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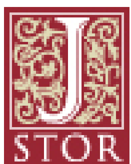

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# STYLE AS SUBJECT
# *WASHINGTON SQUARE*

MILLICENT BELL

WHEN a novelist finds it difficult to establish a distinctive voice his fictions are often self-reflexive, parodistic of literature itself. Such a mood may be characteristic of a particular phase of culture; in our own time it seems to stem from the elusive quality of identity in the age of protean man. But it may also be a regular stage in the development of any writer when both personal and aesthetic selves seem uncertain and his attachments to modes and models are the subject of inner debate. A particular work may even dramatize a moment of awkward choice-making. This could be the case of Henry James's *Washington Square*. The true subject of this short novel has been little understood. It is style, in the sense of ways of behavior as well as in the sense of literary tone; and its own style is the testing ground of this double interest. In this work James examines by means of his story and its presentational devices such literary styles and their analogous life-attitudes as those of the realist-historian, the ironist, the melodramatist, and the romantic fabulist, all of which had been resources of his previous fiction. Opposed to these options he presents in the role of his heroine a style so mute and motionless as to be almost the surrender of style—a practical and intellectual "innocence" which derives from an inability to employ any manner dictated by social or literary convention, almost, at times, a seeming inability to speak or do at all. Out of her dilemma a new style is born, a new language of authenticity.

*Washington Square* has been identified as a melodrama, but it is a melodrama which becomes a criticism of the melodramatic principle. The melodramatists in the story—the cruel, type-casting director-father, the limelight-stealing bad actress of an aunt, the falsely-declamatory lover—are forced

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to give over the script to the naive improvisations of the heroine, whose melodramatic final triumph is also the defeat of the style of her fellow actors. But melodrama is only one of the kinds of "artificial" style that make their appearance in this artistically self-conscious, self-mocking work. Categorical or satirical realism and also irony are engaged in encounter enacted on the narrative and on the verbal level between what is held to be "sincere" and what is seen not only as literary but as personal and social pretense, or even between what is "natural" and what is sometimes called "civilized."

The presence of the last contest explains why the story is, after all, rightly named "Washington Square," a title which proposes a cultural or scenic or historic topic. More than one critic has argued that James's evocation of the old New York of his youth is unserious, and that the story is at heart as abstract as a fairy tale. That it has a romantic or fairy-tale configuration is undeniable: do we not have the cold-hearted father (a widowed king), the orphaned ugly-duckling princess, the treacherous stepmother-aunt, and the handsome young prince? All these in fact betray their fairy-tale roles, the fairy tale or romance, like the melodrama and the ironic exemplum, constituting artifices to be discarded in a general rejection of artifice. But the romance's permanent detachment from local reality is not what James desires in this work. With advised care he defines his story at the outset in terms of particular conditions of time and place.

In the New York City where, around 1830, Dr. Austin Sloper achieved a success, "the healing art appeared in a high degree to combine two recognized sources of credit." It belonged "to the realm of the practical, which in the United States is a great recommendation," and it was also "touched by the light of science—a merit appreciated in a community in which the love of knowledge has not always been accompanied by leisure and opportunity." These observations suggest that Dr. Sloper is something new in the history of civilizations. He is not the "gentleman of leisure" of the past, but a man of culture who is at the same time expert in appraising

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consequences, in deciding what things are good *for*. He begins his career characteristically with marriage "for love" to a girl who is beautiful and who possesses an income of ten thousand dollars, thereby combining both romantic and pragmatic interest. More than most among his countrymen, he might deserve the name of "civilized": his inveterate irony arises from both cultural and social experience, a matured understanding of classes and kinds, all sharpened, made somehow more telic by his very American sense of affairs. His daughter, on the other hand, is a veritable primitive in respect to these things; she is "natural," lacking her father's admirable sophistication, incapable of his vision of comparisons and the taste for complexity or indirection which makes for wit, and without that sense of useful ends by which he corrects the vagaries of impulse. Her American quality is the opposite of his: it meets experience by means of the promptings of a virgin nature, the expression of a human condition or national origin uninstructed by the past.

