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ABSTRACT

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Washington Square, like *The Portrait of a Lady*, is an open-ended Henry James novel that concludes ambiguously and unhappily, counter to the trend of many other Victorian novels. While many contemporary Victorian novels center on marriage and inheritance plots, concluding their protagonists' struggles with felicitous performative utterances of "I do" and "I bequeath," Catherine Sloper's future is less clear: at the conclusion of *Washington Square*, she remains both unmarried and disinherited. Both characters and readers alike seem stymied by Catherine's motivations at the end of the novel, as famously studied in Judith Butler's essay, "Values of Difficulty." Catherine seems calculable, submissive, and guileless at the beginning of the novel—both her father, Dr. Sloper, and her suitor, Morris Townsend, judge her to be good but "decidedly not clever." So what happens over the course of the novel to produce Catherine's infelicitous and incomprehensible outcome? This thesis's performative reading of *Washington Square* sheds light on the infelicitous and inscrutable conclusion to Catherine's story. At a critical moment in the novel, when her inheritance is at stake, Catherine refuses to be coerced into offering a promise that is demanded from her by her father. "'I can't explain,'" says Catherine, "'And I can't promise.'" This refusal to promise, or refusal to enact a felicitous performative—accompanied by an inability to explain her refusal—is a suspensive and powerful method of disinterpellation. Catherine unmakes herself as a subject in the capitalist ideology of the male antagonists in Washington Square—and thus, becomes incomprehensible to them—by insisting on infelicity. This powerful disinterpellation helps Catherine regain control over her future.

Keywords: Henry James, Washington Square, performativity

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. Introduction and Critical Overview

Henry James's novel, *Washington Square* (1880), leaves characters and readers alike confused by its protagonist, Catherine Sloper. At the beginning of the novel, Catherine seems to be highly predictable in the eyes of her father, Dr. Sloper: "[S]he was excellently, imperturbably good; affectionate, docile, obedient, and much addicted to speaking the truth" (8). Sincere and good, it seems like Catherine initially trusts the sincerity and goodness of others, including both her father and Morris Townsend, her suitor. Her trusting nature, however, is a vulnerability that makes her susceptible to deception. Because insincerity appears to be imperceptible to Catherine, Dr. Sloper judges her to be good but, "decidedly not clever" (9). Both Townsend and Sloper exploit Catherine's apparently trusting and simplistic nature, taking advantage of a sincerity that seems—according to both men—to be obvious and predictable. Townsend, only interested in Catherine for the sake of her potentially large inheritance, successfully seduces her. Sloper, of whom Catherine was "extremely fond" but "very much afraid" (9), resists Townsend's attempts to secure her inheritance. While Sloper's actions have the outward mien of parental concern, a jealous refusal to turn over the inheritance money at stake in Catherine's potential marriage appears to drive his objection more than anything else. Both Townsend's and Sloper's assumptions indicate their belief that they can effectively manipulate and gaslight the apparently guileless Catherine. However, as the novel progresses, Catherine's words and actions become less and less scrutable to Townsend and Sloper. Catherine's inscrutability reveals that Townsend and Sloper don't know Catherine as well as they think they do, and this revelation casts doubt on their previous assessments of Catherine's character. It is less that Catherine *becomes* inscrutable than Sloper and Townsend in turn come to *realize* her inscrutability. Catherine, for her part, perceives Townsend and Sloper's baser motives, and refuses their efforts to possess and calculate

her. By the end of the novel, it thus is difficult to trust Townsend and Sloper's ready analyses of Catherine. In contrast to their earlier confidence, Sloper and Townsend are finally unable to fathom Catherine's motives. No major character—including her aunt Penniman—seems to understand her.

The purpose of this thesis is to analyze the confusion surrounding Catherine's words and actions to demonstrate that Catherine's vexing incomprehensibility functions as a growing refusal on her part to participate in a discourse saturated with ideological presumptions of early high capitalism in nineteenth-century New York. This lens brings context and focus to previous critical interpretations of James's novel. Consider the culminating instance of dialogic confusion in the concluding scene of the novel, which Judith Butler and other critics have highlighted in their own readings. Townsend cannot understand Catherine's refusal when he returns to Washington Square to re-avow his love to her. Catherine "will not allow" even a renewed friendship, let alone a renewed romance (169). Her interdiction stumps Townsend. "'Why have you never married?'" he subsequently asks (170). His hopes for renewing a relationship were likely based on his assumption that she had never married because she still cared for him. However, Catherine disavows any such romantic sentiment, instead offering another reason:

> "I didn't wish to marry."
>
> "Yes, you are rich, you are free; you had nothing to gain."
>
> "I had nothing to gain," said Catherine.
>
> Townsend looked vaguely round him, and gave a deep sigh. (170)

Even after hearing Catherine's reasons, Townsend is still perplexed: "'But why the deuce, then, would she never marry?'" he later repeats (171). As early as 1975, Millicent Bell called

Catherine's silence a "surrender of style" and an "antirhetoric" (19, 37). Ian F. A. Bell compared Catherine to Herman Melville's character, Bartleby the Scrivener, who is similarly baffling (100). More recently, Judith Butler has marked this moment where not only Townsend, but the reader as well, struggle to understand Catherine. There is no explicit explanation for Catherine's motives from Catherine herself, nor from James. So the reader, like Townsend, "is also left, in a sense, exasperated, cursing, staring" in the absence of a reason ("Values" 208).

Beyond *Washington Square,* J. Hillis Miller notes a similarly baffling moment in another of James's novels, *Portrait of a Lady.* Even after offering several speculative explanations for Isabel Archer's decision to return to her unhappy marriage with Gilbert Osmond, Miller references Butler's assessment of Catherine and concludes that, likewise, readers cannot make a final, "verifiable judgement" about Isabel's decision. A "verifiable judgement," according to Miller, means "a judgement based on what the text says rather than on unfounded hypotheses about the psychologies of the characters" (79). Both Butler and Miller argue that James does not provide enough textual evidence to support a judgement of Catherine's refusal. If they are correct, then perhaps Catherine's motives should remain unverifiable, and readers of *Washington Square* should refrain from interpretative judgement.

