Letras

Revista do Programa de Pós-Graduação em Letras
Universidade Federal de Santa Maria

n. 71

Original Article

Letras, v. 71, p. 01-16, e89939, 2025 - DOI:10.5902/2176148589939 - ISSN 2176-1485
Submitted: 27/11/2024 Approved: 27/11/2024 Published: 06/10/2025

Dossiê Henry James

On the modern dialectics of the self in Washington Square and the foundation of the Jamesian existential poetics

Sobre a dialética moderna do eu em *Washington Square* e os fundamentos da poética existencial Jamesiana

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Abstract: This paper has a triple aim: firstly, to reevaluate the work mentioned in the title, which many years after its publication James himself considered beneath his artistic standards (in my eyes, wrongly); secondly, to set out how the modern conception of the self (that according to me is the philosophical base of James's conception of literature) is emotionally, morally and socioculturally concretized; thirdly, to study how the characterological variants postulated by the foregoing interplay in the work.
Keywords: Insubstantiality; Existence; Fulfilment

Resumo: Este artigo tem um triplo objetivo: em primeiro lugar, reavaliar a obra mencionada no título, que, muitos anos após sua publicação, o próprio James considerou abaixo de seus padrões artísticos (na minha visão, erroneamente); em segundo lugar, expor como a concepção moderna do eu (que, segundo acredito, constitui a base filosófica da concepção literária de James) é concretizada emocional, moral e socioculturalmente; e, por fim, estudar como as variantes caracterológicas postuladas pela interação acima se manifestam na obra.
Palavras-chave: Insubstancialidade; Existência; Realização

Introduction

It is doubtlessly intriguing what could have induced James to reject from the canonical New York edition of his works such an insightful and entertaining novel as the one above-mentioned, the only one that (if I am not mistaken) is interspersed throughout with a humorous streak absent in all the others. This question could *prima facie* be answered both on a psychological and a aesthetical realm: "James was not able to achieve both the social commentary and the exposition of the central character that he had projected [...] His subject was simply too large and his space too short" (Zacharias, 1990, p. 210); however, it is perhaps more fruitful to search for an answer to the riddle in the fact that James (whose philosophical depth is beyond any doubt) considered

that he had not been able to set out adequately in the novel the comprehension of the self that has prevailed in Western culture from the 17th. century onwards, which is the kernel of what has been called in the title of these lines the "existential poetics" of the artist, an expression that means the categorical obligation of redefining critically both who one is and what one must do, which is imposed over the protagonist of every major work of James (and particularly over that of *Washington Square*).

Thus, whether literarily or philosophically, the poetics at issue aims at the tension of immanence and value, so that the self is permanently compelled to make up for the lack of a metaphysical transcendence with an always questionable subjective ideal of what is worth doing for existence to be fulfilled. Consequently, unlike the ancient comprehension of the self that postulated it as a substance whose behaviour is ruled by its metaphysical nature, the modern comprehension upholds the insubstantiality of the self, according to which the latter is at any moment just what it has been able to be by its willpower: "our existence has no ultimate foundations; it is a brute fact for which we can find no reason [...]" (Scruton, 1994, p. 315). And although this seems to implicate a ceaseless struggle and the corresponding threat of being irrevocably thwarted, it releases the self nevertheless from any teleological ideal and simultaneously changes liberty into the utmost ontological value, for whose fulfilment is necessary to elucidate the several immanent senses that configurate the very self, above all the subjective ones (such as feelings and illusions), a task in which James excels over any other writer.

Now, if we take his works as the thread of the analysis, it is evident that there are three diametrically opposite characterological variants of the self, which agree respectively with three dramatical settings: firstly, the self that fights heroically against any factor that tries to prevent it from expressing itself freely (as Maisie Beale); secondly, the self that on being crushed by its empirical conditions chooses desperately to give itself over to its ruin (as Roderick Hudson); finally, the self that is neither heroically free nor sublimely vanquished, namely, an average or rather an ordinary person (as... Catherine Sloper, the protagonist of *Washington Square*).

Together with these characterological distinctions, what matters here is that because of the constitutive insubstantiality the final outcome of any of them could easily be comparable to the other two, to the extent that any valuative difference among these options would be swept away by the all-embracing finitude and the sole criterion for appraising what one has been would lie in the imaginative and sentimental configuration of the lived experience. Of course, this would agree with the worst kind of relativism (that is to say, nihilism) if it were not by the element that for James is precisely the keystone of any human phenomenon: the possibility of being conscious of one's behaviour, which is practically the same as the capacity of valuating what one has done: "[...] to free itself of the given, effectively to banish it, and to substitute for what is there or what is *wanted* to be there" (Cameron, 1989, p. 3). Which is why it is crucial not to mistake insubstantiality

for nothingness or uncertainty for senselessness, although that, instead of clarifying the matter, only makes it more problematic, since every ontological determination must be experienced in the lifeworld, whether through the psychosomatic peculiarities of the own self or through every kind of opposition of finitude and value.