There is appropriateness in James's choice of a stage—the little square where the tide of upward-mounting wealth appeared to have paused for a moment in the red brick mansions with their white stone steps and delicate fanlights. Here, more than anywhere in America, "you had come into a world which appeared to offer a variety of sources of interest." Here was a context in which he could locate Catherine's naiveté, such a context as he had found only in Europe for his previous studies of American simplicity. James was not entirely sure that his setting was adequate to his purpose. To William Dean Howells he described his story as "poorish . . . a tale purely American, the writing of which made me acutely feel the want of paraphernalia." This lack was fatal, he felt, to the writer taking America as his theme—and it had damaged the achievement of Hawthorne, as he had recently tried to show in his small book on his predecessor. He told Howells that he would be refuted only by the appearance in this country of a novelist "belonging to the company of Balzac or Thackeray."

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The mention of Balzac reminds us of James's admiration for the author of *Eugénie Grandet*, which is generally recognized as a model for *Washington Square*—even though we know that James based his tale on a real-life anecdote told by an English friend. If Balzac could show how the miserly paternal tyrant and his daughter were both products of provincial Saumur, why could not James relate the Slopers to New York? Surely inherent in the story of the doctor and his daughter is a study of the contrarieties of the American evolution, of our aboriginal "naturalness" and of the ripened education of which we might be capable.

As his remark to Howells shows, however, James had not found it possible to use Balzac's example in a way that satisfied him. Yet this example had haunted him from the very beginning of his writing career. In 1865, in a review of a now-forgotten popular novelist—his second publication at the age of twenty-one—he had recommended the study of nothing other than *Eugénie Grandet*, and two years later, in another review, called Balzac "the novelist who of all novelists is certainly the most of one." As he began to write fiction other influences joined and competed with Balzac's: Cornelia Pulsifer Kelley long ago showed (in a study too little assimilated by James criticism) how his early interest in writers as diverse as George Sand, Mérimée, Goethe, Turgenev, Hawthorne, and George Eliot also directed the development of his writing. He had realized the only partial applicability of each to his own needs for expression, and even Balzac, when he came to write a full-length article about him in 1875, received qualified praise. At that point, of course, he had just realized his own mistake in attempting to be Balzacian in *Roderick Hudson*. Later he recalled, "One nestled, technically, in those days, . . . in the great shadow of Balzac; his august example, little as the secret might ever be guessed, towered for me over the scene; so that what was clearer than anything else was how, if it was a question of Saumur, of Limoges, of Guérande, he 'did' Saumur, did Limoges, did Guérande." In attempting to do Northampton, Massachu-

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setts, James had "yearned over the preliminary presentation of my small square patch of the American scene, and yet was not sufficiently on my guard to see how easily his high practice might be delusive for my case." Yet he discovered an alternative way of describing things by making all description come out of the impressions of a visiting consciousness—and this sufficed, in the novel, for Rome as, in reversing the situation, it would suffice for a New England setting in *The Europeans.* Christopher Newman's American origins were never even to be the subject of a backward glance, but his subjective view of Europe, for all its limitations, would precisely serve the ends of *The American.* Perhaps the necessity of evading the Balzacian historicity made for James's great discovery—the use of the central consciousness whose confinement of scope was its interest.

The period 1878-79 seems to have been pivotal in James's career, a time when Balzac's and all other models both teased and repelled. He published then what is probably the worst novel he ever wrote—*Confidence*—a curious attempt at intrigue comedy, perhaps influenced by a sudden enthusiasm for the theatre of Augier and Sardou. Before a year had passed, however, he had begun the work that marked his mature possession of his own literary character and one of its supremest expressions—*The Portrait of a Lady.* In between he produced *Washington Square,* in which he came to terms with Balzac at last, and, having done so, moved on. His problem, as he had told Howells, had been "paraphernalia"—or the details of customs and appearances so abundantly present in the Frenchman's native milieu. For Balzac character was rooted in immemorial modes: old Grandet had been a representative of ancient peasant meanness become capitalist accumulation by the degrees of centuries. James was forced to differentiate his father and daughter differently, inventing his distinctions of speech and behavior, making them matters of pure style. And in doing so, he found himself representing his own literary alternatives.

