

THE WORLD'S CLASSICS

HENRY JAMES  
THE  
BOSTONIANS



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HENRY JAMES

*The Bostonians*

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EDITED WITH AN INTRODUCTION  
AND NOTES BY  
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Oxford New York

OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS

1984

Oxford University Press, Walton Street, Oxford OX2 6DP

London New York Toronto  
Delhi Bombay Calcutta Madras Karachi  
Kuala Lumpur Singapore Hong Kong Tokyo  
Nairobi Dar es Salaam Cape Town  
Melbourne Auckland  
and associated companies in  
Beirut Berlin Ibadan Mexico City Nicosia

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The Bostonians first published in book form 1886  
First published as a World's Classics paperback 1984

Introduction, Note on the text, Further reading,  
Appendixes 2 and 3 and Notes © R. D. Gooder 1984  
Chronology © Leon Edel 1963

Appendix 1 reprinted from The Notebooks of Henry James,  
edited by F. O. Matthiessen and Kenneth B. Murdock.

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

James, Henry, 1843-1916  
The Bostonians.—(The World's classics)  
I. Title II. Gooder, R. D.  
813'.4 PS2116.B6  
ISBN 0-19-281639-X

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

James, Henry, 1843-1916.  
The Bostonians.  
(The World's classics)  
Originally appeared in the Century magazine from  
Feb. 1885 to Feb. 1886.  
Bibliography: p.  
I. Gooder, R. D. II. Title.  
PS2116.B6 1984 813'.4 84-7884  
ISBN 0-19-281639-X (pbk.)

Printed in Great Britain by  
Hazell Watson & Viney Limited  
Aylesbury, Bucks

## INTRODUCTION

Viewed from Mt Vernon Street, the problem of life was as simple as it was classic. Politics offered no difficulties, for there the moral law was a sure guide. Social perfection was also sure, because human nature worked for Good, and three instruments were all she asked—Suffrage, Common Schools, and Press. On these points doubt was forbidden. Education was divine, and man needed only a correct knowledge of facts to reach perfection.

HENRY ADAMS

The society of Boston was and is quite uncivilized, but refined beyond the point of civilization.

T. S. ELIOT

*The Bostonians* is the masterpiece of James's middle period, though it is not the kind of work upon which his reputation has come to rest. It is the only one of his major novels where James's characters inhabit a world that he himself knew intimately and from the inside, a world to which he himself had connexions more vital than those of an immensely superior tourist. James knew that exile from his native country would deprive him not so much of material, as of a world in which his material could resonate. What has Isabel Archer to do with Rome, or Lambert Strether with Paris? His achievement, therefore, had to lie in his analysis of consciousness, not in his analysis of a culture. Yet, even in novels as brilliant as *What Maisie Knew* or *The Awkward Age*, we may wonder whether these people are *typical*, and, if so, what they are typical of? But this is the question to which James frankly addresses himself in *The Bostonians*, and to which he gives an answer both comprehensive and critical, so critical, indeed, that the novel failed on its first appearance in America, and so enduringly accurate that even a quarter of a century later it could not (to James's regret) be included in the New York Edition of his works. *The Bostonians* sums up the history of New England,

and in so doing it sums up the only serious cultural tradition which America might be argued to have had. We cannot feel the distinction of *The Bostonians* without some sense of what that tradition included.

The cultural history of Boston—the city of the puritans—was intimately related to a religious history which, up until the Civil War, had passed through three quite distinct phases, each of which had generated its own literature and its own mythology. The first, or puritan, phase of Boston history ran from the founding of the city in about 1630 well into the eighteenth century. This was followed by a period of less intense, more liberal puritanism which in the course of the eighteenth century developed into a Unitarianism intent upon the inculcation of virtue, but almost entirely non-doctrinal. This in turn developed into a movement which was spiritually as fervent as that of the first puritans, but at the same time as non-doctrinal as that of the Unitarians, and which was known as transcendentalism. This phase reached its zenith in the 1840s and 1850s, and by the time James—whose father had been a friend of Emerson's and a leading transcendentalist—came to write *The Bostonians* it was in its second and third generation, and Boston itself was in the course of entering a new and more dubious phase of its history.

