly impressive are “the white, ranged tablets, each of which, in its proud, sad, clearness, is inscribed with the name of a student-soldier” (246). In Basil’s mind, “the effect of the place is singularly noble and solemn,” speaking to him silently “of sacrifice and example,” as of the “youth, manhood, [and] generosity” (246) of the dead. Verena thinks that the place “is very beautiful [...] but very dreadful” (246). But here, once more, the two find themselves in an unmediated situation, alone with each other (except for the dead). The lovers’ solitude in the Memorial Hall contrasts starkly with their first encounter in the seedy throng at Miss Birdseye’s, where desire floated freely among the desirous, effacing individuals and becoming itself the object of contention.

13

In their convergence on the hapless Verena, Basil, Olive, Miss Farrinder and the others became, on that occasion, multiple doubles of one another, their individuality dissolved in their chaotic rivalry. Now, in different circumstances, Basil and Verena are at last who they are. Basil becomes suddenly aware that “in a moment they had become more intimate. They were discussing their affairs, which had nothing to do with the heroic symbols that surrounded them; but their affairs had suddenly grown so serious that there was no want of decency in their lingering there for the purpose” (247). At stake is the question whether or not Verena will tell Olive about her meeting with Basil. (She does eventually but only after having concealed it for some time, so that the act of not having told her becomes irrevocable.) As they emerge at last from the Hall, “[t]he afternoon had begun to wane, but the air was filled with a pink brightness, and there was a cool, pure smell, a vague breath of spring” (248). The psychological condition of the two young people is correlatively “springlike” (true to the implication of Verena’s name) and in like wise spontaneous. Although Verena dismisses Basil without commitment as she takes her leave to return home, her interest in him, and his in her, have from this crucial moment been affirmed as genuine, and the rest, in fact, is very nearly denouement.

This does not, however, imply any sort of conventional or “happy” ending. Far from it: James never makes Basil out to be anything other than a young man, entirely too intellectual for his own good (he is always picking up books and reading them while he stands), whose prospects as a philosophical journalist, whatever that might be, are dubious in the extreme. When Verena leaves the Music Hall with Basil, forego ing her much anticipated public debut as the angel of the feminist revolution, she is

definitely not walking into “the vales of Arcady” (229), which Basil imagines to be her ideal setting on the occasion of their stroll through Cambridge. She is very probably walking off into poverty and disappointment. The tears that she sheds, James writes, would probably not be her last. Basil’s notion of marriage certainly does not hold out to Verena the opportunity for independence which Olive’s program at least pretended to offer her. Even so, Verena has determined her own mind; the decision belongs properly to her and to her alone. The only thing that James affirms is the authenticity of the lovers’ desire for one another and the legitimacy of their acting on it as long as the desire is mutual. James poses this, moreover, against the sacrificial desire held in common by Olive and Verena’s parents, which takes no cognizance of the desire-object’s selfhood or autonomy. All of these people desire something beyond Verena to which, in a mysterious way, Verena seems to provide convenient access; and it is this elusive goal, evaluated as more important than anything on the empirical scene, which justifies for them in their minds the relegation of an actual person to mere secondary and disposable importance. For Olive, as her meditations make clear, what lies through and beyond Verena is demonic revenge against anyone and anything that she feels has slighted her. For Verena’s parents, it is fame and wealth via the providential medium of the gifted daughter. For Henry Burrage it is the prospect of pleasing his mother by accepting the bride whom she proposes that he marry. What it might be for pallid asexual Matthias Pardon is difficult to say, except that he is a journalist of some unspecified affiliation who fancies that he can profit from Verena’s notoriety by making a story out of it. But the very unspecifiability of Pardon’s longing reveals the mimetic character of the desire stimulated by Verena’s presence, by her being designated as object by any self-nominated suitor from outside the self-appointed circle of her overseers. Pardon need not desire anything explicit; he need only desire, for he is obeying