Balzac, as Miss Kelley's pioneer study showed, was not

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the only literary parent with whom James had the inevitable quarrel of the creative personality with its forebears. And in particular, in 1879, there was Hawthorne upon his native ground. James's biography of Hawthorne is an essay of anguished identification which tells us as much about his own feelings as an American writer as it does about Hawthorne. Hawthorne, as daunted by the English realists as James had been by Balzac, had regretfully elected the mode of romance and triumphed in his best stories in a fiction deliberately narrow and poeticized. James had been influenced by European romance writers—by Balzac's own romantic side and by George Sand in particular, whose romantic melodrama infects *The American* but is parodied, as we shall see, in *Washington Square*. But Hawthorne's romance, with its leanings toward moral and psychological allegory, penetrated more deeply, despite James's view of him as a cautionary example. If *Washington Square* derives from *Eugénie Grandet* it may also be said to come out of "Rappaccini's Daughter"—a connection that has gone unnoticed. In the latter there are also three principals, a doctor-father of merciless intellectuality (who is much closer to Dr. Sloper than Balzac's primitive old cooper), a pure-souled daughter, and her handsome treacherous suitor. The resemblance is, of course, far and near, but it suggests that the quarrel with Hawthorne was part of James's problem in this work. The publication of his wry self-reflective biography immediately preceded the writing of the novel.

As James was also aware, his personal problem of identity was similar to Hawthorne's ambivalence over the choice between the complex and the simple and the expression of that choice in the contrast of Europe and America. It was a real problem of how and where to live, a tension not only in his fiction but in his life. Ultimately he would decide for Europe and for complexity, for knowledge, sophistication, moral and intellectual self-consciousness, style—all of which seemed better realizable in Europe. And yet he would only resolve the contest by internalizing the symbolic American qualities—

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that ignorance which made for innocence, that unselfconscious moral and aesthetic instinct which was the better for its natural purity. He knew, of course, that the lines were not severely drawn in geographic terms and that the division between knowledge and nature could be found anywhere—even in America. As a man as well as a writer, an American with a "complex fate," he could find the contention within himself and enact a personal problem in such a fiction as *Washington Square*.

When Catherine Sloper is twelve years old, her father says to his sister Mrs. Penniman, "Try and make a clever woman of her, Lavinia," to which that lady rejoins, "My dear Austin, do you think it is better to be clever than to be good?" The doctor answers her, "Good for what? You are good for nothing unless you are clever." In dismissing any but a utilitarian sense of "good," the doctor does no injury to Mrs. Penniman, for her reference to goodness as a higher value is, like nearly everything she says, affectation. From her brother's assertion, James writes, she "saw no reason to dissent; she possibly reflected that her own great use in the world was owing to her aptitude for many things." Indeed good and evil are not significant terms in *Washington Square*. For Catherine, the good little princess in the archetypal fairy-tale version of her history, we have available, as I have indicated, another term. "You are so natural," her lover says to her, making a true statement, though he adds dishonestly, "I am natural myself." He is, like Catherine's father, not so much bad as clever—that is, unnatural, unspontaneous, insincere. He has a well-developed sense, like Sloper's, of the uses of things; and he is a "good" liar, unlike his sweetheart, who is described as being "addicted to speaking the truth," who is constitutionally unable to be anything but sincere, who is, in all senses, without style. Balzac's heroine unhesitatingly and expertly deceives her father without arousing any criticism in the reader, who knows that she is not only good, but pious, whereas her father is an irreligious miser. No odor of formal

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piety clings to Catherine, who is simply "incapable of elaborate artifice"; and when her situation does lead her into some slight dissimulation, the narrator ironically notes the first and then the second time in her life that she makes "an indirect answer."

So "she grew up peacefully and prosperously; but at the age of eighteen Mrs. Penniman had not made a clever woman of her." Does this mean that she is stupid, as many readers suppose? Early in the story we realize that both her father and her aunt misjudge her intelligence. He thinks that Catherine is incapable of seeing through Mrs. Penniman, but she "saw her all at once, as it were, and was not dazzled by the apparition." Without any sort of style herself she is protected by her failure to appreciate her aunt's. Mrs. Penniman is all airs and arts, and none of them very high in quality; her speech and her behavior are constantly blossoming forth in dusty paper blooms of rhetoric, second-hand and second-rate histrionic gesture. She is the widow of a poor clergyman with a "sickly constitution and a flowery style of eloquence"; perhaps she had learned both futility and floridity of speech from him. In contrast to Catherine she is described as having "a natural disposition to embellish any subject that she touched," though her affection is quite the poorest in quality among the styles of pretense surrounding her. Indeed she has the effect of compelling her fellow performers to cast aside their own mannerisms momentarily in their irritation at hers, adopting a temporary tone of savage plainness, as when she tells Townsend that Dr. Sloper is "impervious to pity," and the young man harshly corrects her, "Do you mean that he won't come round?"