Of the many and extensive subtleties of puritanism the only doctrine which we need have recourse to here is that of 'election'. Following orthodox Calvinism, the Congregationalists of New England believed that, in consequence of the transgression of our first parents, Adam and Eve, mankind was damned, condemned to eternal death. They believed also, however, that God in his infinite mercy had designated certain individuals—the *elect*—for salvation from this general curse. God's choice could not be influenced. The individual is too weak, too corrupt, altogether too puny to effect his own salvation, and behaving well—performing good works—won't help. On the contrary, good works are forms of pride and egotism whereby men foolishly try to influence the will of God. Yet, of course, he who performs good works might well be saved, since virtue is one of the things that might be expected of the

elect. The task for the individual, and for the congregation, was to distinguish between good works done by the elect, and those done by the 'unregenerate'. (Did I help that old lady across the street because I'm saved, or because I'm trying to influence God to take notice of me?) The most reliable form of assurance was to have had a moment of inspiration, of insight, of inward illumination in which one was reminded of the old, unselfconscious spiritual harmony as it had been in the Garden of Eden, before the Fall:

... the unattended

Moment, the moment in and out of time,  
 The distraction fit, lost in a shaft of sunlight,  
 The wild thyme unseen, or the winter lightning  
 Or the waterfall, or music heard so deeply  
 That it is not heard at all, but you are the music  
 While the music lasts.

T. S. Eliot, 'The Dry Salvages', V

But never did release from self demand such an intensity of self-examination, for it was possible to have the experience and miss the meaning, or to have a *false* illumination induced by Satan, or to misinterpret an experience, or to fail to notice that a feeling or a thought was the very thing that one sought. True regeneration began in the deepest recesses of one's own soul and could be neither induced nor hurried. God spoke to one directly, gave one faith, gave one grace, directly, without the mediation of priest or personal effort. To commune with oneself was the principal conduit of communication with God. The result of all this was a constant inspection of one's own thoughts, one's own feelings, one's own motives for signs of grace and regeneration. In short, the doctrine of an 'election' over which one had no control, and whose surest sign was a forgetfulness of self, occasioned that agony of self-concern and isolation which in their different ways both Hawthorne and Emily Dickinson took for a subject.

The corollary of this, however, was a feeling that one has a certain special status. The earliest settlers in Massachusetts Bay, however anxious may have been their cares both worldly

and otherwise, did really believe that they they were a chosen people, and their belief was converted into energy and courage. When their pilgrim ship, the *Mayflower*, arrived in the harbour of Cape Cod in November 1620 they found themselves in a bay surrounded by barren sand dunes, with very limited supplies, at the beginning of a fierce New England winter. In his *History of Plymouth Plantation* their leader, William Bradford, described their almost desperate situation :

which way soever they turned their eyes (save upwards to the heavens) they could have little solace or content in respect of any outward objects. For summer being done, all things stand upon them with a weatherbeaten face, and the whole country, full of woods and thickets, represented a wild and savage hue. If they looked behind them, there was the mighty ocean which they had passed and was now a main bar and gulf to separate them from all the civil parts of the world . . . What could now sustain them but the Spirit of God and His grace? May not and ought not the children of these fathers rightly say : 'Our fathers were Englishmen which came over this great ocean, and were ready to perish in this wilderness; but they cried unto the Lord, and He heard their voice and looked on their adversity . . .'

(I. xi)

New England was God's country not because it was favoured by God, but because it had been elected by God as the home for his chosen people. The righteous sense of being 'of the elect' gave the puritans the consistent courage necessary to draw a civilization out of a wilderness. It carried duties as well as privileges. Latterly, as necessity pressed less urgently, the duties were less obvious, but the sense of being in some way *special* remained. The conviction of being singled out for a doom different from that of ordinary mortals is an enduring constituent of American literature, and an immensely various one. It lies behind Melville's Ahab, and behind Whitman's *The Song of Myself*; it is exploited with an entirely different kind of subtlety and emphasis in, for example, Isabel Archer in *The Portrait of a Lady*. This background of the need for religious assurance, and the conviction of a direct, personal,

inward relationship with God, gives to the idea of vanity, in American books, a peculiarly ominous resonance.