Yet Butler argues that something valuable can be negatively discerned from Catherine's indecipherable refusal at the end of the novel. James's silence about Catherine's motives is, for Butler, a call to "cease judging in a way that assumes we already know in advance what there is to be known" (208). This call to "cease judging" is important especially when Townsend and Sloper's actions are considered: *Washington Square* uncomfortably invites the reader to reflect whether they, too, will judge Catherine like Townsend and Sloper do. Butler argues a "suspension of judgement" in the case of *Washington Square* is valuable because it "honors what

cannot be fully known or captured about the Other," contrary to the way that Townsend and Sloper continually try to "capture" Catherine ("Values" 208). Scholar Dorothy J. Hale calls this incomprehensible experience with the Other, which is valued by new ethicists like Butler, a "felt encounter with alterity" (899). According to Hale it is encounters with alterity—like Townsend's perplexing encounter with Catherine—that give literature its value for new ethicists, for whom "literature does not technically teach us anything at all, unless we understand learning as the overthrow of epistemology by experience, the troubling of certainty by an apprehension that comes through surprised feeling" (903). Indeed, Butler identifies this "overthrow of epistemology by experience" as a challenge to the knowable that brings us to the "limits of our own epistemological horizon" and provides a possible opening for political and social change ("Values" 206). Thus, this incomprehensible moment at the conclusion of *Washington Square,* identified by Butler and labeled "the aesthetics of alterity" by Hale, is valuable as a method of bringing us to the edge of the knowable, pressing our epistemological borders, and eventually (hopefully) expanding those borders in order to enact political and social change.

Butler and Hale have both posited the usefulness of encounters with alterity like the one provided by James at the end of *Washington Square*, and Butler has thoroughly and persuasively analyzed Catherine's incomprehensibility at the end of the novel within an ethical framework. Yet there are also events leading up to Catherine's refusal of Townsend in the memorably stymying conclusion of the novel that can further elucidate that moment. Both Townsend and Sloper believe that they understand Catherine at the beginning of the novel; it is only as the novel progresses that they realize how misguided their calculations about Catherine were. What happens over the course of the novel to obscure Catherine's motives? The purpose of this thesis is to analyze the erosion of understanding that occurs over the course of the novel by looking at

linguistic clues in Catherine's language. Thinking of language as performative helps us attend to the subtle shifts and slippages in Catherine's language that occur during her conversations with Townsend, Sloper, and others. Butler is right that many of the judgements that readers would like to make about Catherine in this final moment of the novel are stymied by the lack of textual evidence explaining her perspective. But while it may not be possible to make an ethically verifiable judgement about Catherine's refusal of Townsend at the end of the novel, there can still be something gleaned in the linguistic signposts that lead up to the novel's perplexing conclusion. While my own reading will not attempt to liquidate Catherine's final alterity, contrary to Butler's recommendations, I will suggest *why* and *how* she becomes incomprehensible by analyzing her language during her most confusing dialogical encounters in the novel.

My reading agrees with Butler's that "the norms that govern communicability are not singular" and that defying those norms is what challenges shared understanding ("Values" 199). Defying those norms is to risk unintelligibility, yet Butler sees the necessity of this risk, echoing Theodor Adorno's view that "one of the most important ways to call into question the status quo is by engaging language in nonconventional ways" ("Values" 200). Butler and Adorno are both concerned with how our language carries ideological assumptions that cannot effectively be challenged without challenging the conventions of communicability, even if that means risking intelligibility ("Values" 200). Indeed, Butler's work manifests a continued concern for how linguistic and cultural norms support ideologies and create subjects. If Butler is right that comprehension is at risk when linguistic conventions for communicability are defied, then the question of *why* Catherine becomes incomprehensible hinges on a new question: what linguistic conventions and ideological assumptions are being defied by Catherine that make her

incomprehensible? And if Catherine becomes incomprehensible by defying "the norms that govern communicability," how does she do so? In *Washington Square,* the linguistic conventions that Catherine is defying are those that reinforce the emergent ideologies of early high capitalism, which in the world of the novel tend to reduce all possible value and significance to one's "interest" and competitive advantage. Catherine becomes incomprehensible to her interlocutors to the degree that she resists capitalist presuppositions latent in the terms surrounding marriage and inheritance in the novel. But is the attempt to explain *why* Catherine becomes incomprehensible—by analyzing the linguistic and ideological conventions that she resists—the same as trying to comprehend Catherine in the same judgmental way that and Townsend and Sloper did? Does such an attempt undermine the "aesthetics of alterity" at work in the novel? I believe not. The purpose here is not to judge Catherine by pretending to understand her completely, but rather to propose broader contextual reasons for her unintelligible exchanges with Townsend and her father.

Furthermore, it is productive to examine *why* Catherine becomes incomprehensible because such an examination helps answer the second—and perhaps more important—question of *how* Catherine became incomprehensible. How can one resist ideologies with words when the words themselves are fraught with those ideologies? There are two ways in which Catherine's attempts at linguistic resistance manifest themselves in *Washington Square*. The first section of my thesis explains how Catherine's resistance to capitalist values manifests itself through slippages in meaning evident in Catherine's language. These slippages reveal that Catherine's values system has shifted. When Catherine becomes confusing, it is ironically because she is using the same *words* as Townsend and Sloper without referring to the same *things*, nor the same *values*, that the two men unreflectively associate with those words. This slippage in language,

this gap between Catherine's words and the values they implicitly represent, reveals Catherine's attempts to resist capitalist ideologies that have become wholly determinative to her interlocutors. Catherine reappropriates their pecuniary language; however, she struggles to disentangle herself from the conventional meanings and ideologies behind each reappropriated word. But these slippages are not her only means of resistance. There is another, powerful way in which she subverts the language used against her. Drawing upon performativity, the concluding section of this thesis will continue to explore the relationship between words and things to read the second way that Catherine attempts to resist capitalist values: through a refusal to promise. Her refusal effects a disinterpellation, a negative yet productive way of using language to extricate herself from the ideologies that bind that language to a shared form of assent. Catherine's story illustrates the power of refusal as a productive means of challenging conventions and inviting change. Catherine's disinterpellation will also shed light on James's preoccupation with unhappy endings in the broader context of contemporary 19th-century novels.

