

“*Hawthorne* and Henry James’s (Literary) Reputation”

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In his 1983 essay on James’s *Hawthorne*, John Carlos Rowe noted that “the American reviews of *Hawthorne* were not as negative as James’s correspondence would lead us to believe nor was the ‘provincial storm’ quite as tempestuous as Edel suggests” in his biography of James (88). Nonetheless, it is significant both that James emphasized the negative in his letters and also that in shaping his version of Henry James, Edel followed James without interrogating the discrepancy Rowe points out (if Edel were aware of it at all).

The negotiation itself, then, between James’s perception of his reputation as it was being shaped by the critical response to *Hawthorne* and the responses themselves is at issue both in James’s and, following HJ, in Edel’s shaping of the James literary reputation. Rowe explains James’s negotiation this way: “James’s surprise at the American response seems either the effect of his literary inexperience or, more likely, the half-conscious strategy of the expatriate bent on finding signs of alienation in all seasons, every weather” (88-89). On the other hand, given that James’s letters from Europe to correspondents in the United States during 1869 show a similar strategy of self-presentation, there is reason to argue that James’s response to and thus negotiation with negative criticism, rather than being a product of James’s inexperience or alienation from the United States, was a practiced strategy to build a particularly “American” reputation for himself in New England terms of the day that misfired with a wide audience. Those letters suggest that James’s parents were instrumental in coercing in their son if not the actual behavior of a man of taste, then at least their son’s ability to represent that Boston Brahmin taste and to seek the prestige associated with it. Yet James’s attention to “taste” did not appear first in those 1869 letters.

In 1868, writing on Howells’s *Italian Journeys*, James pointed to the significance of “the qualities which make literature a delightful element in life,--taste and culture and imagination, and the incapacity to be common” in Howells’s prose (“Review of *Italian Journeys*” 479). In so doing, James also indicated his awareness of the importance of showing his allegiance to the kind of literary (and thus cultural) “taste” that aligned him with realism as an “institution,” as Glazener uses the term in *Reading for Realism*, and Brodhead in

The School of Hawthorne (109). As Howells had put it in two years earlier, “the ability to produce valid aesthetic judgments should be considered as ‘at once the attribute and the indication’ of ‘an educated and refined literary taste’” (qtd. in Barrish 20).

Glazener shows that the representation and recognition of “taste” had for some time in New England, at least, done significant cultural work as part of the “ethic of stewardship,” which Glazener describes as “a particular technology for creating power relations among people, in this case mediated by social institutions” (30). It was that ethic of stewardship that shaped James’s *Hawthorne*. But in 1869 that was yet to appear consistently in James as a strategy for living, though it had appeared as a strategy for writing. But not for want of his parents’ trying to instill it in him.

Carol Holly in *Intensely Family* and Alfred Habegger in “New York Monumentalism” have written on the way the James family used shame to coerce behavior. James’s 1869 letters home imply that his parents used shame and threats to cancel their financial support of him, forcing a humiliating return home, to force their son to behave (or at least to represent his behavior) so that his conduct would express their idea of the value that such a European trip should have. These expectations were shaped by the same “taste” James read in Howells’s *Italian Journeys*. James’s parents aimed to develop the “ethic of stewardship” in their son. As a response, a kind of negotiating strategy, James learned how to give his parents what they wanted to see. And in giving them what they wanted and by receiving from them what he wanted, James practiced the style that he would control in Hawthorne. For example, James responded to that family pressure, when he declared to his parents on April 23, 1869, that “Voici cinq jours que je suis sur les chemins—je ne m’en porte que mieux. [For five days now I have been on the road—I only feel the better for it.] I don’t want to bore you with my itinerariness or to inflict a geographical letter, but really I should like to have you know what I have managed to do + to survive. When I say survive I mean revive: I have been well nigh born again in joy and strength.” James followed those remarks with 7 pages in which he described where he had been, what he had seen and articulated the value of those travels in intellectual and physical terms. James dramatizes that value in his French and in his stress on being revived, even reborn. He also practices the pose of the cultural connoisseur who makes sweeping judgments such as, in the same letter, “On Wednesday, we left Monmouth in a posting-carriage for Raglan Castle (8 miles)—a ruin as famous here as Tintern + still more beautiful. It is immense in size + wonderfully complete + oh, tangled over with such a mad wilderness of ivy as to make the green quite