14

an impulse of which he is not altogether (perhaps hardly at all) conscious. Rejecting all such ulterior suits, Verena has liberated herself from the desire imposed on her (and leading necessarily to a kind of immolation) by others, particularly by Olive. In so doing, Verena cannot avoid repudiating Olive, who must herself now find some spontaneous impulse-to-action to replace the complex mediations on which she has hitherto relied to bestir herself. Even Olive, therefore, achieves a certain degree of belated self-determination, despite the masochistic character of her desire to fill the martyr’s place before the impatient and potentially dangerous audience. It is of no little importance, with respect to Olive, that in the moment of truth she chooses to bypass martyrdom, rejecting it as unsuited to the development of an independent self capable of acting productively in the world. Verena’s departure catalyzes Olive’s own transformation. “All novelistic conclusions are conversion,” Girard

argues in *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*; protagonists must follow one of two courses, rejecting solitude and embracing others or rejecting others and embracing solitude. But if “the opposition seems insurmountable[:]

Yet it is not. If our interpretation of the conversion is correct, if it puts an end to triangular desire, then its effects cannot be expressed either in terms of absolute solitude or in terms of a return to the world.

Metaphysical desire brings into being a certain relationship to others and to oneself. True conversion engenders a new relationship to others and to oneself. The mechanical oppositions of solitude and gregariousness, involvement and noninvolvement are the result of romantic interpretations. (295)

It is also the case, Girard adds, that “the victory over desire is extremely painful” (300), as it must be not only for Olive, but for Basil and Verena, who remain immersed in metaphysical desire as long as either one of them maintains a relationship with Olive and her radical company, but who are not necessarily (not even probably) made happy by their liberation. We can appropriately recall in this context Kingsley’s description of the martyred Hypatia, with whom James has explicitly identified Olive, as a person “of the fancy and the religious sentiment, rather than of reason and the moral sense.” The terms “fancy” and “religious sentiment” signify for Kingsley—and for James, who is making deliberate use of Kingsley—a certain unconscious response to non-thematic emotions and impulses and cues taken from the immediate scene. “Reason and moral sense,” on the other hand, signify a self-consciousness of the positive sort, an ability to thematize desire, and to free oneself thereby from abject dependence on the whims of others. Verena and Basil’s exercise of spontaneous desire acts, in this sense, to deliver all three members of the triangle (Verena, Basil, and Olive) from an immolatory unreason over which they have otherwise lost control. Hypatia fought against what Kingsley calls her “tormenters” but fell to them in the end. Olive’s worst tormenter is herself. Unlike Hypatia, however, Olive does not fall before the mob; and she does not even fall before herself—the outcome for which she had certainly set herself up. She avoids becoming a victim with the same step that propels her into the dangerous center-of-attention, committing herself to the action even though taking that step might well entail “being hissed and hooted and insulted.” It turns out, indeed, much less dreadfully than that, for when Olive appears, “the hush was respectful” (433). Thus Basil, hearing the roar subside, “was relieved to know that, even when exasperated, a Boston audience is not ungenerous” (433). Clearly, this crowd is unlike the crowd of Hypatia’s murderers in Kingsley’s novel; the sacrificial impulse does not reside in them. It resides backstage, with Olive’s pathologically

intermediated friends.

15

## IV

This essay has argued in passing that *The Bostonians* takes up problems (those we have been discussing) presented in earlier novels by James. This is a fact worthy of consideration. Consider, then, the moment in *The American* when Christopher Newman confronts Madame de Cintre about her failure to act on what Newman believes is her genuine affection toward him, deferring her feelings to those of her family, who oppose the projected union. “You are not a child,” Newman says, “you are not a minor, nor are you an idiot. You are not obliged to drop me because your mother told you to” (247). Cintre responds that she can give no other explanation of her refusal than that she is, indeed, imbecile, and that Newman ought to accept that in the absence of an alternative. Newman remains unsatisfied and works himself up to this remonstrating oration:

“You are not frank[;] you are not honest. Instead of saying that you are imbecile, you should say that other people are wicked. Your mother and your brother have been false and cruel; they have been so to me, and I am sure they have been so to you. Why should you try to shield them? Why do you sacrifice me to them? I’m not false; I’m not cruel. You don’t know what you give up; I can tell you that—you don’t. They bully you and plot about you; and I—I—” (248)