Willpower alone could not long sustain the mystical intensity of this highly subjective religious conviction. The Salem witchcraft trials of 1692 confronted Massachusetts with so distasteful (if logical) a conclusion to its habit of preferring subjective to objective evidence that the theological intensity at once abated. During the earlier part of the eighteenth century New England puritanism gradually divided into orthodox and liberal factions. The former was dominated by Jonathan Edwards and the Great Awakening, a religious movement that swept America in the second quarter of the eighteenth century. It was fervently evangelical (with violent 'savings' of sinners), rural, and provincial, and the liberal faction which developed into Unitarianism was born as much as anything from the opposition of eastern Massachusetts, and in particular Boston, to backwoods revivalism. For Boston was becoming prosperous and sophisticated; its prosperity and sophistication were dependent upon transatlantic trade, and manifestations of provincial religious zeal were embarrassing. Boston therefore increasingly separated itself from the mystical intensities of orthodox piety and took its stand upon the ground of more objective, ethical considerations—in puritan terms, upon good works. Difficult theological questions, such as the doctrine of justification by faith alone, or the doctrine of 'election', lost their urgency as mere personal virtue came (quite unorthodoxly) to be taken as sufficient grounds for salvation. By the end of the first quarter of the nineteenth century Unitarianism had replaced orthodoxy in all but one of the old, established, pre-Revolutionary Boston congregations, and it had taken over the Harvard Divinity School. Boston evolved a religious establishment that was rational, practical, benign, and as devoid of fervour as it was of doctrinal content. This resulted in the creation of a middle class which was both prosperous and decent, and of which the Wentworth family, in *The Europeans*, may be taken as the type. Its solid virtues are obvious, as is its unwillingness, amounting to inability, to comprehend a reality outside its normal round. The atmosphere of



this society is described in the chapter on Boston in *The Education of Henry Adams*, and we may measure some of its deficiencies if we compare Adams's description of his community's attitude to danger and salvation with that quoted from William Bradford above :

that the most intelligent society, led by the most intelligent clergy, in the most moral conditions he ever knew, should have solved all the problems of the universe so thoroughly as to have quite ceased making itself anxious about past and future, and should have persuaded itself that all the problems which had convulsed human thought from earliest recorded time, were not worth discussing, seemed to him the most curious social phenomenon he had to account for in a long life. (Chapter II)

It is from such a society that we may imagine Olive Chancellor and her sister Adeline to come. Indeed, it is part of the tortuous complexity of Olive's character that she is never unconscious of the respectability which her background confers upon her :

She knew her place in the Boston hierarchy, and it was not what Mrs Farrinder supposed . . . the Chancellors belonged to the *bourgeoisie*—the oldest and best. They might care for such a position or not (as it happened, they were very proud of it), but there they were, and it made Mrs Farrinder seem provincial (there was something provincial after all, in the way she did her hair too) not to understand. (p. 30)

On the other hand, Olive, like Adams himself, could never be satisfied by the frigid spiritual complacencies of Boston Unitarianism. If her sister Adeline registers *her* dissatisfaction by turning aside into worldliness and frivolity, Olive takes the scarcely less dangerous step of seeking a mission in the 'transcendental Bohemia' (p. 74) of post-Civil War Boston reform movements.

Not—to come to our third phase of Boston cultural history—that transcendentalism was Bohemian in its origins. The members of the Transcendental Club were as respectable as Olive Chancellor herself, but equally they were dissatisfied

with the spiritual smugness of Unitarian Boston. As puritanism had divided in the middle of the eighteenth century between orthodox Calvinists and liberal Unitarians, so in about 1825 Unitarianism itself split between a conservative faction, and a faction in which the fervour of the Great Awakening was re-kindled, but with a fuel very different from orthodox Calvinism. The transcendental movement was, as James remarked in his essay on Emerson, 'that remarkable outburst of Romanticism on Puritan ground'. The transcendentalists were seeking something different when they turned their gaze inward. For a properly constituted puritan, religious experience was a matter of terror, for the wrath of God might at any moment drop him into the fiery pit. His inward nature was dark and foul, and it took some courage to look *there* for signs of grace. For the transcendentalists there was no terror. William Ellery Channing (1780-1842), a Unitarian preacher whose work marks the distinct shift toward transcendentalism, and whom Emerson later referred to as 'our bishop', explained why:

The great lesson is, that there is in human nature an element truly Divine, and worthy of all reverence; that the Infinite which is mirrored in the outward universe, is yet more brightly imaged in the inward spiritual world.

