

Eros, Thanatos: Amsterdam in Contemporary Anglophone Fiction

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“Amsterdam doesn’t seem a suitable place for tragedy,” muses the narrator of Lynne Tillman’s 1991 *Motion Sickness*, “but place—the city, for instance—is as much a mental space as a physical one, and its physical boundaries, its history, are much less concise than any term such as ‘city’ might lead one to think.”¹ In Tillman’s novel, an American policeman turned drug dealer in Amsterdam is shot to death in the Dutch metropolis, an otherwise placid, well-ordered city in whose midst the unexpected—death—comes as an incomprehensible surprise. Tillman’s association of moral ambivalence and death with Amsterdam is hardly unique in American literature. If, in the most simplistic of US traditional originary mythologies, English Puritans fleeing Europe for the New World first appear on ships mid-ocean, as if borne up straight out of the Atlantic itself, historical works of fiction treating the Pilgrims’ decade-long stay in Holland often portray Amsterdam as embodying their reasons for leaving: fears of their children “becoming Dutch” and growing “naughty,”² or of their women being tempted by material wealth in a sub-sea level, almost prediluvian landscape where dykes constantly threaten to flood the Amsterdam houses that, cheerful and charming as they may be, nevertheless do “not stand straight,”³ and where the backs of men and children working in Dutch mills themselves quickly grow as bent as the architecture.

This article is not about Amsterdam’s ostensible influence on fictionalized characters, however, for, as Lefebvre insisted, “space has no power ‘in itself.’”⁴ Instead it synthesizes what foreign writers—and particularly American writers—do with Amsterdam in fiction, and why they do it with Amsterdam in particular. As Michel de Certeau wrote, “we travel abroad to discover in distant lands something whose presence at home has become unrecognizable.”⁵ Unrecognizable—or indeed suppressed—and thus often primed for projection and reification. This article

examines how this Dutch “nether land” provides space for portraying drives inherent in contemporary American culture—drives perhaps influenced by earlier British works—that dare not represent themselves as being centered in the domestic sphere.

If the Dutch landscape often seems bent on corrupting figures in Anglophone fiction, the word “landscape” itself originated in the Netherlands,⁶ this lowland that, Russell Shorto notes, served in modern European history as a collecting basin for refugees from religious wars. While its geographic position, drawing foreigners, made Amsterdam “the archetypal liberal city” early in its history,⁷ its geographic “lowness” also finds symbolization in fiction.⁸ John Irving, in his 1998 *A Widow for One Year*, certainly sets such a scene. Here, in contemporary Amsterdam, centered around a red-light district where “more than seventy percent of the prostitutes” are “illegal aliens,”⁹ Eastern Europeans, Russians, Dominicans, Colombians, Brazilians, Thais, and Africans form a hallucinatory if realist setting for the novel’s protagonist, American novelist Ruth Cole. Her research drives her toward a voyeuristic experience that will play out, in this alternate reality, childhood scenes whose impact has colored her later life, but which she was unable to witness visually in the United States.¹⁰

The novel opens as Ruth, at four years old, overhears, but cannot see, her mother making love to a younger man. This scene, part of a complex web of sexual relations set in Ruth’s rural Southampton childhood home in the 1950s, has left her, as an adult, at once frigid and drawn to bad boyfriends. Three hundred pages outline Ruth’s life in the US before she arrives in Amsterdam for a book tour: a childhood home adorned with photos of dead older brothers she never knew but was born to replace; her philandering father, an author and illustrator of children’s books whose wife is resigned to his trysts with married mothers after their own children’s deaths; the teenaged “assistant” hired by Ruth’s father for the summer to make love to her mother in a misguided gesture of recompense; her mother’s sudden flight from their home and thirty-year disappearance, leaving a permanent absence in Ruth’s own life. All this, deeply ingrained in her unconscious, remains felt yet invisible to the protagonist. Staying on Kattengat, Ruth, befriended by an amorous and attractive young fan, sets out to research the central scene of her next novel: an older woman and a younger man, because of “something missing, in *their* relationship” (351), engage a prostitute to allow them to hide in her room to watch her work, a scene in which the female observer will “suffer a humiliation that would cause her to change her life” (353). The moral ambivalence of Amsterdam’s red-light district allows Ruth’s research to be conducted matter-of-factly. Yet what was planned as a voyeuristic vision of sex becomes one of death. For when the planned situation finally presents itself, Ruth, hidden in a wardrobe, witnesses the brutal murder of a motherly prostitute by a client eerily reminiscent of her own father and stands transfixed by the scene of the murder, unable to prevent it, as the murderer, finishing his task, removes the red light bulb from the prostitute’s lamp to replace it with a floodlight, illuminating the body. In this lurid and phantastic scene, Ruth is finally both able to