Why do you sacrifice me to them? Newman asks. But this seems, in context, a strange way to put the question. The meaningful form of the question would be, why do you sacrifice yourself to them? Or why do you let them sacrifice you? While Newman understands that someone is the victim of coercion and that love does not receive its due, he nevertheless remains in some confusion over just who the abused party really is. A short while later, Newman again casts himself in the role of the intolerably injured party: “He was filled with a sorer sense of wrong than he had ever known, or that he had supposed it possible he should know. To accept his injury and walk away without looking behind him was a stretch of good-nature of which he found himself incapable” (254). Newman sees himself as someone who has been forced to eat “humble pie” (254) and experiences powerful “vehemence” against those—the Bellegardes—whom he holds responsible for his wicked act. When Newman discovers that Cintre has been destined to a Carmelite nunnery by her cruel guardians, he imagines that “the door of the tomb is at this moment closing

behind her" (267), and resolves to make one last attempt to retrieve her to himself.

The Parisian cloister where Cintre's ultimate induction into orders will occur strikes Newman, when he first lays eyes on it, as "too strange and too mocking to be real" (288). Inside, he finds the initiates separated from visitors by an opaque screen and can hear from beyond it "the strange, lugubrious chant uttered by the women's voices"; this "began softly, but it presently grew louder, and as it increased it became more of a wail or a dirge" (289). Seated in back of the chapel, Newman cannot see the faces of the other visitors. He wishes that he could, for he imagines them to be "the mourning mothers and sisters of other women who had had the same pitiless courage as Madame de Cintre. But they were better off than he, for they at least shared the faith to which the others had sacrificed themselves" (289). Yet even here, where he acknowledges that the initiates are "sacrific[ing] themselves," Newman still senses himself as supremely wounded. Thus "[t]he priest's long, dismal intonings acted upon his nerves and deepened his wrath; there was something defiant in [the priest's] unintelligible drawl [which] seemed

16

meant for Newman himself" (289), as though he were the one on whom "the door of the tomb" were closing. Unable finally to confront a scene that is both "hideous" and "horrible" (290), Newman flees outside. He never manages to catch a glimpse of Cintre, who remains hidden, like her sisters in piety, by the impenetrable "darkness" (289) of the screen, behind which lies "the real convent, the place where she was" (289) and where she would now for ever more remain. We note that this scene, toward the end of *The American*, strongly prefigures the climax of *The Bostonians*, while the latter alters the former by permitting the rescue to succeed. Basil Ransom succeeds where Christopher Newman fails in part, at least, because Ransom better understands his situation than does Newman; Ransom overcomes narcissism where Newman does not. But this change in outcomes also reflects James' own knowledge of desire, resentment, and sacrifice. We note that, leaving off its final grammatical element, Newman's question to Cintre, why do you sacrifice me? uncannily echoes Jesus' question to Saul (not yet Paul) on the road to Damascus: why are you persecuting me? We note additionally, however, that Newman, unlike Paul, is the utterer, not the auditor, of the question. Consistent ethically with Newman's failure to understand who has been coerced (nothing in the description of her fate suggests that Cintre acts according to her own will) is his project of revenge against the Bellegardes. Newman has discovered that Madame Bellegarde poisoned her husband and managed to conceal it; he threatens to reveal this secret, not to get Cintre back, but as a form of tit-for-tat, still positioning himself as the main sufferer. Of course the Bellegardes qualify as snobs of the first water; they are vicious and conniving. But the ethically integral thing to do, once

Cintre enters the Carmelite life, is to walk away from them without a word, which is what Ransom would do. In his role as avenger of personal slights, as a man of resentment, Newman prefigures Olive Chancellor, at least as we find her before her apparent transformation at the end of the novel. Olive, of course, constitutes a more intense and unpleasant sort of avenger than Newman, but the generic resemblance persists. Ransom, on the other hand, simply faces away from those who have coerced and exploited Verena and snubbed him and moves with her into a world of their own, independent of that which they are leaving. These observations allow us to return to *The Bostonians* for the purpose of explicating its carefully presented ethical content.