This analysis of *how* Catherine became incomprehensible will hopefully add to the conversation about the epistemological utility of incomprehensibility. For, while defying conventions—as Catherine does by risking her own incomprehensibility—has the potential to be epistemologically useful, such an insistence can render the speaker lonely, alienated, and esoteric. Is it true that, as Butler suggests, it is necessary to engage with and insist upon "what is isolating, estranging, difficult, and demanding" ("Values" 203)? Can we productively insist on the incomprehensible in order to disentangle ourselves from harmful ideologies implicit in our language, especially when doing so is necessary to create and enfranchise agentic subjects that would otherwise be marginalized?

2. Capitalist Values and Slippage

As Catherine's incomprehensibility is caused by her resistance to linguistic conventions that assume capitalist ideologies, it is useful to begin by examining those conventions of high capitalism that are manifest in the language of *Washington Square.* It is likely that James would have been quick to critique the commercialism of New York society: Colm Toibin notes a latent anger in James's writing about New York City, "an anger, quite unlike any other anger in James, at what has been lost to him, what has been done, in the name of commerce and material progress, to a place he once knew" (247). Thorstein Veblen's influential 1899 work, *The Theory of the Leisure Class,* which postulates the origin and attributes of the upper-class in capitalist modernity, is a helpful resource for recognizing the ideologies that James targets. In his chapter on "Pecuniary Emulation," Veblen identifies the leisure class's tendency to use money as a sign of status and repute. He uses the following language to describe how industrialized societies view the possession of money: "property now becomes the most easily recognized evidence of a reputable degree of success…. It therefore becomes the *conventional* basis of esteem" (24; my emphasis). It is significant that Veblen uses the word "conventional" in this context. The capitalist ideology that property is the "conventional basis of esteem" is manifest in the linguistic conventions of Townsend and Sloper, for, as Ian F. A. Bell notes, "The vocabulary of pecuniary acquisition infiltrates the language of all three major characters," Sloper, Townsend, and even Mrs. Penniman, "where Catherine is concerned" (92). Throughout the novel, Sloper and Townsend use pecuniary language to discuss their dispute over Catherine—a dispute which, in their minds, has everything to do with money and thus has everything to do with repute. Sloper, for example, speaks of "expense" and "economy" when talking about his projected victory over Townsend. Sloper declares that he is unresentful of Townsend's presumptuous use of the doctor's study during the Sloper's trip to Europe: "'I don't grudge him the comfort of it; it is the

only one he will ever enjoy at my *expense*. It seems likely, indeed, that I shall be able to *economize* at his own'" (127; my emphasis). Sloper predicts that even if Townsend has stayed at the house at his *expense*, he may eventually be able to *economize* at Townsend's expense by withholding Catherine's inheritance. Sloper sees the whole relationship between Townsend and Catherine as a transaction, and it is a transaction that Dr. Sloper has determined will not happen at his personal expense.

Townsend is no better. He too, sees his relationship with Catherine as an economic transaction whose ultimate end is to increase his comfort and repute. Townsend coldly calculates how to receive the most monetary gain from his relationship. His only hesitations come from the risk of losing money, never mind a concern for his own sincerity or for Catherine's feelings: "Between the fear of losing Catherine and her possible fortune altogether, and the fear of taking her too soon and finding this possible fortune as void of actuality as a collection of empty bottles, it was not comfortable for Morris Townsend to choose" (104). In what sounds like the language of a speculative investor, Townsend calculates the future of his relationship based on how much he is willing to risk for monetary gain and the associated repute. Never minding how such a mercenary marriage would be emotionally impoverished, Townsend fears the potential economic impoverishment that would come from being cheated out of Catherine's full inheritance and the accompanying loss of repute. The decision is not just about Catherine; instead, as Townsend's actions have abundantly demonstrated by this point in the novel, the decision has always been about "Catherine *and her possible fortune."* We see Townsend's pecuniary preoccupation even more explicitly in one of his interviews with Mrs. Penniman. Mrs. Penniman warns Townsend of Dr. Sloper's doubts about the marriage. The Doctor "'pretends that you like—you like the money,'" warns Mrs. Penniman, to which Townsend responds "'I *do* like the money'" (77).

Catherine and her inheritance are inseparable to Townsend, and by conflating Catherine with her inheritance, Townsend wholly commodifies her.

Scholars have noted the ways in which Catherine is commodified in the novel. As Ian F. A. Bell remarks, both Catherine's clothing and speech "point to her place in the shop window where commodities are displayed," and the front parlor can even be seen as a metaphor for "the showcase for her display" (91-2). The capitalistic language of Townsend and Sloper does not figure her as an autonomous subject, but as an object with monetary value to be gained or lost. More recently, Leonardo Buonomo notes how Morris Townsend is also commodified in the novel. Townsend commodifies his personal appearance or physical beauty, advertising himself as an object for "visual and social consumption," according to Buonomo (34). Towsend is "simultaneously a consumer and a living commodity, in the way he offered himself up for visual consumption as a thing of beauty and a product to be purchased at a very high price," i.e. the price of Catherine's inheritance (32). In another instance where Townsend is wrestling with the decision of whether or not to wed a disinherited Catherine, we see his self-commodification. Townsend seems to have a "perfectly definitive appreciation of *his value*," which he thinks is "inadequately represented" by the sum of Catherine's income (from her mother's trust) without her father's added inheritance (104, my emphasis). Buonomo's reading of Townsend as a figure representative of the new era of materialism in New York, notes how Townsend's language is "appropriately and unmistakably economic" (40). Thus, Townsend's pecuniary language ideologically inscribes his potential marriage with Catherine as nothing so much as a business transaction that would trade his physical commodities for her wealth and its accompanying social capital.