Now, if in the light of the foregoing we retake our question about the reason why James excluded *Washington Square* from the New York edition, a plausible answer could be that due to the characterological variant of the self that the artist chose to work with in the novel (*i.e.*, the average one), he was not able in his eyes to display the ontological and dramatical complexity of existence as he could have done if he had opted instead for the heroic or the pathetic variants. This hypothesis has the advantage of binding the characterological determination with a peculiar narrative configuration in each of the three main realms where the existential complexity is dramatically perceptible: the emotional, the moral, and the sociocultural ones. Thus, to put the hypothesis to the test, it will be indispensable to elucidate how the average self appears in *Washington Square* in the following three sections, which for their part agree respectively with the three realms just mentioned. As a whole, this triple elucidation will provide us with the reason of the rejection of the work from the canonical edition as well as with something a lot more important from any intellectual perspective than that: an exposition *in nuce* of Jamesian poetics of existence from a deeper plane than the one where the issue is normally set out. For instead of limiting the study to the nexus of consciousness and fulfilment, our analysis will embrace the nexus of existence and historical determination to evince that the poetics that we speak about is incompatible with the averageness of the protagonist and demands instead either heroism or irredeemable failure in order to make aesthetically sense.

The emotional realm

Before beginning, it must be taken into account that due to the insurmountable immanency of existence, any modern conception of the self privileges the emotional or desiderative dynamism as the only original valuative thread of behaviour, which involves three elements: firstly, the presence of another self that (whether it really exists or is just dreamed of) stands out from that of anyone else in the several relationships within the reach of everyone; secondly, the temporal multiplicity through which any experience flourishes or is thwarted by what one does; thirdly, the set of values and ideals that the particular medium offers for any action to be carried out or justified as a means for the self to be fulfilled. This interaction of otherness, finitude and sociohistorical value entails the most problematic form of the ontological dialectics both from a philosophical and a literary perspective, for if emotion and fulfilment appear each to its own as absolute determinations, the

search for a solution of their difference will be the axis of any narrative (whether realistic or not), and even more because that solution demands the self to be aware of the dramatic limitations that the lifeworld imposes over it through its values and ideals, as well as of the emotional conflicts that it must suffer whether by its excess of imagination or (which is more probable) by the lack thereof.

With this in mind, let us dwell upon the novelistic framework of *Washington Square,* whose title indicates from the onset the concretion that the lifeworld imposes over the self, since it refers to that urban and specifically residential district that still today keeps a relative importance within the congested grid of New York City, above all by its location at the end of Fifth Avenue. Now, although this topographic feature has nowadays a minor importance, it had instead a cultural lustre at the time that the narrative refers to (more or less, between the third and the fourth decades of the 19th. century), for the square was then at the end not of an avenue but of a historical conception of sociability under the aegis of respectability: "[...] this portion of New York [...] has a kind of established repose which is not of frequent recurrence in other quarters of the long, shrill city [...] The look of having had something of a social history" (James, 1984, p. 39). The history at issue is, of course, that of the modern lifeworld where despite the would-be limitless sociopersonal liberty such as that that the United States is supposed to stand ideally for, the self is more often than not carried away by an economical and utilitarian lifestyle that contradicts flatly the liberty that is so much praised as the supreme value of the culture as well as the respectability and sentimentality that are the cornerstones of privacy: "[in the United Sates] everything is a thoroughfare, a place to pass through, not a place to be" (Sears, 1994, p. xvi). In other words, the topographical setting of the novel is simultaneously the battlefield where two historical valuations of existence fight, that of the ideal liberty of the self and that of its alienation under the economic materialism.

In such a setting, it appears the protagonist of the novel, Catherine Sloper, a young woman whose first description does not augur anything good for a would-be heroine: "She was a healthy, well-grown child [...] She was not ugly; she had simply a plain, dull, gentle countenance. The most that had ever been said for her was that she had a 'nice' face; and, though she was an heiress, no one had ever thought of regarding her as a belle" (34). A healthy constitution is surely desirable for everyone, provided, however, that it goes together with a lively temperament or a witty mind, which is unfortunately not the case: "Catherine was decidedly not clever; she was not quick with her book, nor, indeed, with anything else" (34). Thus, whether physically or intellectually the protagonist is unable to make a great impression on anyone, bar, perhaps, by her being the only daughter of a well-to-do physician, who for his part is deeply disappointed not solely by the physical unattractiveness as by the imperviousness of a daughter whose sole gift is her loving him: "Her deepest desire was to please him, and her conception of happiness was to know that she had succeeded in pleasing him. She had never succeeded beyond a certain point" (34).