Unitarianism has suffered from union with a heart-withering philosophy . . . [and] a too partial culture of the mind. I fear that we must look to other schools for the thoughts which thrill us, which touch the most inward springs, and disclose to us the depths of our own souls.

No puritan would have dared seek the depths of his own soul with such insouciance. But Channing, at least in his philosophical rhetoric, has got rid of the fear of original sin. The Unitarians had come more and more to abandon that conviction of total, innate depravity upon which puritan psychology was founded, and its place was filled with the more comfortable assumption that human nature is essentially good,

or in any case, that whatever is, is right. But this was very bland. As Perry Miller says,

if the strain in the New England tradition . . . that made for reason and breeding and good suppers, found itself happily divorced from enthusiasm and perfectly enshrined in the liberal profession of Unitarianism, what of the other strain? What of the mysticism, the hunger of the soul, the sense of divine emanation in man and in nature, which had been so important an element in the Puritan character? Had it died out in New England? Was it to live, if at all, forever caged and confined in the prison house of Calvinism? . . . For those who had been liberated by Channing . . . [and] who could no longer express their desires in the language of a creed that had been shown to be outworn, Calvinism was dead . . . But if the spiritual desires, though they could not be satisfied in theology, were still living, toward what objects would they now be turned? If they could no longer be expressed in the language of supernatural regeneration and divine sovereignty, in what language were they to be described? (*Errand into the Wilderness* (1956), pp. 196 f.)

Transcendentalism caught up the mystical intensity of puritanism, without retreating from the Unitarian belief in the essential goodness of the individual. The only evil in the world was that generated by society; in his single self the individual was perfect. Self-scrutiny seeking signs of grace gave way to spiritual intuition which identified the real and perfect self that society had inhibited. Impulse could be taken for a rule of conduct because, rather like intimations of divine grace, it was generated in the deepest levels of the psyche and could not be willed. Whatever one felt, if one really felt it, was sure to be right for oneself. Self-certainty freed itself from the restraining fear of original sin. Transcendentalism was puritanism with the devil left out. If evil existed not in individuals, but in society, then all that was needed was to perfect society, so that each individual soul could at last realize itself.

Transcendentalism as a movement was neither religious, nor philosophical, nor political. It was a highly influential state of mind, intellectually not very well organized, that flowed indiscriminately into these and other areas of human

concern, where its potency has not yet been exhausted. What gave transcendentalism so much force as a social movement in America was that it was perfectly suited to the rhetoric of democracy. Here is Emerson writing in his *Journals* in 1834:

The root and seed of democracy is the doctrine, Judge for yourself. Reverence thyself. It is the inevitable effect of the doctrine . . . to make each man a state. (III.369)

Democracy, freedom, has its roots in the sacred truth that every man hath in him the divine Reason, or that, though few men since the creation of the world live according to the dictates of Reason, yet all men are created capable of so doing. That is the equality, and the only equality of all men. (ibid. 390)

By the middle of the nineteenth century the prosperous and dominant north-eastern part of the United States, of which Boston was the natural spiritual capital, was aglow with the politics of perfection. Emerson wrote to Carlyle:

We are all a little wild here with numberless projects of social reform. Not a reading man but has a draft of a new Community in his waistcoat . . . One man renounces the use of animal food; and another of coin; and another of domestic hired service; and another of the State; and on the whole we have a commendable share of reason and hope. (30 Oct. 1840)

America would be transformed; the world would be redeemed; human nature itself would be restored to its prelapsarian perfection. Transcendentalism proposed the innocent, perfectible individual; democracy supplied the conditions of perfect liberty. What could be the need of restraint? In *The Bostonians* James addresses himself to the human and cultural consequences of this untrammelled optimism, as they were unfolding in the period of Reconstruction that followed the Civil War.