Furthermore, Townsend and Sloper's linguistic conventions also manifest other capitalist values that Veblen identifies: competition and comparison. Veblen identifies the leisure-class convention that "it becomes the able-bodied man's accredited office in the social economy to kill to destroy such competitors in the struggle for existence as attempt to resist or elude him, to overcome and reduce to subservience those alien forces that assert themselves refractorily in the environment" (15). In other words, Veblen characterizes the leisure-class quest for social and pecuniary domination as a cutthroat competition, even a war. Townsend and Sloper certainly see Catherine as a battleground, and they compete against each other for her inheritance. When Catherine agrees to marry Townsend without care for her father's blessing or his portion of her inheritance, Townsend responds by saying, "'I don't like to be beaten'" (124). For while he already enjoys full possession of Catherine's devotion and affections, he would have lost her full inheritance, and thus lost the pecuniary "competition" with her father. Dr. Sloper similarly speaks of the whole affair in the terms of competition. Even after years have passed since Townsend jilted Catherine, Sloper fears "'a blind'…an arrangement between them'" in which Townsend would finally outplay Sloper by marrying Catherine after the doctor's death and receiving her inheritance (156). The sense of competition between Sloper and Townsend is heightened because, as Barry Maine notes, "one just cannot get away from the fact that Townsend is the face in the mirror that Dr. Sloper does not want to see," since Dr. Sloper himself (hypocritically) married into money (221). Indeed, scholars have been noting the similarities between Doctor Sloper and Morris Townsend at least as early as William Kenney's 1970 essay, "Doctor Sloper's Double in *Washington* Square." Thus, the language that both Townsend and Sloper use to describe the issue of Catherine's relationship is the language that one would use to

describe capitalist competition; and unfortunately, in this competition, Catherine is not a winner, or even a player. Rather, Catherine, here again, is the commodity or prize to be won.

Catherine, however, eventually attempts to resist the linguistic conventions used by Townsend and Sloper. This resistance becomes apparent in her language after her return from her trip to Europe. Upon her return, Catherine declares that she does not care about her "property" anymore; she would be happy to marry Townsend without her father's blessing or her inheritance. "'I have given it up. I don't care now' . . . . 'I have changed in that way,'" she says to Mrs. Penniman (121). Catherine disavows concern for her pecuniary property, or her inheritance. But, ironically, just a few pages after this disavowal of "property," Catherine uses the word "property" again to describe Townsend. During their first reunion after her trip to Europe, we read that "it was some time before [Catherine] could believe again that this beautiful young man was her own exclusive *property*" (123; my emphasis). While Catherine's values, at this point, diverge from Townsend and Sloper's, Catherine's reappropriation of the word "property" fails as a means of resistance in some ways; it keeps her entangled in their capitalist ideologies. Catherine expresses her relationship with Townsend using the same commercial terminology that is conventionally used by Townsend and Sloper. While it is true that she ostensibly shares their linguistic conventions in this moment, she is using their shared commercial terminology in a divergent way; Townsend and Sloper are wholly concerned with the financial property that is Catherine's inheritance, while, in contrast, Catherine is more concerned with emotional property. Here we begin to sense that Catherine's values do not align with the values that Townsend and Sloper would align with the term. We begin to see some slippage in meaning, some difference in the way Catherine uses the word "property" that reflects how her values differ from Townsend and Sloper's. When Townsend calculates his relationship

with Catherine, he cannot separate "Catherine *and* her possible fortune." But when Catherine speaks of "property," it is after disavowing her inheritance; her definition of the term is distinctly non-pecuniary. However, the values shift implied by this slippage in language remains implicit and inexpressible. This means of resistance through reappropriation of language feels inadequate, and Catherine remains entangled in the capitalist ideology.

Another example of the same kind of slippage comes during Townsend's last meeting with Catherine, when his intentions to stop courting her become apparent. During this meeting, Townsend tries to escape the fraught situation with Catherine by announcing his plans to go away on "business." But Catherine resists his attempt to leave. "'What is your *business*?'" Catherine asks. Then, she answers her own question: "'Your *business* is to be with me'" (138; my emphasis). But Townsend doesn't seem to understand, or perhaps doesn't want to understand, the values shift behind Catherine's reappropriation of this pecuniary term. Townsend tries to explain that his business will be to buy cotton in New Orleans, and he tries to defend his position by claiming financial support as the reason for his visit. But Catherine responds with the exclaimed accusation, "'You think too much about money!'" (138). Townsend is thinking about business in the financial sense. He is using the word to represent his personal efforts to accumulate money. Catherine tries to use the same word against him, using "business" not to represent his efforts to accumulate money (although that is, ironically, the intention behind Townsend's courtship), but rather to represent business in the terms of personal affairs and occupations, even priorities and obligations. In saying that Townsend thinks "too much about money," Catherine is accusing him of thinking too much about the pecuniary definition of business instead of thinking about his personal obligations to her. In the same way that Catherine tries to separate financial "property" from emotional "property," she tries to separate financial

"business" from personal "business." But there is irony here again in her linguistic reappropriations. While Catherine seems to use the economic language of her male antagonists with subversive intent, that fraught language still implicates her in the very capitalist ideologies that she attempts to resist. Townsend does not seem to understand her equivocal point; he cannot fully grasp the values shift implicit in her language.