“see” her mother’s affair that she could only overhear as a child and to visualize her absent mother as her father’s victim. The signs are clear: the murderer photographs the corpse with the same camera used by her father to photograph his “models” and later appears to be a serial killer with a cache of such photos, just as her own father was a serial seducer of women with a collection of their photos. In attempting to observe her parents’ domestic trysts, she is able to visually “witness” in heightened reality what she could only sense secondhand in America: death (that of her brothers) and the emotional violence done to her own mother. Ruth, having done nothing to stop the crime, mails a note to the police before leaving Amsterdam, but she also leaves a fingerprint that is traced to her—bearing the scar she received as a child from breaking the glass on a photo of her mother and brothers. As if to integrate this scene into her adult life, the Dutch policeman who finally traces her as a witness to the crime moves back to America with her and marries her, incorporated as “a housewife” into her now-settled life in the United States, while her friends, the novel’s other central American characters, one with “the heart of a hooker” (527) and the other her mother’s lover, make cameo appearances as pale domestic versions of the exaggerated shadows their characters cast abroad.

Another set of social taboos intrinsic to contemporary life but impossible to play out fully in the domestic sphere is presented just as darkly in Ian McEwan’s 1998 *Amsterdam*, in which Clive, a composer, and Vernon, a newspaper editor, are former housemates who have fallen out in London: Clive finds Vernon’s exposure of a prime ministerial candidate’s personal life morally objectionable, and Vernon is outraged by Clive’s doing nothing to stop a crime he witnesses while, like Ruth, involved in the process of artistic creation. An absent female love-object again figures as a key to the narrative here. After the death of both men’s former lover—not Moll, but Molly—of cancer, the two sign a contract of informed consent to the effect that, if either is in the throes of a life-threatening disease, the other will assist him in active involuntary euthanasia. Their friendship souring, *Amsterdam*, where assisted suicide is legal, offers a means for each to use his contract to kill the other. The novella opens debate on several contemporary ethical issues: privacy and the destructiveness of the press, the responsibilities of witnesses to crimes (in this case, rape), and euthanasia. *Amsterdam* is painted as a space outside the morally charged landscape of contemporary Britain, a city where ethical issues fade and narrative situations move toward their natural outcomes without societal interference.

Amsterdam’s association with death comes with one of the book’s first mentions of the city: Clive’s manager, in *Amsterdam*, “would have no option but to drown himself in the nearest canal” if Clive’s symphony score isn’t finished in time for its performance.¹¹ Clive’s own arrival in *Amsterdam* is punctuated by the crossing of a bridge, a frequent fictional metaphor marking entry into a separate national and psychological space. Crossing “the Bridge,” Clive ponders the ambiguity of the city’s urban landscape: *Amsterdam* is “a calm and civilised city,” with a “consoling . . . body of water down the middle of a street. Such a tolerant, open-minded, grown-up sort

of place: . . . the modest Van Gogh bridges, . . . the intelligent, unstuffy-looking Dutch on their bikes with their level-headed children sitting behind. Even the shopkeepers looked like professors, the street sweepers like jazz musicians. There was never a city more rationally ordered” (155). Ordered, yes, but what is ordered, it seems, are only its own ambiguities. Are the men musicians or street cleaners, professors or shopkeepers—and is Clive a great composer or a failure? Clive may well wonder if his symphony is flawed in the face of this organized environment, but finally the order, understatement, and tastefulness don’t mute the drives transferred from across the Channel, for the men’s murderous plans unfold here with mechanical perfection. Clive, convinced his symphony is ruined, blames Vernon. Outside the *Concertgebouw*, he breathes “the mild Amsterdam air that always seemed to taste faintly of cigar smoke and ketchup” (160), metaphors, perhaps, for the phallus and for blood. Back at the hotel, Vernon and Clive poison each other with tainted champagne and injections, each ending his life imagining he is being seduced by Molly. The novella closes with a second scene on the Brouwersgracht, the canal dividing the city center from the IJ, where the men’s two mutual enemies glibly commiserate their deaths.