smother the grey.” James tells his parents that he is corresponding with Charles Eliot Norton, whom he will see. The frequency with which James saw the Nortons during that 1869 trip and eventually cultivated that relationship to his professional advantage proved the power of James’s particular representation of himself by helping James to establish himself professionally within that particular culture of Boston “taste.” It was Norton who, as Brodhead writes, “administered the admission to literary candidacy to James” (*School of Hawthorne* 108). In addition, James’s report of his fraternization with Norton put him in the company of one James’s parents would like their son to learn from.

Early in 1869, before James understood fully what would earn prestige from his parents, James proposed an expensive trip to the North. His parents decided that that trip was neither valuable nor tasteful touring and seem to have threatened to cut off their son’s funding, forcing a humiliating return to Cambridge. Thus Henry James puns to his sister in his April 16, 1869, letter, on “back” as return and as the back of his body, which he is rehabilitating in Europe: “I spoke to Willy of a fancifully projected tour in the North; but it was a passing vision + I have given it up—for various reasons. This place [Great Malvern] has put me into such a state that I am by no means sure I could stand it (tho’ probably I could) + I deem the expense under the circumstances justifiable only on the ground of a certain benefit. It detracts from one’s pleasure, moreover, to travel sightseeing in a timorous tentative manner, preoccupied by a perpetual Back!”

It is significant that James had introduced the idea of a 2-3 week excursion to, as he wrote William on April 8, “see + know the land,” by citing Norton’s authority. Not only would the trip take James away from centers of both civilization and physical rehabilitation, but it would cost, James estimated, “sixty pounds.” Such an expensive and, in terms of developing his taste and position of cultural stewardship, questionable three weeks’ journey required authorization, James must have known, from someone with great status and prestige, like Norton. Thus he pitches the trip to his parents as one Norton recommends.

Most of all, James’s 1869 letters show him seeking and finally learning to earn intellectual prestige from his particular way of presenting his subject and thus of presenting himself. That self-presentation in the 1869 letters and more significantly in *Hawthorne* followed the tradition of the ethic of stewardship. By representing himself to his parents as one whose European activities in 1869 brought a particular type of experiential value, James gained status, prestige, with his parents, who then continued to fund his trip. The

prestige of tasteful cultural stewardship as James represented it typifies James's efforts ten years later in *Hawthorne*.

As a part of his strategy for authorizing the diction and rhetoric of taste and stewardship, James had to show that he knew and avoided or disdained—as he would later in *Hawthorne*—what was of little or limited value. On April 26 he wrote to William (and via William, who would read most of his brother's letters aloud to the family, to his parents) that “I came hither [Oxford] from Leamington early this mornng., after a decidedly dull 3 days in the latter place.[. . .] Warwick Castle is simply a showy modern house with nothing to interest save a lot of admirable portraits, wh. I couldn't look at [. . .]. [. . .] These English Abbeys have quite gone to my head. They are quite the greatest works of art I've ever seen. [. . .] The land is one teeming garden.[. . .] But it's in its way the last word of human toil.” Those declarations are followed by 12 full pages in which James defines the value of his impressions. Clearly, James works to show the benefits of his efforts in a way his parents prefer.