About Morris Townsend the conventional question, of course, is: "Is he sincere?" In his two interviews with the young man and in his conversation with Townsend's sister, Mrs. Montgomery, Dr. Sloper establishes that the answer to this question is no—Morris is a fortune-hunter. James has his jest, however, with the varied senses of sincere, a word which might first be thought to be equivalent to Catherine's natural-

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ness—that is, to absence of subterfuge. Says Mrs. Almond, Dr. Sloper's other, more sensible sister, "I don't see why you should be incredulous. It seems to me that you have never done Catherine justice. You must remember that she has the prospect of thirty thousand a year." Mrs. Almond prefers to ignore the assumption that a suitor's sincerity means that he loves a girl for herself alone—Townsend is as interested as he appears to be, though for other reasons than Catherine's charms. The doctor comments on the clear fact that his daughter has been, till now, "absolutely unattractive" to young men—which makes him realize, he says, that the young men of New York are "very disinterested. They prefer pretty girls—lively girls—girls like your own." "If our young men appear disinterested," Mrs. Almond responds, "it is because they marry, as a general thing, so young—before twenty-five, at the age of innocence and sincerity—before the age of calculation." In Townsend one has, then, a man who has put the innocence and sincerity of youth behind him and who is a finished example of calculated sincerity. As such he is a clever man, though he will be a failure in the end, unlike Dr. Sloper neither making his fortune nor gaining his heiress. "I suppose you can't be too clever," Catherine humbly remarks to her suitor's cousin, Arthur. And that alert young New Yorker replies, "I don't know. I know some people that call my cousin too clever."

Dr. Sloper, of course, is "the cleverest of men," as his daughter thinks him, cleverer than Morris Townsend and certainly cleverer than his sister. It is only ultimately that we realize that even he was too clever—or else that life can provide surprises beyond the calculation of the cleverest. Like all whose analyses of others are generally correct, he seemingly ran only one risk—that of boredom. Certain he perfectly understands his daughter's character by the time she is eighteen and knows that she is "incapable of giving surprises," he allows for a remotely possible diversion. "I expect nothing," he says, "so that, if she gives me a surprise, it will be all clear gain." The irony of the plot, which is outside his

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own ironic perspective (and which refutes it), is that his daughter will surprise him and that he will *not* enjoy it. This dramatic outcome expresses a literary view of life which is given form and entertainment value by the element of surprise, particularly in the ending which just barely escapes being a cheap and melodramatic surprise through the richness of James's handling. Dr. Sloper's taste for surprise is more fastidious: he expects that experience can be made to conform to his formal expectations, allowing for the romantic unexpected in discreet amounts, like a certain kind of classic garden-plan. But Catherine's rude growths of surprises are unaesthetic. As Sloper tells Mrs. Almond upon discovering the obstinacy of her attachment to Morris Townsend, "At first I had a good deal of . . . genial curiosity about it; I wanted to see if she really would stick. But, good Lord, one's curiosity is satisfied! I see she is capable of it, and now she can let go." He has forgotten that life has surprised him before by his wife's early death and by the birth of his daughter when he had lost a son. In his predictions of others he is generally correct. Though he is "very curious to see whether Catherine might really be loved for her moral worth," he is correct in predicting that she will not be appreciated. He is correct in his diagnosis of Townsend. He is even correct about his own death which he describes exactly as it comes to pass, though instructing his daughter to nurse him "on the optimistic hypothesis."