Lewis Mumford described Amsterdam as “the aesthetic culmination of five centuries of collective effort in commanding water and making land”¹²—or, indeed, of commanding death and making life, literally drawing living human space from the sea. If the Dutch attitude toward space, both land and water, is stereotypically toward space as a planned environment, McEwan’s Amsterdam crystallizes raw energy as planned death. Serving as setting in only 23 pages of the total 178, the city takes on even more significance as a title. What was, in a domestic setting, a passing or sublimated desire for revenge becomes physically animated here, as the coldest of human passions follows its course in this foreign setting like a well-run machine. These former bachelor-housemates witness the elision of the erotic symbol connecting them (Molly) with a symbol of death, neatly coinciding with news regarding death from across the Channel. In this parallel world across the water, as uncanny to Clive and Vernon as the unconscious is to consciousness, their original mutual erotic drive, deprived of its object, reveals itself as a death drive. An elided sexual connection first passes between them through the medium of a shared woman, then is projected onto a foreign landscape. In both cases, what is highlighted is the reification of this drive’s object. Their drive is first directed toward a third party (now doubly reified through both gender difference and death), then onto the heterostereotyping of a foreign landscape.

Lacan posits that the death drive first described by Freud never appears in isolation but only “becomes apparent . . . when a part of it is connected with Eros. . . . In its pure form, silent within the psychic apparatus, it is subjugated by the libido to some extent and thus deflected to the outside world.”¹³ Constantly subdued by the libido in daily life, this drive only exists in “pure form” outside the bounds of consciousness. Amsterdam in Irving’s and McEwan’s works, the nether land across the Channel or the Atlantic, provides a symbolic world outside these bounds, a space

where society's taboos and the subject's conscious desires no longer intercede, leaving this drive exposed. The libido's object is removed, leaving the death drive itself standing naked behind it.

If in Stew's musical *Passing Strange* (2006) one of "Amsterdam's" characters proposes "people should be naked all the time" to an American protagonist fleeing conservatism in the US for the "promised land" the city offers,¹⁴ Tillman's novel muses that "cities aren't naked," "but Amsterdam is more literally a naked city than New York. Window curtains are left open, and apartment inhabitants are casually on view not unlike the prostitutes who sit in other Amsterdam windows, half-naked, their rooms and bodies open to view. . . . Amsterdam isn't a naked city. Not knowing the language or the customs, to me everyone and everything is thoroughly clothed, wrapped in the thick mysterious outerwear of the other. They have foreign tongues and foreign skins that protect them from outsiders," much as the unconscious uses "foreign tongues" both to cloak itself from view and to "openly" present itself.¹⁵ Naked and clothed, covering and disclosing, balancing images of the libido and the death drive, Irving's and McEwan's doubled city recalls Georg Simmel's description, not of Amsterdam but of Venice, that other free, aquatic yet deathly city, whose "ambivalent" "double-life" is seen

here in the connection of its alley-ways, there in the connection of its canals, so that the city belongs neither to land nor to water. Instead, each appears like a body in a protean gown, behind which one tries to entice the other as if genuine. And ambivalent are the small, dark canals whose water restlessly eddies and flows – although no direction can be discerned in this flow, since it always moves without moving anywhere. The one certainty is that life is only a foreground behind which stands death. This is the final reason that life, as Schopenhauer notes, is "ambivalent through and through." For if appearance does not grow from a root, whose juices sustain it in one direction, then it may be exposed to any arbitrary interpretation.¹⁶

Today this ambivalent foregrounding or backgrounding might be extended more broadly to describe the Netherlands itself: one sprawling urban area punctuated with water and green spaces—or a series of cities set between water, farm, and parkland? Are cities spots of development in the surrounding landscape? Or is the landscape simply undeveloped spots within the city? For Camus's narrator, midway between Simmel's time and our own, the ambiguous elements of earth and water in Amsterdam are a source of inspiration: "I love this people [Amsterdammers], . . . wedged into this little space of houses and water, hemmed in by fog, by cold lands,

and by the sea which smokes like washing powder. I love them, because they are doubled. They are here and elsewhere.”¹⁷ As the fog rolls in over Camus’s Amsterdam, its residents, much like Irving’s Ruth or McEwan’s Clive and Vernon, are carried away from daily concerns to distant islands of their own imagination.

While Irving pares down an invisible domestic struggle to a single scene of dramatic symbolism witnessed abroad and McEwan carries a moral and cultural struggle to extremes in a place outside a national boundary, David Liss’s *The Coffee Trader* (2003) sets a tale of greed and revenge outside the boundaries of what would be acceptable in contemporary America’s version of capitalism. Like McEwan, Liss focuses on the uncertain outcomes of individuals ambiguously poised between wild success and complete failure. If, in Irving’s novel, a daughter’s sublimated passion for her mother’s lover cannot be expressed within the home, here, as in McEwan’s novella, two men, Miguel and Daniel, this time brothers, share a house while fighting an underhanded battle peripherally involving each brother’s sexual relationship with a single woman: Hannah, Daniel’s wife. Seventeenth-century Jewish Portuguese immigrants, protagonists Miguel and Hannah are propelled through various quarters of Amsterdam in search of conspirators and business partners in order to foil various plots to destroy them, to achieve Hannah’s independence from her husband, and to secure Miguel’s fortune on the city’s stock exchange. Amsterdam repeatedly holds the promise of individualism won through violence: Ruth witnesses a mother-figure’s death before she herself can marry; Clive and Vernon each commits murder to free himself from the other’s moral judgment; Hannah gains personal freedom by firing her housekeeper and divorcing her husband; Miguel achieves financial independence from his family at the expense of having his brother excommunicated and exiled, of ruining one business associate, and of inadvertently having another beaten nearly to death.