As Basil Ransom's name might lead one to suspect, *The Bostonians* is a novel that has something to do with Christianity; it is in some sense, the evidence indicates, a peculiar type of Christian novel, and numerous other features of the narrative support this thesis. In James' careful description of the de facto cult centered around Miss Birdseye's parlor—that mixture of mystics, mesmerists, feminists, and advocates of radical causes—*The Bostonians* is a book about the degeneration of Christianity into various low-grade and half-secularized forms. The account of Miss Birdseye herself in Book the First bears centrally on this point:

[S]he belonged to any and every league that had been founded for almost any purpose whatever. This did not prevent her being a confused, entangled, inconsequent, discursive old woman, whose charity began at home and ended nowhere, whose credulity kept pace with it, and who knew less about her fellow creatures, if possible, after fifty years of humanitarian zeal, than on the day she had gone into the field to testify against the iniquity of most arrangements. Basil Ransom knew very little about such a life as hers, but she seemed to him a revelation of a class, and a multitude of socialistic figures, of names and episodes that he had heard of, grouped themselves behind her. She looked as if she had spent her entire life on platforms, in audiences, in conventions, in phalansteries, in seances[.] (55)

We note how James links Miss Birdseye's proclivity-to-belong, as it might be denominated, with her “zeal,” the term zeal being related by etymology to another term, jealousy, which can serve as a synonym for resentment. The present seance involves some twenty people, among whom Basil notices “a want of convivial movement[,] even of mutual recognition. They sat there as if they were waiting for something” (59). Basil “had the general idea,” which James never dispels, that

"they were mediums, communists, vegetarians" (59). Before Verena's performance, Miss Birdseye at one point tells a story, more or less to Basil, in which Selah Tarrant's "miraculous cures were specified" and Verena's marvelous success on her Western speaking tour recorded as though they were the "recognized wonders [of] an age of new revelations" (79). When Selah induces the trance in his daughter, Basil thinks of him as a spiritual "carpetbagger" (83). Camille Paglia claims, in *Sexual Personae* (1991), that James is not the clinically observant "social novelist" that most criticism takes him to be, but rather a "Decadent Late Romantic" (607). Paglia assesses Olive as "an irritable political ideologue whose summery Cape Cod has no connection to dangerous cthonian nature" (611). When Paglia says that Olive demonstrates nothing of the "cthonian," she means that Olive does not represent the violence and eroticism that animate interest and contribute so much, as Paglia sees it, to the power of literature. One would be hard pressed to disagree with Paglia's sense that James is a decadent (an American Huysmans) and that Olive is an obnoxious apparatchik in the making; but the fact that James is a decadent does not mean that he is not also a perceptive analyst of decadence. (In a real enough sense, Basil does indeed get a glimpse into "humanity" when he visits Miss Birdseye's parlor, just as Olive had said he would, though not in the way she supposed.) Nor is Olive's ideological fanaticism by any means harmless: it is, on the contrary, vehement and sacrificial, quite capable of justifying the use of other people for its indefinitely deferred ends.

Olive's prudery in fact makes her repressed eroticism volcanic and potentially explosive. Paglia notes that Basil stands out among James' male protagonists in being "a virile hero" (611). What Paglia calls Basil's virility (and it certainly is that) needs to be linked, however, to what we have identified as his ethical character. Virtually everyone else in the novel, all of those quasi-somnolent people at Miss Birdseye's seance, require a victim (Paglia calls it vampirism), whereas Basil himself, aided at last by Verena (just as she is aided by him), acts to rescue-to ransom-the designated victim from her sacrificers. The sacrificial impulse in this milieu stems from the milieu's intensely agonistic character, a character that the morbid "want of conviviality" noticed by Basil clearly if indirectly reveals. Olive and Miss Farrinder and those around them all dote obsessively on what each takes to be his or her own intolerable peripherality; yet none wants to become central, precisely, either, since that would entail a dangerous conspicuity. Each wants, rather, to acquire quasi-central importance by controlling the center through a surrogate, no matter what the cost to the surrogate. And everyone's surrogate turns out to be Verena. In acting as he does, then, to confirm the dignity of the other by validating mutual spontaneous desire, Basil attests to the ethical principle implicit in Jesus' question to Paul, echoed in distorted fashion by Christopher Newman in *The American*, who never quite understands who exactly has endured the greatest indignity at the highest price. That principle is the principle that one

