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An American Antigone: Henry James's *Washington Square*

1. The Narrative Antagonized

Freud was famously critical of America.¹ Peter Gay, a renowned historian and Freud's biographer, observes that Freud's persistent unease about America amounted to a symptom—one that the founder of psychoanalysis failed to address. With one notable exception: while visiting the States in 1909, Freud was introduced to William James and was impressed by James's apparent indifference to death. The two men were talking about psychoanalysis when James was suddenly seized with an attack of angina; he refused to make much of it, however, and soon resumed the conversation, as if to suggest that his interest in the life of the mind was equal to death (see Gay 211). Tellingly, Freud's facing his own death was structured in similar terms, which is all the more symptomatic in view of the fact that, in the 1920s, Freud introduced the death drive (*der Todestrieb*) as a lynchpin to the conceptual grid of psychoanalysis, to then bring about the reconstitution of the method.

While this provides a passageway to understanding the complexity of America for psychoanalysis, it is also a position from which to approach the Jamesian America, shaped as it was by both William and Henry James. The two brothers shared an interest in the life of the mind where it stood to reconstitute philosophy, psychology, and fiction alike and, with it, the America of their intellectual legacy. Although each was a preeminent author in his own right, this is why they present an assemblage, with the Jamesian America to be accessed where their individual intellectual projects emerge as a network of metonymic relationships.

Henry James's *Washington Square* (1880) labors as a specimen story of this America. True, the same seems to apply to most Henry James narratives, because most take America as their narrative and intellectual point of departure (to then suffer deconstruction). However, there is an aspect to *Washington Square* which distinguishes this novel or novella, and justifies the claim to its being the specimen story of the Jamesian America. Namely, Henry James refused to consider it for republication in *The New York Edition* (1907–1909), suggesting that he wanted *Washington Square* ignored and repressed, even erased, from what he could acknowledge as his literary

¹ Research for this essay was supported in part by the Croatian Science Foundation.

² „For reasons of taste, and of space, and with a mixture of relish and regret, James selected for the blight of exclusion seven novels – *Watch and Ward*, *The Europeans*, *Washington Square*, *Confidence*, *The Bostonians*, *The Other House*, and *The Sacred Fount*“ (Horne 211).

legacy.² As a result, *Washington Square* remained unaccompanied by a preface like the ones James wrote for his other works, for their inclusion in *The New York Edition*. Moreover, as this prefatory material provided the groundwork for what was to emerge as narratology later in the century, *Washington Square* remained exempt also from the birth of modern narrative theory. In other words, *Washington Square* was to Henry James, and to modern narrative theory, what America was to Freud: a configuration treated with unease and contempt, shunned from reflection in a system based in reflection.

Interestingly, the story of *Washington Square* reflects precisely the conditions of its later treatment by James, as if preempting and exhausting the position, external to itself, where James establishes narrative authority. The story focuses on the battle of the minds of Doctor Sloper and his daughter Catherine, with Catherine being to her widowed father what *Washington Square* was to James (and what America was to Freud). The battle begins when Morris Townsend, who returns to New York after a long sojourn in Europe, starts courting Catherine, a timid heiress excessively devoted to her father. Both her father and the narrator perceive Catherine as so plain and dull that the only object worth pursuing about her is her fortune. Appraising Morris as but a mercenary, Doctor Sloper threatens Catherine with disinheritance should she marry Morris. Catherine's problem is that she refuses to renounce either of the two men, a problem complicated by the fact that Morris depends on her never renouncing her father, because that would equal her renouncing half the inheritance and leave her only the money from her dead mother's side. Morris makes up for the imbalance in power by exerting from Catherine the promise that she will never break their engagement: the promise he readily breaks as soon as he learns that Austin Sloper values his daughter as little as Morris himself does and will coldly disinherit her in the event of a disobedient marriage. This is also how Morris is exposed as but the story's MacGuffin: empty in himself, he does not provide Catherine with an autonomous object of desire and pursuit but serves chiefly to amplify her father's original claim to that position.³

Morris reciprocates Shoshana Felman's reading of Molière's *Don Juan*: his principle is that of repetition, anaphor, and anaphora, in the world where father and the law reside in the promise of metaphor (see Felman 2003: 24). Indeed, if *Don Juan* enters, repeatedly, new liaisons and new promises, Morris Townsend works for

³ A MacGuffin is a narrative device used widely by Alfred Hitchcock. In itself, it is "nothing at all, an empty place, a pure pretext whose sole role is to set the story in motion" (Žižek 1992: 6–7.) MacGuffins "are both at the core of the action and completely irrelevant; the highest degree of meaning—what everybody is after—coincides with an absence of meaning" (Dolar 45). Hitchcock himself points out that "the logicians are wrong in trying to figure out the truth of a MacGuffin, since it's beside the point. The only thing that really matters is that, in the picture the plans, documents, or secrets must seem to be of vital importance to the characters. To me, the narrator, they're of no importance whatever" (Truffaut and Scott 138). J. Hillis Miller notes a similar emptiness about Morris when he remarks that "[t]he Morris Townsend she [Catherine] fell in love with turns out to be non-existent" (78).

James by reentering the story decades later, after Doctor Sloper's death, assuming that the father's death grants him a new entry. Yet his reentry merely demonstrates that Catherine's response to him repeats the structure of her response to her father's final injunction, in the world where anaphora clearly cannot supersede the significance of metaphor. Namely, before his death, Doctor Sloper demands that Catherine promise never to marry Morris, should he happen to reemerge and start courting her again, after his death. Catherine refuses to make that promise (even though both she and the narrator know by now that she will not reconsider Morris), which in turn secures her disinheritance, a fact she eventually relishes. Similarly, in the end, she refuses to promise anything to Morris and dismisses him. What Morris ultimately demonstrates is that he cannot supersede the father, before or after the father's death, as if death somehow contains both the before and the after of fathers. Catherine, on the other hand, retreats irrevocably into the house on Washington Square, "for life, as it were" (2003: 220), these being the concluding words of the novel.