We see slippage in meaning again—and even more powerfully—at the end of the novel when Townsend visits Catherine in an attempt to rekindle their romantic relationship. That linguistic slippage is a key reason why Catherine becomes incomprehensible in this moment. The slippage in this instance revolves around the word "gain." It is Townsend who first supplies this term in his attempt to understand Catherine's dismissal of him. Townsend, thinking aloud, hypothesizes why Catherine didn't marry: "'you are rich, you are free; you had nothing to gain,'" he says. In response, Catherine simply repeats Townsend's words back to him: "'I had nothing to *gain,*'" she says (170; my emphasis). But while she uses his same words, it does not seem like Catherine's repetition actually confirms Townsend's hypothesis, and Townsend remains perplexed. Townsend wants to believe that Catherine did not marry because, being comfortably provided for, she had nothing to "gain" in the monetary sense of the word. It is natural that Townsend would assume that Catherine was motivated by monetary gain, since he himself pursued Catherine for the sake of her inheritance. But Catherine's answer perplexes Townsend because it doesn't seem like Catherine was concerned with "gain" in the monetary sense. Catherine becomes incomprehensible to Townsend in this moment because they have different value systems encoded in their language. Indeed, sometimes it almost seems like they are speaking two different languages. Townsend's language reveals capitalist values of wealth and domination. Catherine's language implies a different set of values: sincerity, goodness, and

integrity. Catherine's use of a term encoded with capitalist values is incomprehensible because she is using shared terms to signify an alien set of values.

We discern that Catherine values emotional gain over pecuniary gain. Sincere Catherine values love in its most sincere sense. We discern that Catherine is referring to the fact that she had nothing to "gain" in that regard. She is fully aware of Townsend's duplicitous character, and many years have passed since that terrible revelation when "a mask had suddenly fallen from his face" and Catherine realized the "angry and cruel" things that Townsend had said and done to her (142). No, Catherine is not interested in renewing a relationship, nor was she interested in other suitors since. She received two additional offers of marriage after the scandal with Townsend. The first offer came from a widower who "had desired to make a marriage of reason" and chose Catherine "for what he supposed to be her latent matronly qualities" (157). His reasons for courting Catherine were rational, not sentimental, so this was also a match that lacked sincere affection, and Catherine accordingly refused him. But what of the second offer of marriage, from a lawyer who was supposedly "seriously in love with her"? His sincerity is suspect too, since this "clever young lawyer" chose Catherine with "shrewdness"—terms that would not be out of place in Veblen. Even more telling is the fact that after being rejected by Catherine, the lawyer quickly "consoled himself, and married a very different person, little Miss Sturtevant, whose attractions were obvious to the dullest comprehension" (157). Catherine's suitors were rational, "clever," and shrewd. But were they good? Were they sincere? Did they love Catherine? Did Catherine even love them? Her integrity is reminiscent of another American heroine, Jo March, who refused Laurie's proposal despite social and familial pressures, doubtful of her own sincerity. In telling Townsend that she had "nothing to gain," it seems that Catherine was trying to point to this lack of sincerity in all of her previous suitors, including him.

Catherine's language, though it borrows capitalist terminology, does not express capitalist values, which is what causes confusion and slippage. Sloper exemplifies capitalist values when he says, "'You are good for nothing unless you are clever'" (7). For Townsend and Sloper, cleverness is a highly esteemed virtue because cleverness is what enables men to, as Veblen puts it, compete and dominate others in the struggle to accumulate wealth, the conventional symbol of power. Catherine's character, however, is a subversion of these values. Though not clever, she was "excellently, imperturbably good" (8). She valued goodness and sincerity in others more than she valued the cleverness that is essential for social and economic survival in capitalist societies. This is what causes the dissonance between her and Townsend when they talk about "gain." Townsend is talking about gain in the pecuniary sense, while Catherine has an altogether different kind of "gain" in mind, just as her uses of the words "property" and "business" reflect similar semiotic slippage. Townsend's deception seems to have opened Catherine's eyes to the fact that people aren't always sincere about what they say. Catherine seems to have realized that that sincerity is not privileged or prioritized in the capitalist ideologies that are implicit in the vocabulary used by characters in the novel—including Townsend, Sloper, and even herself—so her echo of the word "gain" remains hauntingly dissonant.

3. Refusals and Suspended Performatives

This dissonance is due largely to the fact that Catherine is working within a language fraught with capitalist ideologies. As the novel progresses, Catherine becomes conscious that her personal values differ significantly from the capitalist values that are represented in the language of Townsend and Sloper. This value difference is not trifling; although Townsend and Sloper disregard it, Catherine has real stake in their ongoing competition for her inheritance. It is ironic

that their competition is concerned with expense, because, throughout the novel, Townsend and Sloper's cruel actions come at Catherine's expense. The stakes are high for Catherine because the value differences keep her, in essence, from living a life that is "liveable," as Butler would put it. But for Catherine, the problem is how to defend herself against a compromised language with that same compromised language. We have already seen the slippages that occur when capitalistic terminology is subverted by Catherine's unconventional use of words like "property," "business," and "gain." In her use of the latter word, especially, Catherine risks incomprehensibility and inscrutability. There is tension, dissonance, and conflict latent in her reappropriation of their language without its ideological assumptions. But there is another, perhaps even more significant, instance when Catherine becomes incomprehensible, for a related but different reason. The slippages in language we have been tracing do not fully account for every instance of Catherine's growing incomprehensibility. There is one more moment in the novel that merits consideration, and this moment is unmatched in its power. Catherine becomes inscrutable in this moment, but not because there is a misunderstanding that hinges on the use of a particular word. Rather, in this instance Catherine's incomprehensibility is the product of a refusal: a refusal to promise. Catherine doesn't become incomprehensible in his instance because she reappropriates a word—instead, her refusal to promise is, in a way, a refusal to take up words at all, a refusal to enter into the explicit and implicit contracts demanded of her.