By December 27, 1869, from Rome, he could write to William a letter that gushed “taste” and practiced the judgements and gestures of cultural stewardship never again would James forget when or how to write a “tasteful” letter. For example, “But enfin this energy—positiveness—courage—call it what you will—is a simple fundamental primordial quality in the supremely superior genius. Alone it makes the real man of action in art + disjoins him effectually from the critic. I felt this morning irresistibly how that M. Angelo's greatness lay above all in the fact that he was this man of action—the greatest almost, considering the temptation he had to be otherwise—considering how his imagination embarrassed + charmed + bewildered him—the greatest perhaps, I say, that the race has produced.” Here James's performance rises to parental expectations. He visits museums and churches, rather than touring to see the land. Most important, he makes the kinds of distinctions and discriminations and judgments one would expect from a man of taste, a steward of culture.

As Phillip Barrish defines the term, intellectual prestige or status or distinction “depends on the ineffable aura attached to ‘cultivation,’ ‘refinement,’ and, most of all, ‘taste’” (6). Crucial to Barrish's formulation of “taste” is the idea that it is a “mode of relation that accrues cultural prestige to itself” (32). Glazener, before Barrish, outlined “how a taste for realism, that supposedly most inclusive of literary

movements, could become a mark of distinction” (49). Barrish theorizes that distinction and provides a way to see that what James worked comprehensively to show in *Hawthorne*, he began to control so that it would benefit his life in his 1869 letters.

In *Hawthorne* James works to achieve prestige by rewriting Hawthorne’s reputation through the critical biography and in so doing by representing Hawthorne’s “real” value. As one reviewer wrote “Mr. James’s little book [. . .] is wonderfully subtle, acute, penetrating, and discriminating—it may be pronounced, we think, on the whole, the finest piece of purely literary criticism that American literature contains.” Yet, for this reviewer, *Hawthorne* was also, “over-elaborate” and thus obscures Hawthorne the man under “a mass of minute distinctions” (qtd. Ruland 98). In the 1869 letters that work for him, James satisfies his parents by writing cultural biography, as it were, and in so doing represents the “real” value of what he sees to an audience who rewarded elaboration and fine distinctions with prestige and money. In *Hawthorne*, however, James might have misjudged his audience and, in so doing, mistaken his strategy for availing himself to their assignment of his prestige.

When James writes of Hawthorne that “The twelve years that followed were not the happiest or most brilliant phase of Hawthorne’s life; they strike me, indeed, as having had an altogether peculiar dreariness” (20), he writes out of the same impulse to emphasize the cosmopolitan complexity of his own life and to obscure interests that were not of a piece with that persona that shaped the successful 1869 letters to his parents. James’s parents, after all, sent their son to Europe so that he could learn a way to attain a privileged place in culture that could authorize him to write passages such as the following from *Hawthorne*: “literature and the arts have always been held in extreme honour in the American world, and those who practice them are received on easier terms than in other countries. If the tone of the American world is in some respects provincial, it is in none more so than in this matter of the exaggerated homage rendered to authorship” (24). James here represents Hawthorne’s United States with language, tone, attitude, that mark him as a cultural steward, worthy of prestige, because he writes with a realist’s command of his subject, with a realist’s objectivity, as it were.

[The rhetoric of cultural mastery, the implied (or even explicit) complexity of his life that enabled James to describe those simpler ones, the aggressive and self-conscious assertion of his own position alternating with a softer and more generous stance—nearly an aggressive and then passive pattern in relation to

his subject, which itself casts him in the arbiter's role, are all typical in the good son letters almost as a formula. The following is typical of that pattern of attack and then retreat following the definition/deconstruction of his subject. Writes James of Bowdoin College of Hawthorne's day:

I say it was not impressive, but I immediately remember that impressions depend upon the minds receiving them; and that to a group of simple New England lads, upwards of sixty years ago, the halls and groves of Bowdoin, neither dense nor lofty though they can have been, may have seemed replete with Academic stateliness. It was a homely, simple, frugal, "country college," of the old-fashioned American stamp; exerting within its limits a civilizing influence, working, amid the forests and the lakes, the loghouses and the clearings, toward the amenities and humanities and other collegiate graces, and offering a very sufficient education to future lawyers, merchants, clergymen, politicians, and editors, of the very active and knowledge-loving community that supported it. (15)]