Oddly, perhaps, this is how Catherine reenacts, from within James, the script of *Antigone*: she ends up emphatically unmarried and literally buried alive, demanding that home be related to tomb and vice versa. Like *Antigone*, she does not merely interrupt the structures of kinship and the law of the generation; rather, she replaces these with life and narrative understood on chthonic terms. Moreover, Catherine's relation to Morris in the end corresponds to *Antigone's* relation to Polynices: it is not Morris who is significant to Catherine as much as the burial of his remains, a structured grieving made impossible by the figure of authority. (Indeed, Judith Butler describes *Antigone* as "devoted to an impossible and death-bent incestuous love of her brother." According to George Steiner, even if incest was irrelevant to Sophocles's conception of *Antigone*, the "magic" and the "seriousness" associated with this issue in the nineteenth century "must be grasped if we are to make sense of the special lustre of *Antigone* in nineteenth-century feeling.")⁴ Also, Catherine demands that the chthonic be understood in relation to melancholia: just as *Antigone's* decision to be buried alive proceeds from excessive mourning, Catherine's retreat in the end seems but the climax of her melancholia—of the injury to which she has ultimately been reduced by her father and by Morris. Finally, like *Antigone*, Catherine is cursed with a linguistic insufficiency that stands in the way of her speaking to the figures of authority on an equal footing. With *Antigone*, this has been variously described in terms of stammering, repetition, tautology, and negations (which "riddle her speech"); with Catherine, as "her confounded little dry manner," which Judith Butler situates at "the

⁴ See Butler 2000: 6, Steiner 14. According to Claude Lévi-Strauss, the Oedipus-related narratives cohere around one structuring opposition, that of overrating kinship (and sexual reproduction) and underrating kinship (in favor of life explained around the chthonic principle). See Lévi-Strauss 215, 230. It is in this sense that *Antigone's* final act should be understood in chthonic terms, even if it proceeds from the actions implicated in overrating kinship (her insistence on the burial rites for the dead brother against the authority of the state). See also Lévi-Strauss 214. Judith Butler notes that "*Antigone* cites the chthonic gods as her authority" (2000: 51).

limits of language” and “the limits of the sayable.”⁵ The assemblage thus forming in *Washington Square* outlines a peculiar interpretive situation: the chthonic structures and melancholia liaise in James’s language in the positions where metaphor and authority are rejected or denied, and where anaphora is exposed as inoperative, in favor of metonymy as the figural logic at a remove equal from both.

This is also how Catherine imposes the Oedipus script on her father. Initially, she is the daughter whose exclusive, self-demeaning loyalty serves only to show him off as father first and foremost: to show off fatherhood as pure authority.⁶ There is another hint that incest is instrumental to this structure: Catherine is meant to replace, for her father, his beautiful and eloquent wife Catherine, who died in childbirth, as well as their dead firstborn son, Catherine’s brother. James insists on the importance of naming: “She had been named, as a matter of course, after her poor mother, and even in her most diminutive babyhood the Doctor never called her anything but Catherine” (2003: 30). When Catherine turns out to have succeeded her mother in name only, this is in fact only too logical, because it is only as such that she can provide the story with the narrative slot traversed, racked, and haunted by the liaising fictions of wife, mother, daughter, and sister—fictions constituent to Austin Sloper’s Oedipal fatherhood precisely insofar as they both invoke incest and keep it safely at bay.⁷ The same perverse logic demands that Catherine appears at her most loyal to her father at the moment when she refuses to obey him and make the promise he wants, because it is only then that she embraces language on his terms: she adopts the language of authority for the first time when she refuses to make a pledge to that authority.⁸ This moment is critical for the Antigone script in James. On the one hand, as this is also the moment when Austin Sloper is shown not to know all or enough, he, like Oedipus, turns out to be blinding himself, exactly when he can no longer contain the terms of

⁵ See Honig 2013: 97, Butler 2000: 68, James 2003: 219, Butler 2003: 208. Butler’s perspective on Catherine’s language, in 2003, corresponds in many ways to her position on Antigone’s speech, in 2000. Butler, however, does not acknowledge or explore the affinity of her arguments on Sophocles and James, so that her own language suffers, to an extent, the stammering and the repetition which riddle the speech of Antigone, and of James’s Catherine. It is as if, by taking a critical interest in *Washington Square* soon after completing a book on Antigone, Butler has carved herself a niche where she can enact Antigone for and from within critical theory, and for and from within America.

⁶ Freud called his loyal daughter Anna his Antigone. See Gay 442.

⁷ William Wyler makes brilliant use of this in *The Heiress* (1949), a Hollywood adaptation of *Washington Square*. Wyler rearranged the ending, so that Morris (Montgomery Clift), instead of being drily sent off at the end, returns to the house once again, beating frantically at the door and yelling “Catherine!” This is a reference to a similar scene in Emily Brontë’s *Wuthering Heights*, which Wyler had adapted into a Hollywood melodrama in 1939, so that the two Victorian Catherines are brought together, now from within classical Hollywood. An uncanny kinship is exposed: in both narratives Catherine is the name freely circulated between mothers and daughters in order to facilitate (near)incestuous networks.

⁸ I am bringing up perversion here also in connection with Lacan’s use of it, who relates perversion to *père-version*, and therefore to fatherhood, and perceives it as conditional to/of interpretation (45). See also Tardits 123, 155.

narrative knowledge. On the other hand, by engaging the language of pure authority in the act of refusing to make a pledge to that authority, Catherine assigns to Austin Sloper the role of Creon, too. As a result, Oedipus and Creon come to occupy the same narrative slot in James, with an important suggestion that an American Antigone cannot resolve her Oedipal issues without addressing those of the state. True, Sophocles's Antigone is structured around a similar position, bringing together the concerns of kinship and the concerns of the state. The story of *Washington Square* is different, however, in that it merges Oedipus and Creon into a single figure, as if to signal that its Antigone and her America depend on the insight that authority resides where it departs from any one single figure or position—that it resides in the departure itself, where death and the logic of metaphor join hands.⁹

This is relevant for the understanding of James's later fiction, too, because Austin Sloper is introduced into the narrative as a precursor to James's famed *reflectors*: he is insistently hailed as the cusp of reflection, "an observer, even a philosopher" (2003: 28). Also, he is the best physician in New York, so that the medical conditions he is asked to treat tend to come across as mind games, structures of consciousness. There is a reduction to consciousness and reflection about Austin Sloper that seems to be prefiguring James's own future work, but here with a proviso that there remains something of pathology and of the clinical to do with reflection thus brought into the world: a chthonic residue that this reflection can acknowledge only as pathology and as the clinical. Accordingly, when Catherine, whom her father considers dull, finally presents herself as a respectable problem inviting reflection, she comes to occupy the place Doctor Sloper assigns to pathology: instead of bequeathing his money to a now problematic her, he decides to divide it "into seven unequal parts, which he left, as endowments, to as many different hospitals and schools of medicine, in various cities of the Union" (2003: 207–208). This is not to suggest the removal of Catherine from her father's vision of legacy; rather, it suggests that the clinical is metonymic to Catherine, that Catherine to Austin has become pathological, so that leaving his money to hospitals and schools of medicine secures in fact Austin's continued clinical work on the likes of Catherine, now from within his death.¹⁰

There are hints in the text that this is consistent with what was only to emerge as psychoanalysis. Austin "was to a certain extent what is called a ladies' doctor" (2003: 32), known for explaining "matters rather more minutely than might seem of use to the patient" (2003: 27). Also, as if adumbrating Freud's, Sloper's "private opinion of

⁹ James explicitly invokes Antigone in *The Bostonians* (1885–1886). In a note he wrote for *The Bostonians* in April 1883, James claims that his "subject is very national, very typical. I wished to write a very American tale, a tale very characteristic of our social conditions, and I asked myself what was the most salient and peculiar point in our social life. The answer was: the situation of women, the decline of the sentiment of sex, the agitation on their behalf" (1987: 20).