Consequently, when the novel begins, there seems not to be the least possibility for Catherine to be the protagonist of any story, unless it were that of a nobody that because of an unforeseeable haphazard were suddenly carried away by an irresistible force that compelled her to change drastically. And this dramatic opposition of personal features and social determination sheds light on an aspect of the dialectics of the modern self, *i.e.*, that somehow or other it always contradicts or endangers the valuative and ideal condition of the lifeworld with its emotional constitution, which is here that of someone uncapable of experiencing anything intensely or deeply. At bottom, the worst problem for Catherine is not to be indifferent to intellectual or cultural issues, it is her being incapable of desiring anything so as to fight for it through thick and thin, which is obvious in her most irksome feature, the tendency to keep silence in the most untimely moment, and not precisely because she is wont to think things over before speaking but merely because she does not have anything to say: her silence is a token of vacuity, not of wisdom.

The remission of any existential development to the own emotional dynamism that is for the modern self the way to make up for its ontological insubstantiality can then have completely opposite effects if the former is as insightful as Maisie or as dull as Catherine, which, nevertheless, makes all the more intriguing what someone like the latter can expect of existence bar the simple pass of time. But since no one escapes the all-embracing potency of history in a city like New York (and that is why the topographical reference is essential), our protagonist meets in a familiar party Morris Townsend, a young man that from the first moment makes a strong impression on her:

> Catherine, though she felt tongue-tied, was conscious of no embarrassment; it seemed proper that he should talk, and that she should simply look at him. What made it natural was that he was so handsome; or, rather, as she phrased it to herself, so beautiful (43).

It is worth emphasising Morris's beauty, considering that it is the only gift of his as suitor, which Catherine's father realizes at once: "He is extremely insinuating; but it's a vulgar nature [...] He is a possible coxcomb" (65). Morris embodies so another emotional variant of the average self that, unlike Catherine's vacuity, is reduced to physical appearances and looks for the best of life but lumbers others with the cost, which must here be taken to the letter: he does not work and is neither interested in it for he wants to devote his life to leisure, refinement and enjoyment.

Now, with these antecedents and since very soon a casual acquaintance turns into an engagement under the infatuation that Morris arouses in Catherine, it is not surprising that the relationship of the latter and her father becomes soon terribly conflictive, for he resists the least possibility of accepting Morris, in whom he just sees a fortune hunter. However, what matters is not the dramatic unfolding of the conflict wherein the three characters fight from the opposite sides of love and authority, as the violent arousal of her self-consciousness that Catherine experiences. For James would not be James if he had not displaced the anecdotical dynamism of the narrative

in favour of the analysis of the sorrow that seizes Catherine on seeing that her father rejects adamantly Morris as a son-in-law and (which is worse) that he rejects her too when he realizes that she offers a passive resistance to him with the hope of finding how to make him change his mind concerning Morris, an aim for whose fulfilment she can apparently rely on the fourth main character of the novel, Mrs. Penniman, her aunt, who, however, despite her being widow of a clergyman and her having symbolically taken the place of the late mother of Catherine during the long years that she has lived in her brother's house, is an out-and-out romantic and gives her niece the worst possible advices, as she herself confesses: "my imagination is never quiet, never satisfied. It makes me a bad adviser, perhaps, but it makes me a capital friend" (139). Besides, Mrs. Penniman just wants to please Morris, who almost is for her the prodigal son that she did not have. Thus, she embodies a third emotional possibility of the average self, the idealist one, which together with Catherine's and Morris's show how the ontological insubstantiality can be manifested in the most variegated ways as bluntness, greediness, and foolishness.