Catherine's refusal to promise comes many years after Morris Townsend's original pursuit of Catherine, when she is living as a single, unmarried woman, "greatly liked" in her community but nonetheless aware of "something dead in her life," aware that "Morris Townsend had trifled with her affection, and that her father had broken its spring" (158). Dr. Sloper, at this point, is old and retired. In an attempt to control Catherine's actions after his death, Dr. Sloper

tries to exact a promise from her. “Promise me not to marry Morris Townsend after I am gone,” he demands. He asks for a promise out of fear of a “‘blind’” in which Townsend and Catherine will wait until he is dead to marry and cheat him out of the money he refused to give them (156). After Catherine refuses her father’s requested promise, he asks for a reason for her refusal, presumably expecting a reason that will validate his concerns of “‘a blind.’” But this is Catherine’s response:

> “I can’t promise,” she simply repeated.
>
> “You are very obstinate,” said the Doctor.
>
> “I don’t think you understand.”
>
> “Please explain, then.”
>
> “I can’t explain,’ said Catherine. “And I can’t promise.” (160)

Sloper’s presumption is uncannily similar to Townsend’s at the end of the novel: both Townsend and Sloper presume that Catherine 1) still loves Townsend and 2) still has a vested interest in her inheritance. But Catherine corrects her father’s misunderstanding when he accuses her of being obstinate about those two things, saying “I don’t think you understand.” Sloper, however, remains confused: “‘Upon my word,’ her father exclaimed, ‘I had not idea how obstinate you are!’” (160). It seems like Sloper believed that Catherine would do as she was told, as she had faithfully honored and obeyed him as a child in years previous. “She will do as I have bidden her,” he confidently states earlier in the novel (70). But Catherine refuses to promise—why? Except for a feeling that her father’s demand for a promise was “an injury to her dignity,” it is worth noting that Catherine herself “scarcely understood” her reason for refusing to promise, so she does not, perhaps even cannot, offer a full explanation to her father (160). So, in sum, Dr.

Sloper requests a promise from Catherine, and Catherine replies by refusing to promise. Neither Dr. Sloper nor Catherine seem entirely to understand why.

This refusal to promise is intriguing because promises were used by scholar J. L. Austin as prime examples of performatives in his Harvard lectures, later published under the title, *How to Do Things with Words*, which gave birth to the theory of performativity (9-11). Performatives, according to Austin are utterances that don't just *say* something, but also *do* something. According to Austin, in the case of performatives, "the issuing of the utterance is the performing of an action" (6). Promisers, for example, don't just say "I promise"; they also *do* something in saying "I promise." According to Austin, promising is not just *saying* an utterance but *doing* an act: the act of making a commitment. Of course, there are many things that can go wrong when enacting performatives. For performatives to be successful (or "felicitous," as Austin puts it) several conditions must be met, not the least of which being the fact that there "must exist an accepted conventional procedure having a certain conventional effect" (13). Thus, the act of promise-making is a conventional procedure that Dr. Sloper tries to extract from Catherine. A felicitous, affirmative response from her ("I promise to never marry Morris Townsend") would have implied that Catherine accepted and shared the conventions underlying Dr. Sloper's promise. Those shared conventions include the perhaps obvious convention or culturally shared, implicit "rule" that promising means committing oneself to do what is promised. We have already seen, however, the deeper underlying conventions and ideologies latent in Townsend and Sloper's language. There is more at stake here, for Catherine, than her acceptance of the procedural conventions behind promise-making (indeed, Catherine is not even accepting a promise that has already been made, but rather being asked to initiate a promise of her own). It seems that, by allowing herself to be coerced into this promise, she would be accepting other

conventions and their implications as well. She would be binding herself to the ideology behind Dr. Sloper's words, the significations and values behind the pecuniary language that she has grappled with throughout the novel. By agreeing to promise, Catherine would be actively participating in the same system that has repeatedly commodified her. It would be a surrender to comply by offering the promise that Dr. Sloper tries to exact from her.

But Catherine resists and unbinds herself through her simple statement: "I can't promise." What is performatively happening when Catherine responds to a request for a promise by refusing to promise? It is tempting to think of this refusal to promise as a negative performative. Indeed, a negative performative is perhaps one means of resistance in situations like Catherine's. Andrew Parker and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick identify negative performatives as utterances belonging to the same "powerful class" as "disavowal, renunciation, repudiation, [and] 'count me out'" (9). Parker and Sedgwick give the example of responding performatively with "'[d]on't do it on my account'" to the performative "'I dare you.'" Since, as has been previously noted, performatives rely on shared conventions in order to be comprehensible, negative performatives, though powerful, are much more susceptible to incomprehensibility since they are marked by "the asymmetrical property of being much less prone to becoming conventional than the positive performatives" (9). Negative performatives are often unconventional and thus vulnerable to incomprehensibility. They have a "high threshold" (9). Indeed, Catherine's refusal to promise has a "high threshold." It is unconventional, unpredictable, and incomprehensible, as Sloper does not understand Catherine's reason for refusing to promise not to marry Townsend.