¹⁰ There is a signal in the text, almost a hitch, indicating that metonymy best captures the relation of Catherine and the clinical: instead of disinheriting Catherine completely, Austin Sloper leaves her one fifth of the intended sum (James 2003: 207).

the more complicated sex was not exalted": "[h]e regarded its complications as more curious than edifying" (2003: 32). Finally, Doctor Sloper falls terminally ill after "[d]riving out to Bloomingdale one April day to see a patient of unsound mind, who was confined in a private asylum for the insane, and whose family greatly desired a medical opinion from an eminent source" (2003: 207). Lauren Berlant calls him "a *Doktor-Vater*" (440), thus patently suggesting that he is proto-Freudian, not least where his reflection, like Freud's, participates in the structures of Oedipal fatherhood. In turn, this implies that James's manipulation of narrative into reflection is Oedipal in character, leaving in its wake a chthonic debris sedimenting both in James's Catherine and in Freud's America.¹¹

2. The States of Exception

The event of Austin Sloper's death, therefore, is not how the narrative puts an end to his authority. Rather, dying is how he becomes fully reductive to his last will, with his authority finally forever exempted from the contingencies of Catherine's metonymic language and chthonic eroticism, now as the authority effective as pure form, pure repetition. Put differently, it is as death or dying that Austin makes good on his narrative promise; it is only by dying that he can fully expose law and legacy as the format that defines him, also as the format that defines fatherhood. Incidentally, it is by explaining death where it yields pure form and pure repetition that Freud introduces the death drive, in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, thereby snatching death in psychoanalysis away from the event and into a concept. This is exactly what happens in *Washington Square*: Austin Sloper designates the snatching away of death from the event into a concept, which is also how paternal authority comes to reside in form and repetition. The story suggests as much when it flaunts legacy, constantly, as the lever which is to keep in check both Catherine's eroticism and the appetites of her suitor, Morris Townsend. Catherine is instrumental to this exposure as a dull daughter: introduced by the narrator as emphatically dull, she enters the novel by blocking all libidinal investments into herself on the part of her father (and of the narrator), until legacy has been exposed to be the only bond structural to fatherhood. After all, Catherine's very name, reducible to legacy, points ultimately to the fact that only the name inherits, because the name is "destined to survive me [and] in this way it announces my death" (Derrida 1992: 432).¹² Catherine thus serves to mobilize fatherhood at its purest and into the void—into fatherhood as metaphysics. Of course: by excluding *Washington Square* from *The New York Edition*, where *The New York Edition* constitutes his literary legacy (literature as legacy?), James assumes

¹¹ Felman, too, hints at the affinity of James's narration and psychoanalysis, when she observes that James and Freud share an understanding of the joke as a structure of worry (1993: 97).

¹² That James's narrative coheres around this maneuver is reflected in the title adopted by Ruth and Augustus Goetz for their 1947 play based on *Washington Square*. They chose *The Heiress* as the title for the play, the name retained by William Wyler for the Hollywood melodrama he adapted from the play and from James.

the position of Austin Sloper, who disinherits Catherine. He thereby confirms not merely the convergence of authorship and authority, but the convergence of author with form and the repetition of the Freudian death drive. Ironically, James as author is thus preempted by the very narrative which he did his best to exclude from his literary testament, just as Freud's America seems to have preempted Freud's finding of the death drive.¹³

Both to her father and to James Catherine remains the figure that they admit into their world only in order to appreciate the crisis she constitutes for them. In fact, Catherine organizes for them a state of exception, much as Giorgio Agamben describes it, in which she takes on the role of *homo sacer*. According to Agamben, *homo sacer* is a figure of "archaic Roman law, in which human life is included in the juridical order . . . solely in the form of its exclusion (that is, of its capacity to be killed)"; hence *homo sacer* exemplifies bare life, which "may be killed and yet not sacrificed" (1998: 8). Of course, Agamben's Roman example reads also as an inflection of the Antigone story, because Sophocles's *Antigone* raises the same question, now as the question structural to Greek democracy.¹⁴ To be sure, Catherine does not seem to be included in the narrative order of *Washington Square*, judicial as it is, solely for her capacity to be killed, even though the relation that Austin Sloper establishes at the end between Catherine and pathology does mark her out for death wish. Also, there is a curious episode when Catherine registers that her father is contemplating her murder, during their European tour, hardly for punishment and certainly not as sacrifice, but rather in an attempt to demonstrate that her obstinacy is merely an aspect of her dullness. Conveniently, the episode is staged in the Alps, as if to suggest that the chthonic mass of the Alps is a fitting metonymic cradle to receive Catherine, dull or obstinate, dead or alive. Significantly, the doctor eventually decides not to go through with the killing, as if Catherine's life were at that moment revealed to be so bare that the taking of that life and the not taking of it would fail to make a difference.

Agamben cites the twentieth-century concentration camps as paradigmatic of bare life and the state of exception in modernity. The Alpine episode in *Washington Square* suggests a turn of the screw in this paradigm, because Catherine emerges as bare life defined not just by its exclusion from the law, but also by its metonymic ties to the habitat. To Catherine's father, hers emerges as the life that fails to cohere meaningfully around the opposition to death (so that murder, which is constituent to *homo sacer*, can no longer play a decisive role), precisely because it is bare and therefore contingent on chthonic folds and surfaces which yield no self-serving inside. In other words, that which is bare, as Catherine's life appears to be, demands to be understood as that to which metonymy is critical and constituent; this is also to say that Catherine

¹³ It is with this in mind that one should consider the claim (quite common in studies of James) that "the most intense identification possible" persists "between [the] author's childhood self and [the] heroine" of *Washington Square* (Flannery 17).