The essence of Dr. Sloper's cleverness is his superior analytic power. "Shall you not relent?" Mrs. Almond asks him. "Shall a geometrical proposition relent? I am not so superficial," he answers her. His very glance is expressive of this mind: we hear of his "cold calm reasonable eye" or his "sharp pure eye." Only when, in the terrifying scene in the Alps, he is forced to declare, "Though I am very smooth externally, at bottom I am very passionate," do we suspect the savagery suppressed by his civilization. Meanwhile he exhibits an intellect which endows its possessor with such foresight that it naturally results in the habit of irony. But not only does he

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see life ironically—that is, from a point of view of superior prescience—but his characteristic style of speech is that of a man accustomed to express his meaning by ironic indirection, even sarcasm. When Catherine appears in her showy red dress at the party at which she meets Townsend, her father exclaims, "Is it possible that this magnificent person is my child?" His question is rhetorical in the worst sense. He has used the weapon of language against the defenseless Catherine, pointing out, justly enough, the ludicrousness of her attire, while ignoring the message in her inept effort to please. "It is a literal fact," we are told at this point, "that he almost never addressed his daughter save in the ironical form."

Each of the characters in *Washington Square* is made known to us by his habitual rhetoric, and Catherine's plain style is constantly drawn into verbal and enacted contrast with varieties of evasion, with "cleverness" in speech and behavior such as melodrama or false romanticism on the one hand or irony and sarcasm on the other. The discussion of Catherine's party dress is a particularly good instance, for dress becomes a metaphor for personal and verbal style. The passage just quoted from continues in the metaphor of dressmaking, as though the things that people do or say are made out of yard goods: "Whenever he addressed her he gave her pleasure; but she had to cut her pleasure out of the piece, as it were. There were portions left over, light remnants and snippets of irony, which she never knew what to do with, which seemed too delicate for her own use." In her humility Catherine acknowledges her inability to wear the garment of irony. Of her actual taste in dress, James remarks earlier, "Her great indulgence of it was really the desire of a rather inarticulate nature to manifest itself; she sought to be eloquent in her garments, and to make up for her diffidence of speech by a fine frankness of costume. But if she expressed herself in her clothes, it is certain that people were not to blame for not thinking her a witty person." To this misrepresenting "eloquence," this misplaced "wit"—and verbal rhetoric here is explicitly identified with behavior—her father responds

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with his superior ironic style, as we have seen. "You are sumptuous, opulent, expensive," he continues. "You look as if you had eighty thousand a year." To which Catherine "illogically" (as James notes) replies, "Well, so long as I haven't—" Her father, correcting her, for *that* is not the sort of misrepresentation he values, snaps, "So long as you haven't you shouldn't look as if you had."

But Catherine's awkward show, a child's "dressing-up," is harmless, unlike Dr. Sloper's. It is the latter that receives chastisement in *Washington Square,* an ironic account of the discomfiture of an ironist. We were told early: "He desired experience, and in the course of twenty years he got a great deal. It must be added that it came to him in some forms which, whatever might have been their intrinsic value, made it the reverse of welcome." The "irony of fate" and the narrative tone are at one in the revelation of the death of wife and son. "For a man whose trade was to keep people alive he had certainly done poorly in his own family." The world "pitied him too much to be ironical," an indulgence he did not learn from. Later he is given no quarter when Catherine refuses to tell him the truth about her rupture with her lover. "It was his punishment that he never knew," says James,"—his punishment, I mean, for the abuse of sarcasm in his relations with his daughter. There was a good deal of effective sarcasm in her keeping him in the dark, and the rest of the world conspired with her, in this sense, to be sarcastic." Sarcasm, it should be noted, is here both rhetoric and behavior. To be sarcastic, significantly, Catherine does not have to speak at all: she has only to keep still.

In addition to the four characters I have discussed, there is a fifth who is of importance in this testing of styles. This is the narrator, whom one may call James, and not merely because of the frequent use of the first-person voice and small turns of expression here and there marking him as a personalized narrator with assumed authorial identity, such as the English novel has given many examples of since its beginnings. An interpolation in the third chapter identifies this "I."

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"I know not whether it is owing to the tenderness of early associations, but this portion of New York appears to many persons the most delectable": these words begin a description of the Washington Square of "forty years ago"—the time of James's own infancy. The many persons soon become a particular one. "It was here that your grandmother lived...; it was here that you took your first walks abroad." "You" remembers the odor of the ailanthus trees and his first school kept by "a broad-bosomed, broad-based old lady with a ferule." The "topographical parenthesis," for which the narrator apologizes, resurrects an image of the child James exactly as described in *A Small Boy and Others.* It suggests that James is himself involved in the tale, even though no effort is made at pseudo-realistic claims—such as that the narrator had known the Slopers or heard their story. This narrator, of course, is far from the developed central consciousness which James later preferred, yet he serves as a center, particularly because the chief character, Catherine, is incapable of that reflexive function herself. The unnamed narrator as he tells the story has in some degree the experience of it, like some of James's more developed attending consciousnesses.