Having gambled unsuccessfully on the stock exchange, Miguel is hounded by creditors who often drag him down to “dank tavern cellar[s]” where he is held until he can send for money.¹⁸ Meanwhile, he lives in his brother’s continually flooding basement, where water laps nightly toward his bed. Land alone balances Miguel above the threatening lap of submersion and, just as much of Amsterdam’s land has itself been “bought” by raising it above water, one buys life from death. Water, like debts, can be staved off with an investment but, like death, must be paid (as the novel shows, with the lives of others—or, eventually, with one’s own life). A central movement of the plot describes repeated congress between Miguel’s watery basement and Hannah’s kitchen upstairs, and the novel concludes this narrative repetition compulsion with Miguel standing in the kitchen of his own home.

Unlike Irving, Liss sets his tale almost entirely within the city itself, while a single scene outside Amsterdam describes Rotterdam simply as “a smaller, neater version of Amsterdam” (171). Miguel, Daniel, and Hannah live in Vlooyenburg, an “island neighborhood” on the Amstel that houses the city’s Jewish immigrants, while remaining somewhat foreign to them (most of the ghetto’s inhabitants had until

recently practiced as Catholics in Portugal and are only beginning to study Judaism). Miguel's disputes with his brother, like Ruth's with her father in Irving's novel, or Clive's and Vernon's in McEwan's novella, cannot be resolved within domestic space but are engaged outside it. Creating, like Irving and McEwan, opposing poles of a corrupt but moralistic home center (the US, London, or the Jewish "island") and a progressive but amoral city-across-the-water, Liss further divides the city into psychological spaces drawing characters from one to the other, coloring our expectations of the tale's potential outcomes. A secondary narrative movement thus describes characters' trajectories between (1) the Jewish "island" (like Irving's Long Island or McEwan's England, spaces haunted by invisible and almost incestuous conflicts, barred from full exposition and resolution); (2) the Plantage, an orientalized garden to the east of the Jewish quarter, with subtle links to Turkey, Palestine, and the Middle East (just as McEwan's Lake District is, for Clive, an Edenic, "natural" space of inspiration); and (3) the modernizing world of the city's western quarters, where Miguel buys the latest novels and observes the wealth available outside the Jewish community and its regulations (much as Irving's Manhattan allows his protagonist access to a world of culture and friendships separate from her tainted family relations). Its machinery arranged around these three poles, the narratized city's ambiguity is underlined in its early description. Amsterdam is, for its Jewish population, "the Garden of Eden with red-brick houses" (32), while, at the same time, "dead fish" is "the perfume of Amsterdam's riches, the squish of water its melody" (18). As in Simmel's analysis, land, water, life and death coexist as the spaces of the city shift to reveal its various elements and potential outcomes for the protagonists.

The novel opens on the Dam, "the great plaza at Amsterdam's centre" (2), as the bells of the Nieuwe Kerk close the stock exchange, moving its traders northeast toward the Warmoesstraat's taverns (a historicized version of the same setting used in Irving's novel). From here, Miguel is led west in the opposite direction from the traders toward his future business partner, Geertruid, "across the steep bridges towards the new part of the city, ringed by the three great canals—the Herengracht, the Keizersgracht, and the Prinsengracht—and towards the Jordaan, the most rapidly growing part of town" (5). Here, on Amsterdam's western edge, Miguel notices beautiful new houses but, following the Rozengracht beyond it, the Jordaan loses its charm as its alleys take on "the decrepit cast of a slum," dirt replaces cobblestones, huts "of thatch and scraps of wood" lean "against squat houses black with tar," the whole vibrating "with the hollow clacking of looms, as weavers spun from sunrise until late into the night, all in the hope of earning enough to keep their bellies full for one more day" (6). The Herengracht, Keizersgracht, and Prinsengracht Miguel traverses were created as planned zones delineating three economic levels, moving from upper class to middle class to lower middle class. Moving through these levels in descending order as he moves west, the strata of Amsterdam society literally unfold before Miguel like potential outcomes of his own impending gamble on the market.