This common negative feature notwithstanding, Catherine has something that neither Morris nor Mrs. Penniman have: strength. She is indeed narrow-minded and ignorant, but she is strong enough to go on when she realizes that her father will never give in, which spoils her initial plan of letting time pass so that he could get accustomed to the idea of her marriage. Therefore, the arousal of self-consciousness changes the conflict drastically for Catherine, since instead of merely fighting for love she must mediate between two opposite visions of existence, that of a self placed in a lifeworld whose values are essentially transcendent (as the paternal authority) and that of a self thrown in a turmoil of existential forces that it does not know how to deal with (as in the conflict of obedience and happiness). Besides, it must be remembered that the filial love is deeply rooted in a natural hierarchy of the family ties that opposes the modern comprehension of the self that is instead based on the emotional drives, so that (even without her proposing it) Catherine endangers the total valuative framing of her existence: from the emotional realm of the average self we have passed to a critical lived experience, and the thread of the process is self-consciousness: although Catherine does not intend to be rebellious, it is inevitable for her to be so because she faces the general condition of the modern self from a psychological perspective, namely, the tension of emotion and value. At bottom, for one's wishes to come true it is necessary to break with the natural law under which Catherine will always be subjected to her father, and with all the more reason because her would-be happiness hinges to a great extent upon the paternal resources without which no future marital bliss can be expected: Catherine certainly has a considerable fortune of her own thanks to the inheritance from her mother, but that is not comparable to what she would inherit from her father, who, however, says explicitly that he will not leave her a penny if she marries Morris.

There are so three emotional forces in the situation of the protagonist, that of romantic love, that of filial respect, and that of the anxiety aroused in her (or rather in Morris) by the risk of losing the patrimony indispensable for the would-be marital happiness; unfortunately, the possibility of interweaving them tightly vanishes due to the refusal of Catherine of getting the acceptance of her father by any means other than his free conviction: despite the advice of Mrs. Penniman and Morris, Catherine is not disposed to feign obedience to the paternal authority provided that she will get the inheritance. Thus, although she accepts the invitation of his father for a six-month travel to Europe which ends up lasting a year, it is just to show that she wants to please him without her thinking in the least of postponing the marriage on their return, let alone of giving Morris up. And that is why the conflict changes from a romantic melodrama into an existential revolution, to the point that during the travel the coexistence between her father and Catherine makes evident for both of them that the feeling that unites them is far from the tenderness that it was supposed to be.

In fact, as the narrator tells us in the first chapters of the novel, Dr Sloper always had in his heart of hearts borne Catherine a grudge because a week after her birth his wife and her mother had unexpectedly died, so that she was for him to a certain extent the involuntary reason of his bereavement, to which it must be added her plainness and, to top it all, her decision of marrying Morris. In view of which, it is very understandable that during the travel he gets exasperated more than once:

> "She is about as intelligent as the bundle of shawls", the Doctor said, her main superiority being that, while the bundle of shawls sometimes got lost, or tumbled out of the carriage, Catherine was always at her post and had a firm and ample seat. (152)

At any rate, he keeps his thoughts for himself for he has a plan, which lies in displaying for his daughter the richness of culture and art, in the hope of making her change her mind. But the plan fails because the treasures of Europe do not make any effect on Catherine, as her father confirms in what is perhaps the most thrilling scene of the novel, when in the middle of a desolate spot of the Alps and after several months of travelling he asks Catherine all of a sudden if she has given Morris up, and when she says that she has not, he replies: "you try my patience [...] and you ought to know what I am. I am not a very good man" (154), to which he adds some terrible things about the future that awaits her with Morris. For some time after that, Catherine wonders what he meant on saying that he was not good, and although she attributes initially that to the vehemence of the moment, she begins to swerve from the total devotion that she had until then felt for him on considering that if he is right on saying that he is not good, then he can harm her. The final change in her feelings, however, takes place during the last night they spend in Europe, when her father reveals what he really thinks of her: "A year ago, you were perhaps a little limited – a little

rustic; but now you have seen everything, and appreciated everything, and you will be a most entertaining companion. We have fattened the sheep for him before he kills it" (157).

What Catherine resents is not the crudity of the words as such, it is the contempt for her that they betray: without his meaning it, her father sheds a lurid light on her defects and destroys so the image that she has of him as a loving progenitor. From then on, Catherine takes the iron refusal of his not as a proof of love but as that of the irritation experienced by someone on being contradicted by a fool, as she tells her aunt when they return: "nothing is changed – nothing but my feelings about father. I don't mind nearly so much now. I have been as good as I could, but he doesn't care. Now I don't care either. I don't know whether I have grown bad; perhaps I have. But I don't care for that" (163). This indifference notwithstanding, the fact is that together with the loss of her filial love Catherine also experiences that of the ideal framework wherein she was naturally subjected to the authority of her father: the change is emotional as well as axiological, for instead of the clear hierarchical link between the two now both of them are on an equal footing and she can decide what to do without her being troubled for what he could think of her, which confirms the modern creed that the self is beyond any law that restraints its emotional drive: "[...] every man has a natural right to certain freedom simply because he is a man" (Macintyre, 1998, p. 153).