So he is, too, subject to the vice of style, and borrowing method and language from the stylists in the story, he outgrows these like someone learning from an experience. His language takes no direct cue from the shabby artifice of Mrs. Penniman, but it should be noted that her theatricality is underscored by the narrator's references to the theater—*he* describes her as setting scenes, assuming roles, drawing curtains—and thus she is a kind of artist, the narrator's representative (perhaps the theatrical character of Mrs. Penniman was suggested to James by the fact that the anecdote which was his start was told him by the actress Fanny Kemble, whose brother was the Townsend of real life). He does borrow Mrs. Penniman's style in a nonverbal sense. Writing a tale of melodramatic design, with successive scenes that have a quality of tableau, he is self-mocked by the romantic melo-

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dramatist within his story, who is a sort of debased George Sand. But his verbal tone is closer to Dr. Sloper's. The doctor's categorizing instinct and sense of probabilities are very much that of the novelist who admired Balzac. "You belong to the wrong category," Sloper tells Townsend, who protests, "Your daughter doesn't marry a category, she marries an individual." The categorizer wins; Townsend's sentimentality is a lie. "I turn to our category again. Even with that solemn vow on your lips you take your place in it," says Sloper. A similar perception of the typical is possessed by the narrator. He begins by locating Dr. Sloper, as we have seen, in a world of conditions making for type, and proceeds similarly with other characters in turn. Dr. Sloper's irony is also borrowed by the narrator, who uses it even against its own representative. Seeming thus the doctor's double he comments not only upon the doctor, therefore, but reflexively upon himself.

Eventually the narrator moves from these models, and his voice, particularly in its treatment of the heroine, becomes more and more sober, plain, unmocking. For in the end there is one object that compels his respect, and that is Catherine's love.

> The girl was very happy. She knew not as yet what would come of it; but the present had suddenly grown rich and solemn. If she had been told that she was in love, she would have been a good deal surprised; for she had an idea that love was an eager and exacting passion, and her own heart was filled in these days with the impulse of self-effacement and sacrifice. Whenever Morris Townsend had left the house, her imagination projected itself, with all its strength, into the idea of his soon coming back; but if she had been told at such a moment that he would not return for a year, or even that he would never return, she would not have complained nor rebelled, but would have humbly accepted the decree, and sought for consolation in thinking over the times she

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> had already seen him, the words he had spoken, the sound of his voice, of his tread, the expression of his face. Love demands certain things as a right; but Catherine had no sense of her rights; she had only a consciousness of immense and unexpected favors.

In this chastened style is the narrator's own answer to the problem which he shares with his characters, and Catherine Sloper, whom he has once misestimated, rises in his description to superior dignity among her clever friends and relatives.

Let us now look more sequentially at her history as it is given form by these wilful stylists until she takes it out of their hands. To both sister and brother and to the suitor himself the situation assumes at the outset the character of a play—melodrama or satiric comedy. The doctor "went so far as to promise himself some entertainment from the little drama . . . of which Mrs. Penniman desired to represent the ingenious Mr. Townsend as the hero. He had no intention, as yet, of regulating the *dénouement*." After their first encounter at dinner Morris realizes, however, that the doctor dislikes him. He reports this to Catherine, who fails to say the expected thing: "If my father doesn't think well of you, what does it matter?"—lines from a play, one might put it, he is engaged in writing. Mrs. Penniman, however, promptly says them instead: she is a practised lady of the theater. Catherine, who has no sense of role, only exclaims, "Ah, but it would matter."

Dr. Sloper has made up his mind on the basis of "thirty years of observation" and recognizes a familiar type. "He is a plausible coxcomb," he says, as though life were the Restoration stage or, rather, as though diagnosing a "case" of a kind familiar to him in his scientific practice. Townsend's circumstances—he is a young man who has already wasted his inheritance and is now without prospects—automatically condemn him. Sloper "had passed his life in estimating people (it was part of the medical trade), and in nineteen



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cases out of twenty he was right." Perhaps Townsend is the twentieth case, Mrs. Almond suggests, whereupon the doctor confirms his view by interrogating the young man's sister. He is a scoundrel.