At this extreme western edge of the city, Geertruid offers Miguel his first taste of coffee, convincing him to buy the newly discovered drug with her in a money-making scheme. In this same neighborhood, Miguel, an avid reader of novels, buys books near the Westerkerk (52), while Geertruid herself turns out to be the model for the stories he reads. As Miguel considers her offer, returning east toward Vlooyenburg, he is refreshed by the “cleansing” air of the IJ while “waters [creep] up beyond the Rosengracht to slick the streets” (17). Though no physical body of water other than canals geographically separates the two parts of the city, contact with water is thus mentioned before we enter Vlooyenberg for the first time, underlining the psychic separation of the two areas.

If the city’s west side holds Miguel’s dreams of wealth, fears of failure, and the tales of adventure he finds in books, “east of the Vlooyenburg” lies the Plantage, “a garden of delights” populated by prostitutes and musicians (54), where, in a Turkish coffeehouse, he meets Alferonda, an excommunicated Jew with links to Palestine. In this space Alferonda gives Miguel advice meant to damage Solomon Parido, a head of the Jewish council, who excommunicated Alferonda, and whose daughter, now exiled to the Ottoman Empire, Miguel rejected by sleeping with her maid. The immigrant Sephardic Jews in the story, like their “island neighborhood” itself, are poised between these two worlds: the modernizing West and the “natural” world to the East, an orientalized garden of Moors and Turks, among whose lamp-lit paths Geertruid later leads Miguel to a harem-like brothel.

Meanwhile, Hannah secretly makes her own way west of the Jewish quarter to pray at a Catholic chapel on the Oudezijds Voorburgwal, the old city wall, underlining the dangers she runs in crossing the boundary of her role as a good Jewish wife. Here, her housemaid steals Hannah’s veil and runs off, leaving her as exposed as a Dutch Christian, and forcing her to chase her yet further from the Jewish quarter to “the Nieuwmarkt, the divide between the clean and the unclean, the foul and the fair” (99). There, by the Weigh House, she sees Geertruid, who urges her not to mention their meeting. While in this space outside and west of the Jewish quarter Hannah risks becoming estranged from the Jewish community, the space also holds the allure of intellectual and spiritual freedom unavailable in the Jewish settlement, or in the oriental roots symbolized by the Plantage, for it is also from here that Miguel brings her books of her own.

As Miguel later strolls along the Herengracht, “whose handsome wide streets were bursting with linden trees newly rich with foliage,” its grand houses showing the “glories of the prosperity that the Dutch had built for themselves” (132), like a stumbling block to his own impending fortune, he meets Joachim, a disgruntled former business partner who threatens to ruin his plans. When Miguel later finds Joachim threatening Hannah inside the Jewish quarter, he forces him to cross the bridge over the Houtgracht. This threat to the domestic center’s surface tranquility must be repulsed, driven, as in McEwan’s novella, across the water from it. Yet, as in Irving’s novel, while corruption can only be allowed to appear in the foreign space

outside, it is driven by a source within the domestic center itself, for Joachim's threats later turn out to be directed by Solomon Parido, who seeks his own revenge against Miguel.

With this theme of internal fights made external, the bulk of the novel shows Miguel looking frantically for various characters in different neighborhoods west of the Jewish quarter, while spied on by Parido. A climactic scene takes place during bidding in the Exchange, with Miguel already dreaming of renting "a splendid house on the shores of the Houtgracht" (349). After his success, Miguel rents a house across the canal from his brother's. Hannah lies to her husband, telling him their baby is Miguel's. After the two divorce, Miguel and Hannah plan to marry and bring up Hannah and Daniel's child as their own on the other side of the canal, effectively providing Hannah her freedom and Miguel his revenge. But the tale's conclusion is not entirely happy: Miguel ruins one business partner financially and legally, mistakenly thinking she is trying to swindle him, and inadvertently has another almost murdered. The novel ends with Miguel alone in his new house, enjoying the space of individualism he has made for himself in the city, even as he regrets having carved it from other human lives. The ambiguous situation of Miguel's new home could hardly be more similar to that of Camus's narrator, who also makes his home in "the Jewish quarter, [where] you'll find these pretty avenues where trams loaded with flowers and thunderous music parade. . . . or that which was called the Jewish quarter until our Hitlerian brothers made some space."¹⁹