This drastic transformation of a romantic drama into the peremptory exigency of reorganizing the valuative dynamism of the self goes further on, however, because (as Dr Sloper had foreseen) once Morris discovers that he must live his would-be marital passion without the material support of the inheritance of his thwarted father-in-law, he starts to look for a way out, since he is not ready to spend his life with so blunt a woman:

> He had not forgotten that in any event Catherine had her own ten thousand a year; he had devoted an abundance of meditation to this circumstance. But with his fine parts he rated himself high and he had a perfectly definite appreciation of his value, which seemed to him inadequately represented by the sum I have mentioned. (142)

The character is so not only lazy and irresponsible, he also is calculator and has coolly planned the whole affair with the intention of seizing Catherine's fortune. Consequently, without his being rude or violent (he does not intend to brutalize Catherine), Morris embodies unmistakably that conception of existence that approaches the sentimental dynamism as a means for exploiting others, whether in the field of love or in that of family and friendship, the proof of which is Mrs. Penniman, who acts under the deception of being considered a friend by Morris when the fact is that he despises her: "[...] the more she professed her willingness to serve him, the greater fool he thought her" (177). And this exploitative tendency of the character is more perceptible when he finds resistance, so that Morris takes advantage of the travel of Dr Sloper and Catherine to make use of the house of Washington Square, to the point of getting angry when he cannot do it anymore:

> he had been coming and going [...] so comfortably and irresponsibly, that he had a certain sense of being wronged by finding himself reminded that he must now limit his horizon to the front parlour, which was Catherine's particular providence (164).

With no sound reason to break the engagement, and under the insistence of his wife-to-be of fixing the date of the marriage, he has no resource other than making up he is too stressed by her demands and then blaming Catherine for them. The scene of rupture, without being violent in the least, shows nevertheless the emotional knot of weakness, calculation, and abuse that define Morris and its glaring contrast with Catherine's strength, which is more remarkable due to her shortsightedeness: under the pretext of an imminent business travel, he makes obvious that he will not return for an unspecified time, which is enough for Catherine to see finally his real intentions:

> she hardly knew what had happened; ostensibly she had only had a difference with her lover [...] Nevertheless, she felt a wound, even if he had not dealt it; it seemed to her that a mask had suddenly fallen from his face. He had wished to get away from her. (185)

The last straw that breaks the camel's back is certainly not a blow, but that is not necessary because the emotional dynamism of the modern self goes on through the constant remission of the objective determination to states of mind that escape any clear causality. As it has already been said, the configuration of the existential sense by the emotional dynamism means that the self is determined by what or how it feels more than by the concrete circumstances that it faces, which is why every emotional hindrance can be unbearable, as in the scene at issue, where some hardly articulated phrases reveal a transcendent truth. With no other proof than the abrupt departure of Morris, Catherine feels (or, rather, knows) that he is not true to her. Of course, her intuition shows to be right when some days later she receives a letter where Morris speaks of both of them "[...] as fellow-sufferers, as innocent but philosophic victims of a great social law" (196) and releases her from any vow regarding him.

That this somehow flimsy peripeteia rounds off the emotional realm of existence is another proof of how the modern self has to put up with its essential insubstantiality through the successive rupture of the family ties, the romantic supremacy of love and, last but not least, the symbolical identity of itself in the sociocultural world. Obviously, it is the latter aspect what stands for an authentic revolution in the axiological order of consciousness, *i.e.*, of the manifestation of the self that has to do with how to make up for the flow of becoming that would otherwise be chaotic, something unacceptable for a critical rationality that emphasises the individual discernment over the lack of natural goals: even at worst (as it happens when it is carried away by its emotions), the self must reconstitute what has happened as it can. The situation that it faces is then literally "beyond evil and good" (as Nietzsche would say), for there is no unequivocal value for any course of action bar that that the self is able to create or at least to find starting from how it feels, and

that is why the emotional realm usually marks the insurmountable barrier for most people when it arrives the fearsome moment of deciding what to do so as to escape the worst possibility of finitude, *i.e.*, vacuity.

The moral realm

To take stock of the dramatic and intellectual development of the precedent section, it must be considered that since Catherine has broken with the natural law represented by the authority of his father and from a psychological angle by the idealization of Morris, she has to deal with a problem unconceivable before: how to behave from then onwards? Now, this problem can solely be solved in terms of the values that she must adopt, considering that this implies the contextualization of a liberty and a dignity that had for her until then been idealizations with no existential reference. Fortunately, despite her being from more than a perspective the perfect embodiment of the antihero, Catherine is not weak and can resort to values such as serenity, responsibility, and patience that none of the other selves that make up her intimacy has ever thought of, not even her father, for whom the revaluation of the sense of life is just a waste of time, as he makes clear on commenting the only virtue he would like Catherine to have: "you are good for nothing unless you are clever" (33). For their part, both Morris and Mrs. Penniman belong to those people that temporize without further ado for they do not have any personal value bar the rather civic ones of their class (such as decency).