But is Catherine actually uttering a negative performative here, or is there something more at work? Parker and Sedgwick argue that negative performatives are disinterpellations, and

I would agree that Catherine is disinterpellating through her refusal to promise. By agreeing to promise, by enacting that performative, Catherine would be binding herself to the capitalist ideology that Dr. Sloper functions in. Catherine would risk being hailed into the interpellative system of capitalism if she contracted this promise, which relies on shared linguistic conventions—shared, conventional meanings that repeatedly objectify, commodify, and monetize—for its felicity. But while Catherine doesn't agree to promise, her response differs from a negative performative. A negative performance still enacts a positive, performative action, even though that action negates something. Catherine's refusal to promise is not a negative performative because instead of negating the performative of a promise that Dr. Sloper requests, and thus still using that performative, Catherine does not engage with any form of the requested performative of a promise. Instead of disinterpellating by employing a negative performative, Catherine disinterpellates by refusing to take up the requested performative at all. Instead of saying "I don't promise," Catherine says, "I can't promise." Catherine's resistance is a form of suspensive inaction, a method of disentangling herself from the terms of assent by avoiding the conventional performative altogether. When describing Catherine's "surrender of style," Millicent Bell notes that Catherine experiences "an inability to employ any manner dictated by social or literary convention, almost at times, *a seeming inability to speak or do at all*" (19, my emphasis). Catherine is unable to speak and do things with words performatively because she refuses to participate in the conventions of Sloper's language, including the commodifying capitalist ideology latent in that language. Her inaction, or refusal to take up the performative, is not a mute or unintelligent complacency. Because it is suspensive, Catherine's refusal is arguably an even more powerful means of resistance than employing the negative performative. She disinterpellates herself not by negating the linguistic weapon used against her,

but by refusing to pick up the tool at all. She uses a kind of powerful non-language in this moment.

Catherine's refusal to take up either the positive or negative performative is a disinterpellation because refusing to promise is, in this case, a refusal to be hailed or interpellated by the capitalist ideology and, thus, a refusal to be made a subject within that system. As Louis Althusser argues, "ideology hails or interpellates individuals as subjects" ("Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses" 19). Catherine unmakes herself as a subject in the capitalist ideology, which clarifies why she becomes unintelligible in this moment. Her unintelligibility, the confusion she causes, is a product of her pushing back against what Althusser calls the "obviousness" of ideology. Althusser argues that ideology "imposes (without appearing to do so, since these are 'obviousnesses') obviousnesses as obviousnesses," which makes us say "'That's obvious! That's right! That's true!'" (16-17). Catherine's refusal to promise is anything but obvious to Sloper. It seemed obvious to him that she would agree to promise, then it seems obvious to him that she refuses to promise because she still loves Townsend. But Catherine bafflingly eludes Sloper's analyses, her actions and motives—her "obstinance"—remaining a much less-than-obvious mystery to him. While there are many moments throughout the latter part of the narrative that reveal Dr. Sloper's miscalculations of her, this is perhaps the most revealing. This incomprehensible moment places Catherine outside of the ideology while simultaneously, perhaps, giving Dr. Sloper a glimpse of the ideology that he operates within. Althusser argues that it is "necessary to be outside ideology" in order to be able to say "I am in ideology" or "I was in ideology" (18). The ideology "has no outside" for Dr. Sloper, as he is oblivious to the obviousness of his capitalist ideologies, while, for Catherine, the ideology has become "nothing but outside" her at this point (18).

Catherine's disinterpellation unmakes her as a comprehensible, recognizable subject within a capitalist framework, putting her outside of the capitalist ideology that remains invisible to Dr. Sloper. It is perhaps Catherine's unmaking herself as a subject that leads Ian F. A. Bell to conclude that the life left to Catherine at the end of the novel as she picks up her fancy-work "for life, as it were" (171) "will be devoid of life because living has been frozen by the impossibility of dialogical relationship, by the categories of the marketplace" (Bell 103). According to Bell, Catherine is "devoid of life" at the end of the novel because she is frozen as a commodity, "sealed forever within the 'parlor' that is her shop window, guaranteed now only to fade" (103). However, another interpretation of Catherine's "life devoid of life" at the end of the novel: Catherine was not lifeless because she froze herself as a commodity, but rather because she unmade herself as a commodity, unmade herself as a subject in the capitalist ideology. The "vacuum" (Bell 102) that she rests in is not a vacuum within capitalist ideology but without it. If her remaining life is "devoid of life" it is because she is living a life outside of ideology. "One might question whether such a cure is not worse than the disease," commented Geoffrey R. Kirsch in his reading of *Washington Square* (453). But what other cures were available to Catherine? At its most idealistic and optimistic, the novel is not concerned with a futile cure but rather "a struggle for power, a will to freedom, and the refusal of a simple soul to bow before the domineering spirit of another" (Edell 251).

Catherine's refusal to promise is even more striking when considered in the contexts of James's oeuvre and Victorian literature as a whole. Catherine is not the only one of James's characters that uses suspensive or inscrutable language. Furthermore, James's infelicitous endings seem to run contrary to the performative current of many contemporaneous novels. In *The Novel as Event,* scholar Mario Ortiz Robles observes that most Victorian novels center

around the felicity of the performatives "I bequeath" and "I do"—representing, respectively, inheritance plots and marriage plots (x). Robles uses examples like Charles Dickens's *Our Mutual Friend,* and George Eliot's *Middlemarch,* among other novels, as paradigmatic examples of this concept. And James certainly would have been familiar with these novels—he reviewed *Our Mutual Friend* early in his career; he also reviewed Eliot's work and commented on the "form" of *Middlemarch* (Edell 70,152). From this observation that the plot of most Victorian novels center around performatives, Robles posits, "What if every novel could be reduced to one or two speech acts whose failure would then become the premise of its narrative," and whose conclusion would always be a felicitous performative (ix)? James's *Washington Square* is indeed reducible to one or two speech acts; however, neither of these speech acts are ever felicitously performed. Though the novel focuses on the issues of both Catherine's inheritance and her marriage, neither issue is resolved with a successful performative. Dr. Sloper does not felicitously bequeath Catherine her full inheritance, nor does Townsend felicitously complete the marriage rite and say "I do." *Washington Square*, then, upends the typical novel expectations of his time. James's infelicitous endings could even be subverting the epitomal marriage-plot novels of Jane Austen. Juliet McMaster has suggested that *Washington Square* is a subversion of, or "sort of Jamesian re-imagining of" Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey*. The two novels differ significantly in tone: Austen's novel is "a romantic comedy, light, bright, and sparkling in its own way," while James's is "a domestic tragedy, bleak and painful" (201). But McMaster gives plenty of evidence to support this suspicion, including her observations that both novels have a heroine named Catherine, that Dr. Sloper is an alter-ego of General Tilney, and that Dr. Sloper's first name is "Austin." While the novels mirror each other in many ways, the outcomes seem directly opposed. "Catherine Morland's lover renounces his father and cleaves to her," but

"Catherine Sloper is deserted by everybody" (205). *Washington Square,* with its infelicitous ending, could thus be read as a speech-act parody of *Northanger Abbey* and thus function as further evidence of James's attempts to subvert contemporary novel expectations by upending traditional marriage and inheritance plots.