must recognize the full humanity of the other and not subordinate the other to oneself. In this manner, as Gans has written in an extended interpretation of Paul's encounter with Jesus, "each [person] would be a sacred center for the other" (*Science and Faith* 107), an act of generosity which Olive is emphatically unwilling to grant to Verena. Gans writes elsewhere of Christianity's insistence on "absolute reciprocity of human relations as the model—the fundamental model—of human interaction" (*Originary Thinking* 45).

Significantly, Basil's relation with Verena, over the course of the narrative, is dialogic, that is to say reciprocal, rather than monologic and responsory, as in the case of Olive's relation with Verena. Newman's relation with Cintre, by opposite example, never becomes truly dialogic, due in part to Newman's self-absorption and in part to Cintre's dissimulating irony. With Paglia's claim in mind, it is possible to imagine a different version of *The American* with a more virile Newman who asserts himself meaningfully and saves Cintre (who has done nothing to deserve it) from her enforced encloisterment. In effect, Newman sacrifices Cintre for the sake of his own sense of martyrdom at the hands of the Bellegardes. Newman's subsequent lack of interest in marriage supports the judgment that he is essentially narcissistic and that he remains fundamentally uninterested in the necessary reciprocity of a conjugal relation. *The Bostonians* is that different version of *The American*.

Basil Ransom is clear-sighted in this respect at least: he has come to understand that inaction with respect to Verena amounts to complicity in the exploitative design of others. In "an age of unspeakable shams" (328), Basil will not sham a lack of interest in the person who "had even more power to fix his attention than he had hitherto supposed" (266), as he thinks of Verena during their long peregrinating conversation in Book the Second, and who gives signs of responding with mutuality to him. Basil is thus responding by deed to the question that his counterpart in *The American* so badly misunderstood. In the final moments in the Music Hall, Basil notices that "the expression in Verena's eyes was ineffably touching and beseeching" (425). Basil sees that "she trembled with nervous passion, there were sobs and supplications in her voice, and he felt himself flushing with pure pity for her pain" (425). Basil here comprehends Verena not only as the young woman whom he certainly loves but as the abused object of a cynical scheme in which the internal disposition of the subject receives no acknowledgment. "But at the same moment," James continues, Basil "had another perception, which brushed aside remorse; he saw that he could do what he wanted, that she begged him, with all her being, to spare her" (425). This corresponds to the sudden Pauline insight that persecution is universal and that it represents the iniquity of the world. Thus, one must stop persecuting others, either actively or passively. Mrs. Tarrant meanwhile

declares that Basil's intention toward Verena adds up to "the most horrible, wicked, immoral selfishness I ever heard in my life!" (426). Basil, by his own lights, only wants to deliver Verena from the disgusting scene. But how can we reconcile our claim that Basil's impulse is essentially Christian, hence moral, with the various moral positions staked out by the novel's radicals, especially by Olive, who argues that her cause absolutely requires Verena and so establishes a claim over her prior to Basil's and prior, in fact, to the girl's proper claim over herself? After all, a hundred and ten years after James wrote *The Bostonians*, feminism has been vindicated (in any movie of *The Bostonians*, the writers would have to make Olive the righteous heroine and turn Basil into a lascivious kidnapper; the Merchant-Ivory *Bostonians* already shows some of these revisionary tendencies), and everyone knows

19

that marriage is simply a patriarchal ploy to dominate women. We have already admitted that Basil's idea of marriage is not modern but strictly and confiningly traditional. And James, after all, readily admits that, in securing Verena to himself, Basil is acting on his insight that "he could do what he wanted." Does this not confirm Mrs. Tarrant's complaint that Basil is horribly, wickedly, immorally selfish?