But Catherine is a different kettle of fish, and although her characterological gifts are limited, they are enough for her to query her values even before her final disappointment: "the poor girl had an admirable sense of honour, [and] it was on her conscience that she ought to live under [the roof of her father] only so long as she conformed to his wisdom" (143). Of course, he snubs her when she tells him that it would perhaps be better for her to live outside his house, and this allows Catherine to realize how relative honour or any other social value is, and through that to intuit the totality of her existence from two completely opposite angles: either as the victim of a pitiless progenitor or, on the contrary, as someone whose opportunities of finding new personal goals hinge entirely upon herself (although they will never be what she had originally dreamt of). And it must be emphasised that instead of having to do with resignation in the commonly negative sense of the word, this attitude agrees with an authentic philosophical comprehension, *i.e.*, with the search for the values that in the situation of the character could turn the abstract or general sense of liberty into a personal determination: "There was something dead in her life, and her duty was to try and fill the void. Catherine recognized this duty to the utmost; she had a great disapproval of brooding and moping" (203). Thus, the critical value displaces the imaginative

aspirations that more often than not are the sole psychological ground of happiness. Last but not least, the expression of this in literary terms would be tantamount to the displacement of drama by the assumption of insubstantiality as the starting point of a conscious existence.

This transformation must even be called spiritual more than moral for it implies to subvert the existential possibilities that Catherine originally had had as the only daughter of a very clever and worldly man that, nevertheless, in his heart of hearts despised her. And the best proof of how this had affected her is paradoxically the intensity of her love for Morris, whom she takes literally as the redeemer of an almost original sin: "We must be very happy together, and we must not seem to depend upon [my father's] forgiveness. And, Morris, Morris, you must never despise me!" (167). But since the would-be redeemer is not up to the task and endorses instead fully the opinion of Dr Sloper, Catherine does not have any option other than fighting against her emotional constitution and, through that, against any idealization.

Now, it is worth emphasizing that independently of the averageness of the self that Catherine embodies, the phenomenon that we refer to opposes the natural aspiration to link good behaviour and happiness (as Catherine had in a first moment intended to do on pleasing her father so that he accepted Morris). This displacement of happiness as the logical reward of good behaviour is, however, the *sine qua non* condition of the process to be really moral in accordance with the quintessential philosophical definition of modern Morals, *i.e.*, Kant's, for which to be good does not have anything to do with how to be happy as the consequence of being virtuous (which was instead the principal aim of the ancient Ethics, above all in its most important definition, namely, Aristotle's) but only with how to obey the categorical imperative of the practical reason, which in any of its three formulations order to act beyond the natural determinations of the self, the most problematic of which is precisely happiness. Why? Because "[...] happiness is indefinitely variable [...]" (Macintyre, 1998, p. 195), which means that its definition hinges upon the opinion of everyone. Thus, the natural law is utterly ineffective by a simple reason: the insubstantiality of the self that has here been our hobbyhorse.

In the case of Catherine, this is clearly perceptible in how the brutal failure of her efforts to identify filial duty with marital happiness by the sheer force of her love sentences her to an authentic "sickness unto death" (Kierkegaard *dixit*) even if she is not able to express it neither theoretically nor emotionally due to her dullness. At any rate, that awful situation can be overcome by a critical self-consciousness that must however not be mistaken for the usual meaning of the term, *i.e.*, the mere awareness that flickers all the time because it is just the psychosomatic determination of the circumstance that the self is in (for instance, the perception of Catherine of how desolated is the spot of the Alps that her father has chosen for speaking with her about the future that awaits her with Morris). Therefore, the usual sense of consciousness alludes to a very dispensable existential determination, for the self can organise most of immediacy simply by the mechanical succession

of the events without being conscious of what it could represent in a certain moment (a stratagem of seizing a substantial dowry) or (which is worse) how such a possibility could abruptly change the total sense of its existence (to pass from being a blunt heiress to be the victim of a fortune-hunter). Thus, on speaking of self-consciousness we do not mean either awareness or the reflexive analysis of what must be done in accordance with a certain moral standard (*i.e.*, inwardness), but the reorientating of one's behaviour and expectations without the support of the natural law that culminates in the affirmation of happiness as the fulfilment of virtue. The process is indeed emotional and valuative but not subjective, which signifies that it demands to set the limits of one's expectations in the light of the all-embracing dynamism of the lifeworld: "[...] experience [...] is an affair of consciousness, but it is also intersubjective and social" (Meissner, 1999, ch. 1).