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'Fourscore and seven years ago our fathers brought forth upon this continent a new nation, conceived in liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.' So did

Lincoln begin the brief Address with which he dedicated the cemetery at the stricken field of Gettysburg, site of the bloodiest battle of the Civil War. Just a decade later, in the autumn of 1873, a young gentleman not quite thirty years of age, from Mississippi, the deepest, most traditional, most benighted of the Confederate states, calls upon his cousin, a year or two younger than himself and a radical feminist, at her home in Boston, the very capital of modern, egalitarian enlightenment. When James came to write *The Bostonians* in 1883 he fixed its dramatic date, and the age of its antagonists, with some deliberation. Basil Ransom and Olive Chancellor would have been in their late teens at the opening of the Civil War. Ransom had fought in it, on the Confederate side—might be supposed, indeed, to have been at Gettysburg. Olive's 'two brothers—her only ones—had given up life for the Northern cause'. James himself, who was born in 1843, was thus their contemporary. (He did not himself fight in the war, but two of his brothers did, one of them returning home gravely wounded in August 1863.) After the war James was at his parents' house on Quincy Street in Cambridge; he was in Europe in 1869 and 1870; from 1870 to 1872 he was again in Quincy Street; from 1872 to 1874 he was in Europe; he spent the winter of 1875 in New York, trying to make a literary career; in July he returned to Cambridge, and in October 1875 he went back to Europe with the intention of settling there. At the dramatic date of *The Bostonians*, that is to say, James was himself at that stage of his life when he was struggling to find his place and his vocation. America after the Civil War would never be so comfortable as it had been before. Like Basil Ransom, failing to revive his stricken Mississippi plantation and throwing himself into a law career in New York, like Olive Chancellor seeking, among a score of radical causes, one so purely virtuous as the abolitionism of the late 'fifties, and committing herself finally to the feminist movement, Henry James was one of those who had been brought up to a world of values and expectations which did not survive the war, or which survived it only in forms unrecognizably grotesque, and who had therefore to find his own way. *The Bostonians* is scarcely

an autobiographical novel, but in reading it we cannot but be aware of the extent to which it is a meditation on that period of his life, ten years earlier, when James came to feel how little room there was for him in the expansive, ragged, opportunistic America of the 'seventies. *The Bostonians* is an analysis of the metamorphosis of American idealism in the Gilded Age, an account of what America had become, and was becoming. Liberty and equality are ideals. Their continuity is not inevitable, and their fragility is acknowledged by Lincoln in the precision of his formulations. 'Now we are engaged in a great civil war, testing whether that nation, or any nation so conceived and so dedicated, can long endure.' The war corrected a gross contradiction, but it could not in itself secure the ideals for which it had been fought. The North succeeded by reason of an industrial might to which the war itself offered a great stimulus, so that its victory provoked the exploitation and the distortion of the very values for which it had fought. The abuses of capitalist industrialization and commerce were defended in the very language of democratic individualism which had come down from the transcendental idealists. *The Bostonians* is an analysis of the consequences of this development.

*The Bostonians* is not about Boston; the title refers to two Boston women, Olive Chancellor and Verena Tarrant. Moreover, what is generally thought of as 'proper' Boston is little in evidence. We see nothing of the social world of Beacon Street and the Back Bay, or of the cultural world of the Boston Athenaeum and the Music Hall, or of the intellectual world of Harvard, in short, of those very institutions which had given Boston its distinctive place in the American consciousness. Or rather, we see them almost as tourists through the eyes of Basil Ransom, who admires the view from Olive's window over the Back Bay, where church spires are but forlorn reminders among the uglier visual manifestations of rampant commercialism, and who is shown round Harvard by Verena Tarrant, for whom Cambridge is not 'the academic suburb' but merely the place where her impecunious family happens to be accommodated in a speculative development. Olive's taste

for music reminds us of the city's distinguished musical tradition, but she herself hires the Music Hall for a performance which Ransom luridly compares with an exhibition in the Roman Coliseum. It is as though James were determined to give us the whole outward image of Boston, and to remind us constantly of its cultural pretensions, without providing any of the inward reality. This is because the inward reality of the real and great and threatened Boston, the Boston for which James himself most cared, is all recapitulated in the figure of Olive Chancellor.