Just as *Washington Square* subverts performative expectations, many of James's other novels also result in infelicitous endings. *Daisy Miller* and *The Portrait of a Lady* are just two examples. As previously noted, Isabel Archer in *The Portrait of a Lady* is a heroine who is similarly baffling. While Isabel successfully performs the marriage rite of "I do," her marriage to Osmond is infelicitous in the most literal sense—their marriage is anything but happy. Though Isabel apparently returns to Osmond at the end of the novel, there is still a sense in which the marriage is unstable and unsatisfactory. "I do" conventionally signifies loyalty and exclusivity, but Caspar Goodwood's kiss threatens the felicity and stability of Isabel and Osmond's marriage promises, which are already troubled by Osmond's various abuses. All of these complicating factors contribute to the impression that Isabel's future is anything but happily fixed at the end of the novel. Likewise, *Daisy Miller* features an inscrutable and ambiguous heroine. Winterbourne, Winterbourne's aunt, and others are continually judging Daisy and making estimations of her character: is she a flirt or is she not? Like Catherine, Daisy at first seems estimable. Winterbourne seems smitten by this beautiful fellow American, pursuing her to Rome and trying desperately to understand her character. However, Daisy remains elusive and incomprehensible; she baffles characters and readers alike by the end of the novella. After a confusing exchange between Daisy and Winterbourne, where Daisy claims to be engaged then later revokes her claim, the novella ends with Daisy's suddenly death. Lack of closure seems to be a trend for James's heroines.

So *Washington Square* is not the only Henry James novel to leave readers "exasperated, cursing, staring." Along with at least these two other representative works with baffling heroines, *Washington Square* ends unsatisfactorily and infelicitously. J. Hillis Miller perhaps put it best when he said that "[r]enunciation, for James, is, for some mysterious reason, the highest virtue. . . . James has an aesthetic resistance to happy endings" (78). What was the purpose behind James's "aesthetic resistance," the purpose behind these unhappy and infelicitous endings? It's true that most realist novels depend on infelicity. As Robles observes, the literary plot of the realist novel hinges on infelicity—*Pride and Prejudice* would have been much shorter without the various misunderstandings and rejected proposals that led up to Darcy and Elizabeth's wedding, for example. "To do things with words efficiently is also to have nothing else to say" (15). But while most realist novels end their dependence on felicity with the literary consummation of a successful performative, James does not. For James and his characters, ending with infelicity means that there is still something left to say, and there are still disinterpellations left to be made. While performatively felicitous, it seems like Catherine's story would have been much less happy if she had simply accepted Dr. Sloper's request for a promise or Townsend's final offer of marriage. It would have been much less triumphant, if we can call Catherine's story that, if there had been nothing left for her to say. In fact, Shoshona Felman argues that for seducers or Don Juan characters, like Morris Townsend, "[t]o seduce is to produce felicitous language" and "felicity itself is nothing other than having 'no more to say'" (15). Henry James refuses to let his readers be seduced by a happy ending, just as Catherine refused to be seduced by Morris in his old age; the infelicity of the novel means that there is still more to say.

Catherine Sloper's disinterpellation is a powerful and necessary means of resistance. Catherine intended to do the exact thing that her father wanted her to do: never marry Townsend. But Catherine could not and did not make that promise to her father. Why? Sloper's language, like Townsend's, relied on conventional meanings that prioritized invidious capitalist ideologies at the expense of the heart. Catherine, by refusing to comply with the conventions of a promise, positive or negative, refused to be bound by the ideologies implicit in the performative that her father tried to extract from her. After being repeatedly ensnared by her dissonant reappropriation of pecuniary language in her attempts for autonomy, Catherine finally and resoundingly resisted by unmaking herself as a subject within capitalist ideology. Catherine resists ideologies through her words and by refusing to perform those words, by suspending them. The price that she pays for that negative performative is her comprehensibility. But, as I think Catherine's story suggests, insisting on incomprehensibility can be productive and necessary. Catherine had been commodified, objectified, and coldly calculated by capitalist language throughout the novel, but her refusal to promise is a reminder—for characters and readers alike—to remember: "Never say you know the last words about any human heart!" These words were penned by James in 1888, just a few years after *Washington Square,* as the opening lines of "Louisa Pallant." James's words here remind us, as Catherine's refusal does, to honor the dignity of others by honoring what is unknown about them and making linguistic space for them. As Butler noted in another work, not about comprehensibility per se, but, interestingly, about performativity, "language is the condition of possibility for the speaking subject, and not merely its instrument of expression" (*Excitable Speech* 28). The capitalist language employed by Townsend and Sloper did not allow agency and livability for Catherine. Their language did not allow for Catherine's possibility as a subject. Catherine's dilemma asks: how can we resist with our words a language that itself

oppresses us? How can we use words as a means of resistance when our very words uphold ideologies and value systems that are harmful to us? Catherine's story suggests that challenging linguistic conventions through the use of suspensive performatives may be a productive means of resistance, even if using those disinterpellations sometimes brings us to the edge of the comprehensible. Her story suggests that sometimes, the most powerful way to resist is not by being understood but by insisting on incomprehensibility. There is power in disinterpellating, as Catherine did. There is power is saying "I can't promise" and insisting "I don't think you understand."

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