Mrs. Penniman, meanwhile, proceeds in her own way, for, as we know, she "delighted of all things in a drama. . . . Combining as she did the zeal of the prompter with the impatience of the spectator, she had long since done her utmost to pull up the curtain. She, too, expected to figure in the performance—to be the confidante, the Chorus, to speak the epilogue. It may even be said that there were times when she lost sight altogether of the modest heroine of the play in the contemplation of certain great scenes which would naturally occur between the hero and herself." She is impatient with Catherine, who is quiet, not even sulky ("a style of behavior for which she had too little histrionic talent"), and "pervaded by an earnest desire that Catherine should do something striking"—she "wished the plot to thicken." She longed for the girl to "make a secret marriage" to be performed in some "subterranean chapel" and for the "guilty couple" to be lodged in the suburbs where she would visit them "in a thick veil." Eventually she would effect Dr. Sloper's relenting "in an artistic tableau, in which she herself should be somehow the central figure."

Dr. Sloper has sharp words for her interference and ready scorn for her language. Yet he too begins to exhibit behavior which may be deemed melodramatic, as though, by some Gresham's law, melodrama has driven out the better money of his satire. When he understands that Catherine does not intend to give Townsend up, he says, "You can wait till I die, if you like. . . . Your engagement will have one delightful effect upon you; it will make you extremely impatient for that event." The tone of this remark involves both satiric and melodramatic distortion at once. It is logical and untrue. And Catherine, who has only her simplicity to oppose to it, is unable to reply. "It came to Catherine with the force—or rather with the vague impressiveness—of a logical axiom which it

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was not in her province to controvert; and yet, though it was a scientific truth, she felt wholly unable to accept it." He concludes with a declaration that is purely melodramatic: "If you see him, you will be an ungrateful, cruel child; you will have given your old father the greatest pain of his life." After this Catherine passes a sleepless night of weeping but, to her aunt's annoyance, descends to breakfast with undiminished bloom on her healthy cheek. Again she has no sense of her role and shows no sign of having "lain quivering beneath a father's curse." She was "really too modest for consistent pathos."

Of course the *pose* of sincerity is in the accomplished actor's repertoire. When Catherine wants time to convince her father of Morris's worth, her lover, who has decided in favor of a runaway marriage, accuses *her*: "You are not sincere." Mrs. Penniman assures him of the sincerity of her advice, the reverse of her former counsel; and he asks, "Will you come to me next week and recommend something different and equally sincere?" So the situation in Washington Square stands still. Mrs. Penniman, "elaborately reserved" and silent—alert to the demand for style—has, of the little group, "most of the manner that belongs to a great crisis," while Catherine, going about her daily occupations, "was quietly quiet," James notes, adding, "her pathetic effects, which there was no one to notice, were entirely unstudied and unintended." Then Dr. Sloper takes his daughter to Europe for six months so that she may forget her lover, who, in parting, suggests that she try "among beautiful scenes and noble monuments" to "be a little clever about it, and touch the right chord," and bring her father around. But still Catherine commands no art: "The idea of being 'clever' in a gondola by moonlight appeared to her to involve elements of which her grasp was not active."

Truth bursts from behind its disguises finally against a background stern and majestic—a lonely Alpine pass. In describing it James is gravely poetic. Dr. Sloper discloses the cruelty and possessiveness behind his former coolness. He

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tells his daughter that he is a passionate man at bottom and able to be a hard one, and Catherine even recedes a step from him in fear, though she "hardly went so far as to say to herself that it might be part of his plan to fasten his hand—the neat fine supple hand of a distinguished physician—in her throat." We seem to have an hallucinatory glimpse of Sloper's hand—the very instrument and symbol of his accomplished mind—in the act of murder! "Should you like to be left in such a place as this, to starve?" he says next, and the girl cries, "What do you mean?", certain that he proposes to abandon her—as perhaps he really wishes to do—even though he replies, "That's how he will leave you," referring to Townsend.