James's July 10, 1869, letter to Charles Eliot Norton is significant in James's representation of the taste that would motivate *Hawthorne*, the relative lack of critical success of which would, following his sense that he had mastered the rhetoric of cultural stewardship, surprise him. The letter's opening, "My dear Charles," is important for the intimacy James freely expresses with Norton. But it's important too, in relation to what James says about American society during Hawthorne's life, that he would make similar frank charges, this time in describing Germans. The key here is the rhetoric of condescension that troubled readers of James's *Hawthorne* but was evidently acceptable to Norton. Important too are James's efforts to make fine discriminations at the end of the following passage and James's use of the third person, as if he were writing for a public, not a single person. Writes James:

I find here a vast rough-+ tumble sort of hotel, swarming with Germans + conducted on strictly German principles—suggesting, too, many reflections on German idioyncrasis—notably one to the effect that the excellent creatures are the very ugliest members of the European family. Such men—such women—such children! But we will drop the painful theme.—Even the comparatively good-looking ones suffer from the ugliness of the others + are injured by the hideous contagion. I look up from my writing + see a young girl sitting

alone; she is decently pretty + graceful: suddenly her party comes in—half a dozen terrible specimens--+ fling over her the baleful mantle of their plainness. But in spite of their ugliness I fancy they have their points + that a certain amount of satisfaction is to be obtained in their society. They are homely but not vulgar + simple but not shabby.

The famous catalog of absences in American life from *Hawthorne* is another example of the point that what worked for those close to him in the letters didn't always translate to a wider audience. On May 31, 1869, James wrote to Charles Eliot Norton that “Geneva is extremely pretty, but rather vacuous. One feels rather sold, living in a European town which has so few distinctively European resources:—no Antwerp spire—no Rubenses—no museum, churches, opera nor theatre.—nothing but the sense of the Alps in the distance + Calvinism in the past.” Perhaps it would be worth thinking about such catalog of absences as a central trope of the rhetoric of cultural stewardship. Michael Anesko notes in *Letters, Fictions, Lives* that “When James composed his famous catalogue of the items of high civilization missing from the texture of American life, it may well be that he had Howells’s work rather than Hawthorne’s in mind, for in *Their Wedding Journey* Howells anticipates James’s long string of negatives” (16). Yet if *Their Wedding Journey* (1871) preceded *Hawthorne* (1879), then James’s letter to Norton (1869), in which James describes a string of absences in Geneva, suggests to me that such strings could have been a part of the way Howells, Norton, James, and perhaps others engaged in the rhetoric of cultural stewardship represented themselves to each other, at least.

James’s strategy in *Hawthorne* was predicted in the early letters that he used to represent himself as the good son. In *Hawthorne* he works to represent himself as the good cultural steward. Thus James’s reaction to negative reviews can be understood, at least in part, as his reactions to an incompletely successful strategy at self-representation.

James’s 1869 letters from Europe are significant for what they reveal about the development of a self-representation that James made famous (and that made James famous) in the really revolutionary *Hawthorne*. Yet I want to suggest that letters written that year are significant for the way they show the formation of other attitudes and strategies too as James begins to achieve an identity as a literary person in the Boston tradition. And if James saw *Hawthorne* as a failure of that strategy, perhaps *Hawthorne* marks a shift in James away from that identity, or at least away from that strategy for attaining that prestige, as well.

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68—re: Emerson: “One envies, even, I will not say the illusions, of that keenly sentient period, but the convictions and interests—the moral passion.”

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That diction of value, an important element of representing the ethic of stewardship, would play a central role in *Hawthorne*. Glazener describes the ethic of stewardship thus:

The ethic or discipline of stewardship, then, was part of a platform by which the Boston bourgeoisie—and in particular the Brahmins—justified, preserved, and understood their concentrated wealth, their institutionalized influence, and their cultural hegemony. And it was within this matrix of philanthropic relations that Boston institutions of high culture, which included Harvard University and the *Atlantic Monthly*, took on their characteristic forms. (32)