¹⁴ See also Butler 2000: 81.

fails to cohere from within, or around an inside.¹⁵ Therefore, the habitat to which she relates metonymically is neither vacancy (vacancy denoting a place that is excepted or exceptable . . .) nor the home, which Agamben understands in the analogy with the Aristotelian *oikos*, where life is enclosed and “merely reproductive” (1998: 2), and which stands to be renegotiated in the *polis* as (bio)political. True, Catherine persists for the narrative in the metonymy she forges with the house in Washington Square, which is her father’s house, so that she does seem locked in the script of the *oikos*, as daughter, if not as mother. Still, she maintains this metonymic habitation by outliving her father at a remove from his last will, so that the house in Washington Square signifies in the end an obliteration of the father, as a place where reproduction is cancelled so that life can be fully bared. In turn, this is how James preempts that which Agamben will describe as bare life, because—compared to James—the Agambenian bare life shows as a function of paternalism, at the expense of the configurations based in the chthonic, the melancholy, and the metonymic. This is also how metonymy in *Washington Square* comes to supplant metaphor. That the horror or miracle of life thus bared is James’s true interest in the story of *Washington Square* can be evinced from the closure of the text: James concludes the novel with the image of Catherine who has resigned herself to inhabiting the fatherless house “for life, as it were” (2003: 220).

The narrative insists on this position: while Austin Sloper is shown relocating around New York, sensitive to the city’s mutating fashions and its sense of history (the city’s sense of itself as historical), Catherine lives on in the house in Washington Square, as if to metonymize New York back to its American condition. I am referring here to the America instrumental to Agamben when he explains the state of exception. Following Carl Schmitt, Agamben argues that “the link between localization and ordering constitutive of the *nomos* of the earth always implies a zone that is excluded from law and that takes the shape of a ‘free and juridically empty space’ in which the sovereign power no longer knows the limits fixed by the *nomos* as the territorial order” (1998: 36). In the classical epoch of the *ius publicum Europaeum*, continues Agamben, “this zone corresponded with the New World, which was identified with the state of nature in which everything is possible”; he then quotes from Locke, that “[i]n the beginning, all the world was America” (ibid.).

To be sure, Catherine’s America does not designate the zone identified with the state of nature in which everything is possible. However, the metonymicity of this America does point to an interesting inflection in Locke, and—by extension—in Agamben, where America signifies a political beginning that is not pre-conceived in terms of law or codification. This, then, is also how to understand political modernity, whose symbolic space is radically opened precisely by the event of the American Revolution and the shift from royal to popular sovereignty. Immanent to this shift was the

¹⁵ When Freud introduces the death drive, he invents an inside to go with it, so that the death drive becomes inseparable from organizing an irreducible, voiding interior within a more general topology of psychoanalysis. This new topology, predicated on the death drive, can be observed for instance in “The Economic Problem of Masochism.”

crisis of legitimacy to do with the fact that the American republic was founded at a remove from divine authorization (implicit in the figure of a monarch), thus promoting authorization itself as fundamentally contractual, even an-archic in character.¹⁶

That this problematic is constituent to James's text can be deduced from its title, *Washington Square*. The text takes its name from the public place in New York dedicated to the memory of George Washington, one of the Founding Fathers; this is how the issue of fatherhood and paternalism again comes into play, now as the issue formative to America. However, given that the founding of the United States of America was premised on a deconstruction of paternalist authorization "from above," the Founding Fathers inaugurated in fact a structural crisis of fatherhood, just as they exposed the act of founding as critical in character. That this crisis entails a distrust of representation based in metaphor can be inferred from a commentary by Jacques Rancière, who points out that "[o]riginally representation was the exact contrary of democracy" (53). "None ignored this at the time of the French and American revolutions," says Rancière, adding that "[t]he Founding Fathers and a number of their French emulators saw in it precisely the means for the elite to exercise power *de facto*, and to do so in the name of the people that representation is obliged to recognize but that could not exercise power without ruining the very principle of government" (*ibid.*).

It is symptomatic that Austin Sloper enters the narrative as the father to Catherine only inasmuch as he assumes also the spirit of the Founding Fathers. The novel is set, explicitly, in the first half of the 19th century, "more particularly during the latter part of it," says James: "In those days in New York there were still a few altar fires flickering in the temple of Republican simplicity, and Dr. Sloper would have been glad to see his daughter present herself, with a classic grace, as a priestess of this mild faith" (2003: 27, 38). Catherine by extension assumes a relation to her father, and to the narrative, by becoming—or not—representative of America; this is why her final transformation of the house on Washington Square into Antigone's crypt signals a narrative reconstitution of American republicanism into a chthonic script. The narrative responds to this America by itself assuming the configurations characteristic of Catherine: while its father-dominated beginning is markedly historical, historicized and garnered with ante-bellum minutiae, its climax is organized around Catherine's melancholy breakdown, and structured as a massive near-ellipsis that amounts to a narrative stutter and engulfs decades of American history, mostly the 1850s and the 1860s.

¹⁶ See Arendt, Derrida (2002), and Honig (1991) on the crisis of authorization invoked by the American Revolution and the founding of the republic. Carl Schmitt (2006) suggests that the rupture in divine authorization was occasioned already by the Reformation; Schmitt's reading of *Hamlet* depends largely on this proposition, just as the political theory of his argument depends on approaching *Hamlet* as literature. Honig argues that Schmitt's analysis of *Hamlet* applies to *Antigone*, and speaks of the "Hamletization" of Antigone, because both entail "the transformation of the figure of the avenger into a reflective, self-conscious melancholic" (2013: 147). Interestingly, Agamben makes a cursory reference to Antigone when he analyzes revolutions alongside the state of exception, and addresses her as the figure of the ancient *laus* (2005: 28).

When Catherine breaks down, so does the narration, assuming for itself the language of melancholia. Symptomatically, the decades thus engulfed include the years of the Civil War, with the implication that the Civil War should be understood in terms of a melancholy breakdown—in terms of a historical stutter that disrupts irrevocably the articulation of American republicanism. It is at this point that the narration itself is Antigonized, Antigonizing in turn the structure of American history.

3. The Novel Between Legacy and Constitution

Doctor Sloper's fantasy of temples, flames, and priestesses evokes a picture of classical Rome, and it was to classical Rome that early American republicanism resorted in its search for legitimacy at a remove from the divine authorization of European monarchs. (Hannah Arendt insists on the preeminence of Roman thought in the ideology of the Founding Fathers. Hence the added value of *homo sacer*, with its Roman resonance, specifically to America and to the American ideation of exceptionalism.) Yet Austin Sloper's republicanism is immersed in religious imagery, with an emphasis on what about this imagery is institutional; as a result, his republicanism remains steeped in the religious figures of classical Rome, particularly those that were to adumbrate the paternalism of Christianity in the positions where Roman religion ended up cultivating ever more intense structures of authority.¹⁷ Conversely, the America of the Founding Fathers, especially Jefferson's America, reflects Roman philosophy rather than religion. Thomas Jefferson was deeply influenced by Epicureanism, especially by Lucretius, whose account of atomism introduced the positions where metaphysics is challenged and, with it, the supremacy of the metaphoric principle, as well as the imaginary of paternalism.¹⁸ This is also why the Jeffersonian America could not espouse legacy as its constituent feature, as that would have reintroduced into the American ideology the very paternalism that had been banished from it: precisely the condition of the James narrative, which revolves around the issue of inheritance.¹⁹

If this is to say that Austin Sloper fails as an American where he enacts his values and his mind by means of legacy, it is also to say that the narrator fails to capture

¹⁷ See Veyne (211) about Roman religion, which, unlike Judeo-Christianity, had not been based in paternalism but in contractuality, yet whose concept of deity evolved over time towards the structures of government and sovereignty that began "to prefigure the Christian relation to God" (218). See Sellers about the impact of the Roman Republic on the French and American Revolutions.