When the doctor admits, "I am not a very good man," the fairy-tale king is revealed as being wicked and not merely witty. But to his daughter even this confession proves only that he is too clever for her simplicity. "Such a saying as that was a part of his great subtlety—men so clever as he might say anything or mean anything." It is clear that she does not understand that her father has for once resorted to her own style and spoken without indirection. Catherine, who has been schooled to expect only deliberated rhetoric from others, wonders at his intention. When he says, truly, "I can be very hard," she replies, "I am sure you can be anything you please," as though insisting on regarding his behavior, too, as a rhetoric under the command of the will which "pleases" to be this or that. There is an irony—unnoticed by either the ironist or his constant subject—in his statement "You ought to know what I am"; for she has never been able to distinguish in him a core of undissimulated selfhood.

The brutality of Dr. Sloper's cleverness and the meretriciousness of Mrs. Penniman's theatricality continue to expose themselves, and now there is a violence in the doctor's language which thrusts past his control. "If she doesn't let go, she will be shaken off—sent tumbling into the dust," he exclaims to Mrs. Almond. Mrs. Penniman, having spent the previous months entertaining Morris Townsend in Washing-

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ton Square, reveals, despite the narrator's ironic courtesy, the sexual preemption behind her type roles as confidante, intercessor, etc. Her "romantic interest in this attractive and unfortunate young man," however maternal, was such as to supplant her impulse of maternal protection for Catherine. She is perfectly ready to betray her niece, and she agrees to take Catherine down, ease Townsend off, stipulating only, "Ah, but you must have your last parting!" as she holds by the merest ribbon the nearly dropped garment of theatrical disguise.

When Catherine's moment of realization comes it is entirely private, and she gives no sign, though Mrs. Penniman scents out the melodrama of abandonment and receives, for her intrusive comfort, her niece's challenge: "Is it you, then, that has changed him and made him so unnatural?" Of course she is wrong—Townsend has always been unnatural. It is only she who is natural among these rhetoricians. It is quite appropriate that Townsend's parting attitude should be expressed in a letter which, we are told, "was beautifully written, and Catherine . . . kept it for many years after this, [and] was able, when her sense of the bitterness of its meaning and the hollowness of its tone had grown less acute, to admire its grace of expression."

And though she could not herself utilize the rhetoric of deception, she could be silent with the father who desired to know the truth. He had called her a "plain, inanimate girl" in earlier days, and now she rewards him for regarding her as an object, a mere stone, by being as immovable as one and as voiceless. In the end he is reduced to supposing Catherine the "vilest of hypocrites"—the antirhetoric of her silence is incomprehensible to him, and he comes to believe his earlier histrionic outburst which had invited her to wait for his death. He tries to get her to promise that she will not marry Townsend after his death—and she refuses. Then there is the famous final scene of Townsend's return. The "most beautiful young man in the world," now fat and bald, a manifest failure, his very appearance proved only a passing rhetorical

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flourish, stands again before Catherine. Aunt Lavinia is present to draw the curtain and prompt the actors. But Catherine, her simplicity having emerged as something far more profound than their cleverness, leaves them the mystery of her refusal to contemplate.

She also leaves that mystery to the contemplation of that invisible participant who records: "Catherine, meanwhile, in the parlor, picking up her morsel of fancy-work, had seated herself with it again—for life as it were." In the end it is she who has given a form to life, imposed style upon it. It is she who writes in the end her own modest story, her "morsel of *fancy*-work," the work of imagination, of the creativity of her plain nature.

In his heroine's triumph of silence James had, perhaps, come upon a discovery of moral and aesthetic importance. His next novel, grander and richer than *Washington Square*, announces the achievement at last of his own artistic freedom from masters and mentors, or, rather, his progress from mere rejection of them to that incorporation and transformation which assuage what Harold Bloom has called the anxiety of influence. It is not surprising that Isabel Archer should continue to figure in the pattern established in *Washington Square*: she, too, struggles against the imposition of others' styles and, wishing to be free, is caught in the scheme of their false art. Her final discovery of a mode of her own is almost as silent as Catherine's, yet she will go further toward leaving her imprint upon the life around her; she has learned how to absorb the style of Madame Merle. In so doing she continues to express the secret history of the artist, his quest for a true voice, an authentic and original being.

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