The narratization of three spaces has served to align Miguel's new home: the Jewish quarter, a home space where one is chastised for moves in either direction outside it; the pleasure-oriented and orientalized garden-like East of the Plantage, blurring class structures; and the new West of Amsterdam with its hierarchized canals and bookstores. These might well be compared to Lacan's Real, Imaginary (the field of image, imagination, and deception), and Symbolic (a linguistic dimension characterized by triadic relationships, absence, and lack, all hidden by the death drive, itself "only a mask of the Symbolic order"²⁰). Together these three psychic realms narratize the construction of an individualized self, a construction embodied by three geographic poles in Liss's Amsterdam, but also by their chronological order in the timeline of the novel's plot. Žižek assumes narrative itself is a device for resolving oppositions by ordering them in time. The result of "repressed antagonism"²¹ between two or more terms (or, here, more specifically, places), as Lacan explains, narratives offer "a kind of package deal in which one gains meaning at the price of accepting temporal order, coherence and unification. The very existence of such a package deal testifies that it strives to cover something repressed."²² Narratives offer a solution to the uneasy coexistence of contradictory terms (or fictional spaces) by imposing a temporal order on them. Both McEwan's charged triad of London, the Lake District, and Amsterdam and Liss's Vlooyenburg, Plantage, and Negen Straatjes/Jordaan exist as atemporal, antagonistic *places*,

yielding narrative only when their antagonism is repressed by the coherence of movement in time.

Neither the Amsterdam of *The Coffee Trader*, *A Widow for One Year*, nor *Amsterdam* provides clear answers to the contemporary moral dilemmas they describe: active involuntary euthanasia, prostitution, incest, or the ethics of capitalist business practices. Does this say something about the city itself? If authors often project ethical concerns onto spaces separated from national space by a body of water, Amsterdam, itself a web of channels to be crossed, is an especially apt metaphor for choices that remain ambiguous even outside the national space. Which state is emphasized as dominant as the result of the other's repression depends, much as Venice does for Simmel, on our own perception at any given moment: a city of streets between canals? Or a city of canals between streets? The proliferation of potential passageways, aquatic or terrestrial, in this watery city (or city-encrusted water), separated from the Real by the sea, tends to create tertiary spaces within the story, and possible tertiary resolutions to conflict.

Historically, the movement of water itself represents the openness of unrealizable drives coursing through (national or familial) domestic space. In the bucolic setting of George Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss* (1860), for example, protagonists Stephen and Maggie, on the brink of betraying friends to pursue personal desires, are pulled from home downriver. Taken up by a Dutch ship bound for Holland, they debate their dilemma, much as Hannah and Miguel might have voiced their own, of whether "the feeling which draws [them] toward each other is too strong to be overcome" or whether it presents only "a warrant for all treachery and cruelty," with "no law but the inclination of the moment."²³ Stephen would have them continue their course downstream toward Holland. Maggie's "ethical" compulsions, however, draw her home, only to be killed soon afterward when the same river floods its banks. To surmount this water, this flow of desires and drives that ultimately, within the Real, run toward death, Amsterdam provides a space where one lives, like Liss's Miguel or Camus's narrator, with and among these desires, repeatedly, daily crossing them. And while Freud links repetition compulsion to the death drive, this same drive is also the drive to achieve one's own individuality by subduing the other. Miguel, and the other characters mentioned above, must reckon with the costs of their own individualism in Amsterdam.

Like the sea that never figures directly in these stories, but whose scent is carried throughout them, what the backdrop of Liss's tale of urban European mercantile greed occludes is the full depth of the universe in which it takes place—that of seventeenth-century Dutch exploration and exploitation. Colonizing, like Mumford's Amsterdam, is itself a means of commanding death and making life, of staunching decline by offering new territory. Early seventeenth-century cartographers, assuming only open sea separated North America's eastern coast from Asia, had underestimated the earth's size by about a third, until the Dutch-hired explorer Hudson mapped the extent of North America's westward-stretching land.

His ships “gained” land from empty space formerly thought to be water, just as Amsterdammers pulled islands from the Amstel River’s mouth. J. M. Coetzee describes poets’ claims, in “times of unparalleled geographic exploration, of a right to venture into forbidden or tabooed places.”²⁴ If Irving’s and McEwan’s explorations of a contemporary taboo promise independence but lead to death, they, like Miguel’s and Hannah’s breaking of taboos, while causing the fall of others, simultaneously allow them their own individualism.