All this explains that self-consciousness is the ontological condition of a moral or (rather) truly spiritual experience, namely, of an experience of the own finitude beyond the natural bond of virtue and happiness. The spiritual experience aims at choosing values to interpret the totality of the own behaviour as the fulfilment of a liberty that escapes any subjectivation because in order to integrate the diversity of planes that intervene in the personal behaviour it demands to take into account the dialectical constitution of the lifeworld where the self looks after number one. And although this can seem too crushing from a psychological perspective due to the constitutive insubstantiality of the self before the immense potency of the lifeworld, it also makes it deeper and more flexible even when the former is average as Catherine. Which has a truly critic effect for the comprehension of the nexus between the ontological and spiritual realms: to displace the search for a transcendent criterion to discern good from evil in favour of the part that one plays in the lifeworld. Thus, the experience has at the end more to do with the ontological and even hermeneutical constitution of the self than with how to be good or happy.

Needless to say, this does not mean that after her ordeal Catherine becomes an expressive or insightful woman, for, firstly, there is no direct link between the emotional and the moral realms, so that the dullness does not disappear after the fall of idealization. In fact, to pretend to get a fusion of all the characterological features under a daring will or an all-embracing self-consciousness represents a distortion of the correlative existential transformation, which belies flatly the modern aspiration to overcome the empirical limitations of the self, particularly in the ideological version thereof that intends to find spirituality in the mere agitation that stems from immaturity (let us think of Mrs. Pennyman). Face to which it is remarkable that if Catherine does not turn overnight into a wise woman, she gets instead that kind of serenity that so easily blends with the averageness that she embodies. In sooth, "serenity" means here a lot more than a state of mind and aims at the consciousness of the own finitude, which is why it is an ontological redefinition even if the self is not capable of conceiving it as such due to that bluntness that is one of the features of Catherine. Thus, without her being in the least as passionate as Isabel, as subtle

as Fleda, or as shrewd as Maisie, Catherine is able nevertheless to discover an original sense of her existence (although James himself had not apparently been able to recognize it).

The sociocultural realm

The pass from the emotional realm of the self to the moral or spiritual one imposes the rearticulation of the negativity of finitude by values that without their being transgressive as such allow the self to experience emotions and situations that break with any conventional approach to behaviour; *mutatis mutandis*, the pass from the spiritual realm to the sociocultural one imposes the overcoming of the empirical ends of individuality (namely, happiness understood as a substantial thing) in the assumption of the critical experience of the self in a lifeworld whose dialectical or historical contradictions spur the former on to fight against any natural limitation. In fact, this is already perceptible on the moral realm, although it appears therein through the fight against the constraints of duty, whereas on the third and final realm the self is released by serenity from the psychological and sociocultural idealizations that are respectively expressed in the cult to romantic love and in the cult of money.

As it has already been said, serenity is not a metaphysical or transcendent ideal, let alone a state of mind fruit of detachment regarding existence; on the contrary, it is a critical attitude that obliges the self to dispense with any dramatization so as to concentrate instead in the always bewildering historicity of the modern lifeworld, which due to the critical condition of rationality threatens ceaselessly the natural capacities of everyone for reorganizing the multiples fields of experience in an order alien to the all-embracing objectivity that rules society under the sign of profit that in the novel is luridly symbolized by the greediness of Morris, which for its part stems from the materialism of the United States society. Thus, it is very significant that in the work there is a completely different existential value to oppose materialism, which, however, solely appears to make more patent its final vacuity: religiosity.

It must be mentioned that when Catherine conceives the absurd idea of making her father change his mind through time concerning her marriage, her initial prop is not the examination of the situation, let alone the fight of desire and duty to which she resorts later; instead, initially she acts by her religious faith: "Catherine expected a good deal of Heaven, and referred to the skies the initiative [...] of dealing with her dilemma" (107). Unfortunately, the celestial providence never arrives, perhaps because the heroine's faith was not strong enough or because the comprehension of the sense of life is for Modernity and particularly for James absolutely contrary to the intervention of any supernatural agent, which throws the self to the emotional becoming that has been elucidated in the two previous sections and, furthermore, shows the meaninglessness of religiosity face to the violence of existence. Such a stance is then perceptible in the cynical attitude of Morris, for whom

"providence was more especially on the side of clever people, and clever people were known by an indisposition to risk their bones" (142). Before the overwhelming secularization of the values that comes to meet the self everywhere in the modern lifeworld, the idea of a divine intervention is at best a psychological image to fall back on in a crisis.