Answering this question requires a backward glance at the murder of Hypatia as portrayed by Kingsley in the romance to which James alludes, comparing Olive to Hypatia, during the tense final moments in the Music Hall. Hypatia's murderers are an ostensibly Christian mob and the murder takes place in a basilica under the gaze of an image of Christ to which the doomed woman reaches out a hand in desperate supplication. Hypatia herself is a pagan, but, as Kingsley's description of her makes clear, she is a decadent pagan whose thought is no longer rigorous in the style of her Platonist precursors. The conventional contemporary reading of this scene would be that the crowd truly represents Christianity and that Kingsley is depicting the essential hypocrisy and brutality of the new creed. The immolation, in today's orthodox exegesis, would affirm Nietzsche's diagnosis of Christianity as a case of pathological resentment disguising itself in saccharine but totally misleading figures. The lynchers would murderously resent Hypatia because she represents a cultural, intellectual, and spiritual level of attainment which the bigots can neither match nor understand. The fact that the mob thinks of itself as Christian or acts in the name of Christianity does not mean, however, that Christian is what they are. It is important that the image of Christ hovers above the scene of the murder and that the murderers act on a plane below it. It is equally important that, in the terrible moment, Hypatia beseeches the image of Christ, Himself the victim of a murder, for succor. She suddenly identifies with Him, one victim with another. "And who would dare say in vain?" Kingsley significantly asks. The truth, in Kingsley's scene, is that

the sacrificial impulse comes not from Jesus (not from Christianity) but from the mob, who are motivated by passion, not by compassion, which has a cognitive element implicitly denoting the equivalency between self and other. The mob enact the very impulse, namely sacrifice, that Jesus would suspend. Hypatia's final gesture shows that she understands the meaning of Jesus' revelation even though those who allege that they act in His name do not. To say, then, that Olive stands in relation to feminism as the lynch-mob in Kingsley's novel stands in relation to Christianity is simply to say that Olive's self-articulated attachment to feminism, however we evaluate that creed, is utterly irrelevant to an assessment of her character and deeds. The lynch-mob's act is irreconcilable with the anti-sacrificial essence of Christian morality and Olive's exploitation of Verena is irreconcilable with the essence of feminism, which is that women are the moral and intellectual equals of men and deserve to be treated on their merits as individuals, just as men are. Whether Verena's decision regarding herself satisfies the additional demand, made implicitly by Olive, that all women stand in doctrinal solidarity with feminism, is again utterly irrelevant. Verena's "Ah, now I'm glad" (433), uttered as she leaves with Basil, might represent an unrealistic assessment of her prospects, but the fact remains that it is her assessment and it constitutes good evidence that she is doing what she wants to do, at last. It is indeed extremely difficult to see how one could celebrate Olive's program without effacing Verena's right to her own program. In this sense, vindications of Olive necessarily acquiesce in the sacrifice of Verena's volition and her desire. Olive's gender-preference, like her politics, is another non-issue. The principle that James takes care to illuminate is that choice needs to

20

be mutually affirmed, for if it is not, then it can be nothing less than coercion. The basic structure of coercive eroticism remains sacrificial. Elective unions need include no guarantee of ultimate satisfaction; indeed, as elective, they cannot. But this is only to say that all utopian agendas, which insist on a guarantee of satisfaction, must issue in the compulsory participation, hence in the negation as self-determining subjects, of those who would rather not participate, because they have some other plan.

## **Works Cited**

Eric L. Gans. *The End of Culture. Toward a Generative Anthropology*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1985.

—. *Originary Thinking. The Elements of Generative Anthropology*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993.

René Girard. *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel. Self and Other in Literary Structure*. Translated by Yvonne Freccero. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1965.

Henry James. *The American*. New York: Penguin, 1981

—. *The Bostonians*. New York: Penguin, 1988

Charles Kingsley. *Hypatia; or Old Foes with new Faces*. London: MacMillans, 1881.

Camille Paglia. *Sexual Personae*. New York: Vintage, 1990