¹⁸ Stephen Greenblatt specifies that Jefferson "owned at least five Latin editions of *On the Nature of Things*, along with translations of the poem into English, Italian, and French. It was one of his favorite books" (262). Greenblatt remarks that "[t]he atoms of Lucretius had left their traces on the Declaration of Independence" and that Jefferson "had given a momentous political document, at the founding of a new republic, a distinctly Lucretian turn" (263). Symptomatic in this sense is the fact that moral precepts in ancient Rome were perceived to be in the domain of philosophy, not religion. See Veyne.

¹⁹ I am alluding, inter alia, to Jefferson's letter of 13 November 1787, from Paris, to William Stephens Smith, in which Jefferson comments on the American Revolution: "God forbid we should ever be 20 years without such a rebellion" (110).

America where he is entertaining genre as one such legacy: where narration is understood as heiress to genre. To James, the novel famously coincided with heritage, never so insistently perhaps as at the time of his work on *Washington Square*. In a letter to William Dean Howells of 31 January 1880, he insists that “it takes an old civilization to set a novelist in motion—a proposition that seems to me so true as to be a truism” (Anesko 146–147). James continues to qualify his claim, as if to make sure that a truism to him is granted universal validity: “It is on manners, customs, usages, habits, forms, upon all these things matured & established, that a novelist lives—they are the very stuff his work is made of” (Anesko 147). On 21 February 1879, in the note where he recounts the anecdote he heard from Fanny Kemble the night before—the anecdote set in England, that was to provide him with a *précis* of *Washington Square*—James adds how Kemble’s story will make sense in an American narrative he would use it for:

In a story, some one says—“Oh yes, the United States—a country without a sovereign, without a court, without a nobility, without an army, without a church or clergy, without a diplomatic service, without a picturesque peasantry, without palaces or castles, or country seats, or ruins, without literature, without novels, without an Oxford or a Cambridge . . .” (1987: 12)²⁰

It follows that James’s novels are not American, insofar as they are novels; they can only aspire to be *about* America, thereby promoting America as a state of exception to the novel itself. *Washington Square* testifies to this quandary, which was evidently of structural value to James, because the text hovers all the while between the novel and the novella, belonging fully to neither or, more to the point, failing to inherit genre as a particular narrative logic. (After all, genre boils down to defining narration in terms of inheritance.) Consequently, the narration itself behaves in *Washington Square* like Catherine Sloper: it finds its voice where it refuses to inherit. Hence, probably, James’s frustration with the prospect of revisiting *Washington Square* for his *New York Edition*, the edition that was to put a seal on his oeuvre as a thing matured and established, itself a manner, custom, habit, form. Symptomatically, when James was working on *Washington Square*, in and around 1880, he was simultaneously preparing *The Portrait of a Lady*. Both novels focus on young American heiresses and the terrible plight of their libidinal exposure to wily American expatriates, formatted by their experience of Europe. Yet, while James embraced *The Portrait of a Lady* as one of his finest novels, he despised *Washington Square*, as if reciprocating *The Portrait’s* Isabel Archer, who could and does inherit, at the expense of Catherine Sloper, who could and does not.

This is how Catherine Sloper ultimately hijacks the narrative, away from its generic predispositions and into a narrative state of exception: into narrative bare life. James testifies to this when, in the above quote from his letter to Howells, he attributes to America the lack of that on which “a novelist *lives*,” thereby suggesting that life in/of

²⁰ James heard the story of an unhappy heiress as a piece of gossip about Kemble’s brother who was engaged to the girl. See James 1987: 11–12.

American literature is a life apart, an a-generic life, which fails to register the affinity with form and establishment implicit to the novel as a genre.²¹

Catherine bears the brunt of this state, just as she suffers her father's disapproval, in the metonymic figures she cuts for the narrative. One such figure is her constitution. The narrator remarks that she is robust, even a glutton; after Morris has jilted her, she does not die of melancholia, even though her melancholia is so severe that few could survive it—the insight Doctor Sloper advertises with some contempt.²² This, however, does not entail health or recovery on Catherine's part but a sustained melancholia. Catherine thus comes to signify, both to her father and to the narrator, a certain consistent pathology instead of either death or survival. Furthermore, as melancholia is the pathology sustained in reflection or as reflection (though it is not contained in reflection), the melancholy Catherine compromises Austin Sloper's focalizing consciousness and, by extension, the rationale of James's fiction. In turn, Catherine's melancholia is reciprocated by the constitution of the narrative, whose closure is forever deferred and suspended. This is also how to understand the narrator's final observation, that Catherine settles to occupy the house at Washington Square "for life, as it were": the narrative cannot close properly because Catherine cannot, just as her life is the life that the novel cannot process from within—hence this life, for the novel, can only be "life, as it were." Accordingly, the Jamesian narrator, like Doctor Sloper, is not flaunting Catherine's constitution for its realism but as an excuse for contempt, however mild. It is almost as if the narrator, like Doctor Sloper, profits eventually from Catherine's constitution, because it allows him to address contempt as a structure of rationality that would otherwise remain inaccessible to him—in much the same way as Freudian psychoanalysis addresses the structure of masochism.²³ Catherine is thus to James's narrator what *Moby Dick* is to Captain Ahab: the life which presses on the constitution itself of sign and semiosis—the critical condition which ultimately coincides with the constitution of America, or with America as the ultimate sign, in modernity, for the questions of constitution.²⁴

²¹ James was born in Washington Place, the address adjacent to Washington Square, in 1843, the date consistent with the latter part of the first half of the 19th century, when the novel begins. James's decision to Americanize and historicize Kemble's story into a metonymy of his own birth is acutely symptomatic, just as it sheds light on the structure of the writings James openly acknowledged as autobiographical: his letters, his famous Notebooks, even his prefaces (which were to become the birthplace of modern narrative theory).

²² Freud describes melancholia as the wound that attracts all the available libidinal energy, from all sides, until the ego has been so impoverished that it can no longer sustain itself. See Freud 253, 258.