Olive's nature is constructed from all that is best and most characteristic in the Boston tradition, but what she lacks (like Boston high culture itself) is any sense of humour. Humour, of course, would be fatal to the kind of willed high seriousness that Olive has inherited, a seriousness of a kind which the only two native Bostonians in the book who are capable of conscious wit, Dr Prance and Adeline Luna, have in different ways put aside. But with no sense of humour to reconcile the elements of her nature to one another Olive is deeply at odds with herself. She is unselfconsciously proud of deriving from the best Boston stock, and irritated by Mrs Farrinder, for example, who comes from Roxbury and tends to 'mix things up'. Olive is well-bred and independent, and Ransom, at his first meeting with her, admires her, her home, her view over the Back Bay, and the wine which she has inherited from her father. Neither he, nor anyone else save the coarse parvenue Mrs Farrinder, ever denies Olive's fineness. The most striking tribute comes from her sister, who otherwise has little patience with Olive's tastes and enterprises, on the evening of the Burrages' great *soirée*: '. . . for she is a lady, poor Olive. You can see that tonight. She is dressed like a book-agent, but she is more distinguished than any one here. Verena, beside her, looks like a walking advertisement' (p. 249). This is of course true, and it is a tiny tragic touch that it should be so.

But the world of comfortable Unitarian propriety that Olive shares with the best Boston families is, rather like that world itself, only the incongruous outward vestment of characteristics far deeper. We can sense the temper of this even in

Olive's social judgements—as for example of the Tarrants, which is more than just mere snobbery, or of the Burrages, which is more than just cultural complacency. She shares with her hardest pilgrim forebears a touch of that firm-souled contempt for mere difficulty and complication, and for the trivialities of the age:

Olive had a standing quarrel with the levity, the good-nature, of the judgements of the day; many of them seemed to her weak to imbecility, losing sight of all measure and standards, lavishing superlatives, delighted to be fooled. The age seemed to her relaxed and demoralized . . . (p. 119)

How close *this* is to Basil Ransom's view, though of course not the concluding clause: 'and I believe she looked to the influx of the great feminine element to make it feel and speak more sharply.' For Olive shares with her ancestors not only their firmness of soul, not only their seriousness and determination in the face of difficulty, but also their fanatical singularity of focus. What in them was an intense preoccupation with election, salvation, grace and righteousness has been transmuted in Olive into this question of the emancipation of women. If there is something bathetic in the descent from terms so religious to terms so social, that is the measure of Olive's difficulty, for she cleaves to her belief with religious fervour. Devotees of a mystical religion may in the face of frustration take refuge in the inscrutability of an invisible God, but the beliefs of social reformers are subject to the caprice of a more present reality.

The ground-note of Olive's nature is just this deeply subjective religious enthusiasm, and if we hear the note as always slightly cracked it is not therefore the less audible. This is so delicately sounded in James's handling of Olive, and yet so pervasive, that it is difficult to isolate for demonstration. Her first extended meeting with Verena has about it the air of a religious experience. She tells Verena that she has had a nervous premonition of an insight's being verified: 'it had filled her all day with nervous agitation so violent as to be painful. She told her that such forebodings were a peculiarity of her



organization, that she didn't know what to make of them, that she had to accept them' (p. 73). Her premonition is, equally, the premonition of evil:

And she mentioned, as another example, the sudden dread that had come to her the evening before in the carriage, after proposing to Ransom to go with her to Miss Birdseye's. This had been as strange as it had been instinctive . . . She couldn't help it; her heart had begun to throb with the conviction that if he crossed that threshold some harm would come of it for her . . . By this time Verena had learned how peculiarly her friend was constituted, how nervous and serious she was, how personal, how exclusive, what a force of will she had, what a concentration of purpose.

But it is in the seventeenth chapter, where Olive attempts to consecrate Verena irrevocably to the faith, and at the same time to preclude her marrying, that we find James's most sustained analysis of the religious core of Olive's nature. 'I hope with all my soul', Olive urges,

'that you won't marry . . . You know what I think—that there is something noble done when one makes a sacrifice for a great good. Priests—when they were real priests—never married, and what you and I dream of doing demands of us a kind of priesthood. It seems to me very poor, when friendship and faith and charity and the most interesting occupation in the world—when such a combination as this doesn't seem, by itself, enough to live for . . . . It came over me—just seeing those young men—how exposed you are; and the idea made me (for the moment) frantic. I see your danger still . . . You must be safe, Verena—you must be saved; but your safety . . . must come from the growth of your perception; from your seeing things, of yourself, sincerely, and with conviction, in the light in which I see them; from your feeling that for your work your freedom is essential, and that there is no freedom for you and me save in religiously not doing what you will often be asked to do—and I never!' (pp. 130-1)

This is a perfect translation of puritan psychology into terms recognizably modern: the fear of nature (for it is not men,