The American protagonist of J.M. Coetzee’s *Elizabeth Costello* (2003) ponders the relativity of evil from a bench overlooking Amsterdam’s Prinsengracht: “A sparrow knocked off a branch by a slingshot, a city annihilated from the air: who dare say which is the worse? Evil, all of it, an evil universe invented by an evil god. Dare she say that to her kind Dutch hosts, her kind, intelligent, sensible auditors in this enlightened, rationally organized, well-run city?” (159). Sandwiched between the story of the death of a libido (the previous chapter concludes with the compassionate hospital bedside fellation of a dying man’s limp penis) and a chapter entitled “Eros,” “The Problem of Evil” in *Elizabeth Costello* describes Costello’s reaction to a fellow American writer’s graphic portrayal of the murder of Hitler’s enemies. Likening his description to letting an evil genie out of a bottle, she believes “the world would be better off if the genie remained imprisoned. . . . While she has less and less idea what it could mean to believe in God, about the devil she has no doubt. The devil is everywhere under the skin of things, searching for a way into the light” (167). In Amsterdam, Costello reflects on her own experience of being beaten by a dockworker who, failing to make love to her, switched from erotic overtures to violent abuse: “The devil entered the docker that night on Spencer Street, the devil entered Hitler’s hangman. And through the docker, all that time ago, the devil entered her: she can feel him crouched inside, folded up like a bird, waiting for his chance to fly” (167). On Spencer Street, the dividing line between Melbourne and Port Phillip Bay, much like McEwan’s Brouwersgracht separating the Negen Straatjes from the IJ, Costello’s docker, a worker between land and water, moves from eros (masking Freud’s death drive) to thanatos, just as Clive and Vernon, their communal object of desire removed, slide from friendship to murder. Amsterdam here, too, allows this death drive to project itself in “pure” form onto an imaginary, image-making screen. What Costello fears is letting a devil out of its bottle, yet, while bottling it may keep humanity safe, projecting it into a distant space solves the problem of having it threateningly “crouched inside,” waiting for its chance “to fly.” It must be moved offstage, for, as Costello reasons, “obscene means off-stage. To save our humanity, certain things that we may want to see (may want to see because we are human!) must remain off-stage” (168–69). A foreign space allows these “things” to remain offstage, distanced and visible at once, much as colonization moves the most violent of capitalism’s necessary maneuvers “off-stage,” visible only as symbolic values of production in a rarified urban space. “Let me not look,” Costello thinks. But the author she has read “excited her to read,” and, for that, “she has

pursued him across the seas all the way to Holland” (179). But for what does Costello pursue him “across the seas all the way to Holland?” Not to stop this genie from being let out of its bottle (for that, she is too late), but precisely to see the hand that has released it. This is what is happening with these stories set in Amsterdam (and what is happening with Costello). Asking to not “look” is, in fact, asking to not associate these images with the self (national or personal). These tales of Amsterdam are pleas for the reification of desire, for “looking” in a space where no harm can touch the self. As an Amsterdammer in Stew’s musical warns, “We’re the freedom experts—don’t try this at home.”²⁵

Our most basic drives, impossible to disentangle within ourselves, must be mapped elsewhere, if only, as de Certeau hints, because it is impossible to *recognize* them in ourselves.²⁶ Amsterdam’s geographic status, like Costello’s own sensations in the city, remains ambiguous, as writing itself, Costello muses, is ambiguous, as “if what we write has the power to make us better people then surely it has the power to make us worse.”²⁷ The ambiguity of Simmel’s city shows itself to be much like the ambiguity of text-making. If the social fabric of the domestic sphere colors these issues in ways that make them flammable, Irving’s, McEwan’s, and Liss’s work brings contemporary taboos to light abroad, where they can, like Costello’s genie, be released without the risk of their “making us worse.” Amsterdam—ambiguous as it proves to be—provides ground for their exploration.

Amid this shifting of space between Long Island, London, and Amsterdam, between Liss’s quarters of the city, or between the spaces of the Real and the Symbolic, can there be reconciliation? The narrator of Camus’s *La chute* never crosses a bridge after dark for fear of coming across an attempted suicide, confronting this death drive firsthand. Yet if Freud postulated the death drive as more primitive than eros, perhaps the most primal drive of all, Camus’s narrator’s insistent avoidance of witnessing firsthand the very drive that has led him to Amsterdam only underlines his fascination with this drive. The foreign characters who make Amsterdam the setting for their dramas are indeed something like Costello’s Greek gods, unable to accept their own drives toward death while enticed to witness them secondhand in another realm: “the inventors of death and corruption . . . have lacked the courage to try their invention out on themselves. . . . Inventors of death; inventors of sex tourism too. In the sexual ecstasies of mortals, the *frisson* of death . . . they wish they had that inimitable little quiver in their own erotic repertoire. . . . But the price is one they’re not prepared to pay. Death, annihilation: what if there is no resurrection, they wonder misgivingly? (189). Can there be a reconciliation between the two worlds? While the novels Miguel brings home from the city’s western quarters provide pleasurable stories of adventure, in the end he realizes—as Irving’s Ruth does of her mother’s novels or her father’s children’s tales—that these fantastic tales are based on the actual life of someone closer to his own world than he imagined. If in Irving’s novel the protagonist realizes that, should she “change her life, it should be *she* who is bad; one doesn’t change one’s life because *someone else* has been bad,”²⁸ *The*