²³ Tellingly, masochism for Freud works alongside the death drive, as part of the same assemblage.

²⁴ Butler remarks that the concluding phrase in *Washington Square* "makes clear that this is a life constituted only metaphorically" (2003: 208). While this comment does not exhaust the narrative quandary peculiar to *Washington Square*, it does identify, and aptly, a more general strategy James perceived to be generic to novels: a processing of life which reciprocates metaphor. I am alluding again to James in his letter to William Dean Howells, when he founds the novel in form, custom, establishment, which Butler rightly relates to metaphor, and which Slavoj Žižek, in his reading of James's later fiction, ascribes to James's marked interest in the superego. See Žižek 2006: 124–44.

I am deliberately invoking constitution here, because it was in terms of constitution that America was inherited as a political and a philosophical project by important post-revolutionary writers such as Melville or Hawthorne, but above all by R. W. Emerson. This, however, is not to say that constitution is the principal legacy of America. Instead, this is to say that America makes sense only if the concept of legacy be supplanted by constitution, which inaugurates the ongoing process of critique and deconstruction, where legacy is no longer a fully operative concept. Stanley Cavell finds it preeminent that Emerson fleshes out the meaning of constitution for America: constitution to Emerson signifies that body and body politic are to be seen as part of the same assemblage. According to Cavell, Emerson “speaks of ‘my constitution,’ meaning for him simultaneously the condition of his body, his personal health (a figure for the body and or system of his prose), and more particularly his writing (or amending) of the nation’s constitution” (1988: 11). In part at least, this is Emerson’s political and philosophical debt to Jefferson’s physiocracy.

Emerson was in many ways the symbolic father to Henry James, not least (auto)-biographically, as the great American educator closely linked to the James family. Interestingly, James could come to terms with Emerson only by oedipalizing him away from constitution and into pure/Puritan fatherhood. In an essay he wrote in 1887, five years after Emerson’s death, James insists on describing Emerson as reducible to a conscience that “could not have been turned off, as it were, from one generation to another,” the conscience attributable to “the stock he sprang from, clerical for generations, on both sides, and clerical in the Puritan sense”; Emerson’s “perfection, in his own line, comes largely from the non-interruption of this process” (1965: 70). This is how James reduces Emerson to conscience as legacy, also to legacy as conscience, which in James’s opinion is evidently the legacy at its purest. When James qualifies Emerson’s mind as clerical and Puritan, he is invoking not merely its Judeo-Christian structure, but the stunning purity of this mind’s operation and the underlying self-sufficiency of the superego to which this mind has been reduced: the qualification evocative, again, equally of how James imagines Austin Sloper and of how psychoanalysis explains the operation of the death drive.²⁵

James observes that Emerson’s having had “a more vivid conception of moral life than anyone else” was in part due “to the limited way in which he saw our capacity for living illustrated”; his three journeys to Europe introduced him “to a more complicated world” (1965: 71). Put differently, it was only in America that James’s Emerson could refine conscience into pure concept: not because America provided him with no life, but because America seems to have sprung on the Puritan communities the bare life which exposed the condition of their thought to be that of the death drive. Hence, to this thought, the American life is bare as much as baring, just as America

²⁵ Julia Kristeva observes a distinct Judeo-Christian inflection in the psychoanalytic “subject supposed to know,” which, according to Kristeva, entails a derivation from St. Paul away towards psychoanalysis. See Kristeva ix–xiii, 3–5. The same inflection seems to resonate in James’s claim that Emerson was “the prayer and the sermon: not in the least a secularizer, but in his own subtle insinuating way a sanctifier” (1965: 71).

is entertained by this thought as limit and a state of exception. It is in this sense that James's puritanization of Emerson takes place at the expense of America.

What James occludes in his essay, however, is Emerson's appreciation of the constitution. Emerson's incisive constitutionalism translates the Puritan America, which James attaches to him, into an America that is metonymic, in much the same way as habitat is metonymic to Catherine Sloper.²⁶ This America is reminiscent perhaps of dwelling as Heidegger sees it. Heidegger relates dwelling simultaneously to being, building, and thinking, so that dwelling pre-organizes the three in terms of a metonymy. It is in this sense that dwelling to Heidegger is "always a staying with things" (149), a proposition evocative, in fact, of Antigone. But here with one significant departure: while Heidegger insists that "divinities" are integral to how dwelling is understood, so that in Heidegger the metonymic constitution of dwelling is forever reclaimed as a promise of metaphor (also as a metaphysical destination), Catherine's habitat remains consistently metonymic, inductive, and even empiricist in inspiration. In fact, Catherine's habitat comes close to how William James conceives space, in a letter to Josiah Royce, when he says that "[a]ll *deducers* of space are, I am sure, mythologists" (111; emphasis W. J.). Incidentally, the quote is from a letter that William James wrote in 1880, when his brother was working on *Washington Square*.²⁷

4. An American Tragedy

This is why *Washington Square* is only seemingly a misnomer. Certainly, the title appears to miss the narrative focus on Catherine, her father, and the battle of their minds, just as Washington Square, the location in New York City, ostensibly fails to target the house metonymic to Catherine, and refers instead to the public place which fronts it. Yet Washington Square is the metonymic extension of the house, just as the house is metonymic to Catherine, and vice versa. In the final analysis, this complex expands to incorporate New York City and, with it, the American city culture that was to recreate the logic, if not the architecture, of a polis.

When writing about "the place of the city in United States culture and literature," Stipe Grgas notes that "Winthrop's 'city upon a Hill' has been routinely drawn upon

²⁶ James reports, with polite scorn, that Emerson "rarely read a novel, even the famous ones" and was "little spoken to by works of art" in the Louvre and the Vatican where James took him in the autumn and winter of 1872 (1965: 84). Given Emerson's appreciation of writing in relation to constitution, his indifference to novels and to art in European museums, which James calls "an anomaly," seems but an indication of James's own exultation of genre and of authority.