The thing is worse if from religiosity understood as an imaginative substitute of Morals (Kantian formulation of the modern conception of faith) we pass to religion understood as a social institution of ecclesiastical structure: for instance, despite her being the widow of a minister and attending regularly the dominical services, Mrs. Penniman does not manifest the least trace of piety. And if that can be attributed to her rather childish temperament, the fact is that in view of the symbolical and dramatic part that she plays in the novel (as the respective embodiment of romanticism and of the jester of a cloak and dagger comedy) religion is again contextualized exclusively in terms of the psychological wants of the would-be believer, which is why when she thinks of the marriage of her niece and Morris she imagines it in the most outlandish way: "she had a vision of this ceremony being performed in some subterranean chapel; subterranean chapels in New York were not frequent, but Mrs Penniman's imagination was not chilled by trifles" (108). Thus, the jocosity of the novel that has been mentioned in the introduction as a singularity in the Jamesian corpus, belies flatly the would-be transcendency of religion.

This takes us to an issue apparently opposed to the foregoing: the criticism of the economic profit as the supreme value of society, at least as it is put into practice in the United States, which spearheads the materialistic trend of the modern world. Regarding this, it has above been quoted the passage where Morris fixes his own value as a good in the market of marital relationships, to which it must be added that the real cause of the passional conflict is the inheritance or its possible lack as the economic basis of the relationship, which is why Dr Sloper ends up being too a symbol of the materialistic approach, in this case to knowledge (despite his indubitable professionalism) and of a philistine penchant for culture (despite his refinement). In essence, his attitude is (the same as Morris's) dictated exclusively by a *sui generis* mixture of pride and economic concerns instead of stemming from true devotion to his daughter, as Catherine realizes in a certain moment, starting from which the sentimental conflict turns into the crisis of the valuative ground of existence. For until then Catherine has limited herself, as most people do, to simply follow wonts and ideals without her having elucidated what sense they have for her; but as it has been seen, after the initial bewilderment, she gets to experience a new emotional disposition that is the *sine qua non* condition of her spiritual liberation.

At the risk of being too insisting, it is worth repeating that this by no means entails the transformation of the character into a broad-minded woman, for the reintegration of the latter through the possibilities offered by her place in the lifeworld, far from leading to an assertive or monolithic unification of the emotional trends, brings to light some others that could have remained

utterly unconscious as well as some analytical or practical dispositions that tend to be hardly compatible one another. At the end, the self must discern what to do and why do it in accordance with the determinations within its reach whether circumstantially or characterologically, which for Catherine are tantamount to overcome disappointment without bitterness and learn to coexist with her father during the long years that he still lives without her being emotionally subjected to him anymore. Thus, the consciousness that springs from her ordeal allows the character to discover and enjoy new forms of relationships and feelings although she never gets to experience those that she had originally aimed at.

This reformulation of the desiderative and sentimental framework of the self that is just another way of facing the inexorable finitude and the constant threat of unsettlement leads us to the last issue to be here elucidated, that of the apparently inexplainable fact that Catherine never married even if she had two excellent opportunities for doing it after Morris's desertion. This bewilders the rest of the characters to the end and, above all, the failed husband, who after many years of absence comes back just to find that he is dead and buried for Catherine. What neither he nor the other characters consider is that a truly critical experience forces the self to dispense with all those idealizations that would for Catherine be to marry happily, so that the romantic apotheosis of love could finally be melodramatically fulfilled. But, as the narrator says, she does not marry for the simple reason that she has discovered news ways of enjoying an emotional life that are as gratifying if not as thrilling as those that she expected. Serenity instead of happiness would so be the philosophical answer to the riddle of her spinsterhood. But there is still another, the characterological one, which is even more important, if not to understand the conception of the issue that the work sets out, to appreciate the strength of Catherine as character. When she tells her father that despite his opposition she will marry Morris, Dr Sloper says that she can wait for him to die in order to marry, which would somehow make her guilty of yearning after his death, to which she answers: "if I don't marry before your death, I will not after" (124). Without their being an explicit promise, these words represent nevertheless the effort of Catherine of keeping her wishes for happiness apart from any twisted inward intention such as that that her father's phrase implies. Thereat, not to marry is for her to prove the trueness of her feelings, neither to her father nor to anyone else, but to herself. And that, despite all her limitations, endows her with that resoluteness that changes the plainest self into one of those unforgettable images of human ideality. *Vale*.

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