Coffee Trader closes with Miguel standing at his new home's half-open back door, receiving news of his own complicity in the brutal beating of his associate. Like the Symbolic's cut into the Real, this back door remains open just a slit for the threats (and promises) of the city to enter his "island neighborhood." In Amsterdam's "soft grey afternoon light," before crossing "the Bridge,"²⁹ Clive's walk along the Brouwersgracht, the slim channel dividing land from river, city from non-city, eros from thanatos, is, after all, the line each of us walks, perhaps less consciously, each day, all our lives.

Notes

¹ Lynne Tillman, *Motion Sickness* (New York: Poseidon Press, 1991), 73–74.

² Nora Smith, "The First Thanksgiving," in *The Story Hour: A Book for the Home and the Kindergarten*, ed. Kate Wiggin (New York: Walde Books, 1890), 48.

³ Margaret B. Pumphrey, *Stories of the Pilgrims* (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1912), 52.

⁴ Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991), 358.

⁵ Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 50.

⁶ T. F. Hoad, *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 258.

⁷ Russell Shorto, "The Ideas of Amsterdam" (paper presented at the conference *Imagining Amsterdam: Visions and Revisions*, Amsterdam, Netherlands, November 19, 2009).

⁸ The originally idealistic narrator of Camus's *La chute* (1956), for example, formerly preferred high spaces, mountains, cliffs, terraces and balconies, but he comes to Amsterdam once disillusioned with his ideals, having heard, on a bridge, a disembodied voice that calls to him from the water like death itself and finally lures him to this city below sea level.

⁹ John Irving, *A Widow for One Year* (London: Bloomsbury, 1998), 422, emphasis original.

¹⁰ Irving's novel betrays murky ties to early British literary heterostereotypes of the Netherlands and Flanders. One might recall Aphra Behn's stint as a spy in Antwerp, yet certainly, since Defoe, the Dutch landscape in the Anglophone literary imagination has been a mix of sexual liberation, intrigue, and corruption, as well as death. Moll Flanders, naming herself after the region to which her fugitive husband flees, opens herself to a long series of moral and civic transgressions before finding redemption for her crimes in

America—it is, finally, her deportation there, like Ruth’s flight back to the US, that grants a reprieve from her death sentence.

¹¹ Ian McEwan, *Amsterdam* (London: Vintage, 2005), 142.

¹² Lewis Mumford, *The City in History* (New York: Harvest Books, 1989), 505.

¹³ “Death Instinct,” No Subject, last modified June 9, 2006, http://www.nosubject.com/index.php?title=Death_Instinct.

¹⁴ “2. ‘Amsterdam’ from ‘Passing Strange’ A New Musical,” YouTube video, 3:48, posted by “beretcat,” uploaded March 31, 2008, <http://youtu.be/da4Q6Vo2esM>.

¹⁵ Tillman, *Motion Sickness*, 76.

¹⁶ Georg Simmel, “Venice,” trans. Ulrich Teucher and Thomas M. Kemple, *Theory, Culture & Society* 24, no. 7–8 (2007): 45.

¹⁷ Albert Camus, *La chute* (Paris: Gallimard, 1956), 16–17.

¹⁸ David Liss, *The Coffee Trader* (New York: Random House, 2003), 29.

¹⁹ Camus, *La chute*, 14–15, my translation.

²⁰ Jacques Lacan, *The Ego in Freud’s Theory and in the Technique of Psychoanalysis, 1954–1955*, Book II of *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan*, trans. Sylvana Tomaselli (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 326.

²¹ Slavoj Žižek, “The Seven Veils of Fantasy,” in *Key Concepts of Lacanian Psychoanalysis*, ed. Dany Nobus (London: Rebus Press, 1998), 197.

²² Efrat Biberman, “On Narrativity in the Visual Field: A Psychoanalytic View of Velázquez’s *Las Meninas*,” *Narrative* 14, no. 3 (2006): 244.

²³ George Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss* (London: William Blackwood and Sons, 1860), 222.

²⁴ J. M. Coetzee, *Elizabeth Costello* (New York: Penguin, 2003), 172.

²⁵ Stew, *Passing Strange*.

²⁶ De Certeau, *Practice of Everyday Life*, 50.

²⁷ Coetzee, *Elizabeth Costello*, 171.

²⁸ Irving, *Widow for One Year*, 353.

²⁹ McEwan, *Amsterdam*, 155.

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