²⁷ In empiricism, Gilles Deleuze insists, "the relations are heterogeneous and exterior to their terms, impressions, or ideas" (163). With Hume, "the empiricist world can for the first time truly unfold in all its extension: a world of exteriority, a world where thought itself is in a fundamental relation to the Outside, a world where terms exist like veritable atoms, and relations like veritable external bridges—a world where the conjunction 'and' dethrones the interiority of the verb 'is'" (Deleuze 163). Note the affinity of Deleuze's empiricism and of Jefferson's Epicureanism, specifically in relation to atomism; note also the metonymic logic implicit in Deleuze's affirmation of *and over is*.

as evidence that the rhetoric of the city was present at the originary moment of this polity's emergence onto the historical scene. One could argue that the various takes on the American polity engage the difference between this utopian vision emblazoned on its founding moment and the actualization of the vision in historical urban realities" (2005: 128). In his book about New York literature, Peter Brooker reports on Francis Baily, who, visiting the United States in 1796, "wrote in fulsome praise of the 'perfect regularity' and geometric order of the new American cities of Philadelphia and Baltimore, whose straight lines happily expressed the straight dealing of the American character and the destiny of the new nation. The new American city was felt to be an embodiment of scientific rationality, and a sign, therefore, in one of its senses, of modernity" (27). Brooker points out that "Thomas Jefferson's own simple replicable design for the new cities of the new nation had been a case in point. Jefferson proposed a checkerboard model with alternate open spaces to prevent the spread of disease and to provide the pleasures of the country in the city" (27-28).

While this seems to dovetail with Austin Sloper's rationality and with deductionism, the organization of the American urban space, in the event, was metonymic, even physiocratic in character. Brooker comments that "in the eighteenth as in the twentieth century, it was a matter less of such ideas or ideals in themselves than what they had been made to mean, what interests they in practice served" (27). Jefferson's design hardly contradicted the interests and the practice of the American cities, because its very logic was that of interest and practice, expressed in terms of a physiocratic imperative.²⁸ Freud could well have had this in mind when, travelling to the United States in 1909, he observed that he was bringing "the plague" to America.²⁹ Evidently, Freud wanted to advertise that psychoanalysis would affect America the way the plague would, also that it would spread in a similar fashion, possibly bringing about the extinction of the idea of America. What Freud's image implies, however—assuming America was to receive psychoanalysis the way it would receive the plague—is the metonymic character of America, also the likely reconstitution of psychoanalysis itself once it encountered metonymy in the places where metaphor had been structural to the psychoanalytic semiosis. Perversely, what Freud was in fact saying was that America could prove to be the plague of/to psychoanalysis itself.³⁰

²⁸ James was critical of the New York he witnessed after his return to the United States in 1904–5; he perceived its vertical growth (its skyscraper architecture) as alien to semiosis as such. Cavell, however, draws attention to the sentence in *The American Scene* in which James addresses this New York as "attesting the possibilities of the soil" (2005: 85). While Cavell takes James's comment as "an allusion to Emerson's idea of finding America (somehow) unapproachable" (2005: 86), what strikes me is the chthonic, metonymic, even physiocratic aspect of James's image.

²⁹ See Felman 1977: 189.

³⁰ Freud's discovery of the death drive in the 1920s coincides with a significant increase in the numbers of his American patients, in the wake of the First World War, almost as if the death drive was a metaphor-based response to the metonymic excess which the American cases presented to psychoanalysis. For the increased number of American patients whom Freud treated after the Great War, see Gay 2006.

This sheds light on the closure of James's narrative (if closure applies to the narrative of *Washington Square*, technically speaking). Not only is the father killed off for this America to become, unnerving as this America may have been to James, but there remains an irreducible residue of metonymy about the parricide, nowhere so visibly perhaps as in the fact that the father's ultimate refinement into the conditions of the death drive is premised on his remaining a physician, his capital being transferred to hospitals and schools of medicine. On the one hand, this means that an American *Doktor-Vater* can abstract himself from any singular fatherhood into the death drive, but cannot lose the "Doktor" in the process, thereby forever registering the residual physiocracy and Epicureanism of the American revolutionary becoming. On the other hand, this suggests that legacy cannot be reduced to the conditions of the death drive insofar as it entails capital—that there remains a metonymic residue about capital which does not tally with the concept of the death drive, or with metaphor, so that metaphor cannot fully explain, or contain, the logic of capital and of capitalism. (This may well be the American contribution to a cultural history of capitalism, especially in view of the recent emphasis on legacy and inheritance in capitalism, for instance in the work of Thomas Piketty.)³¹

The structure of the closure is truly climactic. When the *Doktor-Vater* demands from Catherine that she promise never to accept Morris's offer of marriage should it happen again, as the condition on which she will be granted legacy, Catherine refuses to give her word: this is how she disinherits herself *and* annihilates the father. What ultimately turns out to be killing off Austin Sloper for the narrative is Catherine's assuming language on *his* terms, so that her crime is faultless, because his narrative death comes out also as suicide. Catherine is thereby fully disinherited, because not even the crime (of parricide) can be attached to her.³² This in turn is how language is exposed to the contingencies irreducible to states of exception. Stanley Cavell alludes to this condition of language when he speaks of its "exposure to infelicity" and of language being predicated on "the incessant, unending vulnerability of human action" (1995: 53). Also, this is how Catherine eventually hijacks all language into a metonymic condition: metonymy, as noted, signifying a kind of empiricism, insofar as empiricism insists on the "*relations which are exterior to their terms,*" as Deleuze argues in his essay on Hume (163; emphasis G. D.).

This proposition is not unrelated to the American condition. The constitution of the United States, premised on the Declaration of Independence, hangs in the balance of a pledge (by the signatories of the Declaration) which was predicated, essentially, on exposure to infelicity. Most political theorists who were fascinated by the American

³¹ James hints at this particular configuration when he insists that money is problematic to Catherine only insofar as it relates to her father; otherwise money remains a vehicle of enjoyment which Austin Sloper, characteristically, considers vulgar.

³² This is how Catherine invokes, again, Butler's Antigone, who paralyzes the superego. Butler quotes from Lacan, who defines the superego as "[t]he discourse of my father . . . in so far as my father made mistakes which I am absolutely condemned to reproduce." Yet Antigone, "significantly, by obeying the curse upon her, stops the future operation of that chain" (Butler 2000: 52).

Revolution were fascinated by this circumstance: that “a new body politic,” as Arendt calls it (34), was constituted around a pledge which did not rest in any pre-conceived authority but was predicated specifically on the incessant, unending vulnerability of human action. Arendt in particular insists on this: for instance, when she observes that “the task of the revolution, to find a new absolute to replace the absolute of the divine power, is insoluble because power under the condition of human plurality can never amount to omnipotence, and laws residing on human power can never be absolute” (39).³³ When Catherine refuses to pledge herself to her father, she is therefore enacting her condition as that of America: not because the pledge would bind her to an act, of obedience or of rebellion, but because she draws attention to the pledge as an act in itself, whose rationale is that of violability.

This is why Catherine's narrative promise, if anything, is the promise of tragedy. Just as the *Antigone* story is singularly reducible to speech acts, to how language is used, denied, and exchanged, until the language of tragedy has come into full effect as the tragedy of language, the same is true of *Washington Square*. Catherine coheres around language reduced to violability—around the exchange and denial of promises, injunctions, threats, seductions—until the reason of language has been exposed as that of tragedy, with speech acts amounting to the tragic flaw.³⁴ One could almost propose that Catherine's logic is that of tragedy, where her father's logic is that of modern detective fiction; she takes on the language in the condition of metonymy and of parataxis where modern detective fiction depends on assigning guilt from within the law implicated in hypotaxis and metaphor. It is in this sense that Catherine contaminates James's idea of the novel, because James's idea of the novel depends actually on the reason of modern detective fiction, while American narratives, as he perceives them—it turns out—depend on reconsidering the rationale of tragedy.

Greek tragedy was instrumental to inventing the language and the structures of thought constituent to democratic procedures in Athens, even to the type of rationality implicit to democracy.³⁵ Honig argues that this logic remains residual in modern melodrama and situates the residue in the structures of mourning, where they assume the

³³ Honig (1991) expands on this position and argues for the specific linguistic, philosophical, and political properties of the speech act as foundational to the Declaration of Independence.

³⁴ Cavell argues that, for the same reason, J. L. Austin's speech act theory reads as a critical theory of tragedy (1995: 53).

³⁵ Jean-Pierre Vernant points to a singular coming together of the political, the literary, and the affective in the Greek tragedy of the fifth century. According to Vernant, this is why already Euripides's tragedies do not compare to those of Aeschylus, just as Aristotle's theory of tragedy comes too late after the fact to take fully into account the reconstitution of language and of rationality that the tragedy effected for the democratic Athens to become (see Vernant and Vidal-Naquet 89). (One could almost propose that tragedy therefore constitutes the tragic flaw of Aristotle's philosophy. Symptomatically, J. L. Austin was a leading British expert on Aristotle.) That this is relevant to a reading of James is supported by Martha C. Nussbaum's extensive comparisons of James's novels and Aristotelian thought, with James often serving as a point of departure to Nussbaum's situating practical reason in Aristotle's philosophy (see, for instance, Nussbaum 1992: 84, 2001: 313). Nussbaum focuses on “practical reason” in order to rescue Aristotle from

function of melodramatic constitution; she draws on the examples of Walter Benjamin and Carl Schmitt, who focus on mourning and melancholia where they intervene into the structure of tragedy, in order to describe the rationale of modern political theory (Benjamin in his study of *Trauerspiel*, Schmitt in his study of *Hamlet*). “Melodrama may, indeed, be the democratic genre par excellence,” says Honig, because, “[f]amously said to be written for people who could not read . . . , melodrama . . . is also anti-grandiose” (2013: 93). It therefore “makes sense that a so-called low-culture genre merits consideration by democratic theory, especially when that genre is one that calls attention to affect, body, subjectification, thwarted agency, and the quest for emancipation, often amid the cover of double-speak or in circumstances of isolation” (Honig 2013: 93).³⁶

The last quote is such a fitting description of Catherine Sloper that *Washington Square* could be taken as a specimen story for a theory of melodrama, not least where it presses the nascent novelistic reason of Henry James into conditions other than those of modern detective fiction. How this particular trauma of birth registers in James’s later fiction can be inferred from the comment by Peter Brooks that James’s late fiction is characterized by “its *insistently metaphorical* evocation of melodramatic states of consciousness” (172; emphasis mine)—suggesting that James finds metaphor instrumental to domesticating melodrama for or within novelistic reason, at the expense perhaps of metonymy. This bears relation to Cavell’s “philosophical placement of the melodramatic as the hyperbolic effort to recuperate . . . the familiarity or banality of the world” (1996: 40). Cavell relates his understanding of melodrama to Brooks’s, and notes that Brooks approaches melodrama in terms of “a historical event” and “the loss of conviction in a transcendent basis for the distinction between good and evil” (1996: 41). Significantly, Cavell mobilizes melodrama to address, from within philosophy, the political project of America as the laboratory of modern democracy. Cavell, too, thus seems to be classing melodrama with metonymic excess, insofar as metonymic excess is implicit to his idea of the world which is hyperbolically familiar, banal, and disturbingly reducible to event where event signifies the crisis of transcendental authority.³⁷

Platonic metaphysics and reclaim him for pre-Platonic thought, which Vernant finds constituent to Greek democracy. She finds her claim in Aristotle’s “criticism of Platonic generality in favor of an emphasis on the grasping of contingent particulars,” and relates it to James’s criticism of the narrators, who “might be ever so strong on method, but . . . fall short of the fine responsiveness of ‘tone’ that is the mark of true practical wisdom” (2001: 310). Yet Nussbaum neglects to insist that Aristotle is strong on method first and foremost, which inevitably informs his grasp of the particulars, and that the same is true of James’s narrators; indeed, like Austin Sloper, James’s narrators respond finely to tone only where their method precedes it.

³⁶ Styles of mourning were structural to Greek democracy too, insofar as they pressed on the polis as a type of rationality. Honig rightly notes that Sophocles’s *Antigone*, a play about styles of mourning, is critical in this sense because it “repeatedly explores the question of how permissibly to grieve not just ungrivable life but grievable life as well” (2013: 96). Equally, Honig admits to “[b]eing open to reading *Antigone* as melodrama,” even if not just that (2013: 94).

³⁷ The same structure seems to resonate in Grgas’s claim that the project of the United States has been most insistently effected as a contestation of space, a position he relates to Sacvan Bercovitch’s hermeneutics of non-transcendence (2000: 9, 240).

Central to Cavell's understanding of melodrama is the figure of the unknown woman, defined by "[a] certain choice of solitude (figured in a refusal of marriage)" (1996: 12). Marriage here epitomizes "the fate of the democratic social bond" in a world where contract "replaces the divine right of kings" (Cavell 1981: 193). While this, again, reads as a succinct portrayal of Catherine Sloper as an American Antigone, *Washington Square* invites in turn a critical reading of Cavell. For instance, Cavell finds Freud crucial to his understanding of the (American) unknown woman, and brings Henry James ever closer to Freud, in order to forge a philosophical conduit to melodrama, especially melodrama in classical Hollywood, which to Cavell is the hub of American political modernity. At one point, he argues that James in his later fiction captures the unknown woman better than Stefan Zweig, whose Freudian *The Letter from an Unknown Woman* was adapted by Max Ophüls, in 1948, into the eponymous Hollywood melodrama that Cavell finds exemplary to his analytic position (1996: 113). Curiously, in his book about the Hollywood melodrama Cavell omits even a cursory reference to Wyler's *The Heiress*, adapted from *Washington Square* at about the same time, even though Wyler captures both the structure of Cavell's argument and the narrative predicament of Henry James. Yet, it was Olivia de Havilland as Catherine Sloper—not her sister Joan Fontaine as Lisa in *The Letter from an Unknown Woman*—who won the Academy Award.

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