"Peter Rugg, the Missing Man": The Unacknowledged Account

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"Remember that time is money."
(Benjamin Franklin)

The story of Peter Rugg pertains to a tradition of "nocturnal transports;" a man, submitted to devilish powers, is forced to wander at random and haunts the surroundings of his home. Gone from Boston, Peter Rugg, the blasphemer, goes round and round, "without being able to find again the family circle, nor the social one" (trans. from Terramorsi 125). He wanders for some fifty years, bewildered, and pressed by time, repeating again and again that he is lost — "I have lost my way" — and asking for "the way to Boston," without finding his way back home.[1] Pursued by a thunderstorm, Peter Rugg exhausts himself in his quest, and wastes his energy in vain for he has lost his sense of direction — "it is all turn back! . . . and the guide posts too, they all point the wrong way!" (23) — as well as his sense of the value of things: he ignores the Revolution, he stubbornly refuses to pay tolls, denying reality — "there are no turnpikes in this country" (38) — and his money is no longer legal tender — "it might have once been thirty shillings, old tenor" (43). He on his own embodies the specter of the colonial era which still haunts the amnesiac United States.

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[1] "Do the political, cultural, symbolical stakes [of the swearword] challenge the very core of the social system to such a degree that such a fulmination against it has to be uttered again and again?" (trans. from Vidal 17).

Rugg talked through his hat, for which he paid dearly. Precisely! The repayment of his debt to Heavenly powers — "heaven sometimes sets a mark on a man" (22) — is expressed in the text in a surprising "economic" register. Thus, the narrative — and Rugg's wanderings — will come to an end, as if by magic, two months after the narrator, Jonathan Dunwell, a commercial traveler from New York, accepts to exchange his money — "I would exchange the money myself" (44) — and to pay his fare on the Hudson ferry. Only then can the protagonist eventually find his way home. The narrative closes on an auction sale: Rugg comes back like a whirlwind, just in time to prevent his North End estate from being sold to speculators. He recovers his estate, but, after more than fifty years of absence, he has lost his home...

Austin's tale echoes a whole tradition of ancient European folklore. Rugg's kinship with the Wandering Jew and the Flying Dutchman has often been evoked by the critics.[2] In other respects, the relationships established by the text between economic power and supernatural powers calls to mind the myth of Faust, though the staging of the devilish pact is missing. The question of money is indeed linked to Rugg's damnation, but it is mainly an implicit consequence of his defection at toll-gates. By refusing to pay the tolls, his debt increases, and his malediction is prolonged.

The economic register — the "credit" granted by the narrator to Peter Rugg — does not interfere, as in the Faustian tradition, with the very causes of his curse, but on the contrary, it makes his redemption possible.[3] Rugg did not sell his soul for more economic or social power. The advance is only worth a discount.[4]

Our paper will focus on a detailed study of the various occurrences of economics in the economy of the text, and will propose a set of

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[2] See *supra*, Terramorsi, "'Peter Rugg, The Missing Man' or The Eclipsing Revolution."

[3] This cannot be seen as an American version of the European legendary fund, as other American writers, meanwhile, produce a faithful version of the Faustian myth. See, for example, Washington Irving's "The Devil and Tom Walker" (1824) or else Nathaniel Hawthorne's "The Young Goodman Brown" (1835).

[4] "Discount:" here we think of the curtailment of a debt paid before its time.

values for it.[5] This theme appears, however, in other short stories by Austin:

> Although each of Austin's Unitarian tales conveys a distinct moral message, they all share themes that lend them a unified focus: the responsible treatment of money and worldly possessions . . . Austin should choose monetary issues as the thematic center of his tales (Zimbalatti CXXXIX).

Our reading will be organized around three textual knots:

— the contract which binds the investigator-narrator and motivates his narrative: the economic motifs staged in the story thus participate in the writing of the very genesis of the text.

— the forcible passage of the toll-gates, the crossing of the Hudson and the cash donation.

— the auction sale of Peter Rugg's house in North End.

We will propose then an interpretation of this particular use of economics in jurist Austin's fiction, according to two different levels of signification. On the first level — purely informative — we will see that this economy pertains to Austin's concern for realism; by drawing his inspiration from the "official" history, he provides his fiction with elements which make it look "true." However, this first level, on which the narrative "looks true," is coupled with a second one, which bypasses the superficial networks of meaning, and proposes a "true narrative."

In fact, the text exhibits a social, economic framework only to free itself from it, and asserts its fictional status through self-irony as well as by working out a "*mise en intrigue*" — "a staging of the plot," —, according to Paul Ricoeur's seminal formula. We will see precisely to what extent the narrative process enables Austin to go beyond the

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[5] In fact, more those of an economy than those of economics. This economy is relevant to the use which is made of History, of the balance of the powers, of the modes of production and commodity exchange when they operate and manifest themselves according to laws of significance which are specific to literature, *i. e.* "revised, muddled, unwedged, and filtered" (trans. from Henaff, 1978).

ordinary forms of certitude, and to question, through fiction, the History of the United States, as it is written by historians.

I - 1 Contracts and bonds

A) The "interest" of the text

The first of the three sections of the tale — "Some account of Peter Rugg, the Missing Man, Laik of Boston, New England in a letter to Mr Herman Krauff" — published in the *New England Galaxy* of 10 September 1824, was signed by Jonathan Dunwell, and opens with the following formula: "*Sir,* — Agreeably to my promise..." So the fiction originates in a promise, that is to say, a debt, an agreement for the future. The narrative begins straight-away with a form of exchange: a letter, a promissory note, a written promise.

In its original construction, the fiction appears both as an epistolary text and a journalistic chronicle. The text looks like an "order," a report under the by-line of Dunwell, a New-Yorker on a business trip. We soon understand, and this is the first thing we learn, that Dunwell, the narrator, is bound by a contract — a moral pact, a promise — to a Mr. Herman Krauff. He explains that he is leading his inquiry only because of the kind interest his silent partner takes in this affair — "it is entirely owing to the humane interest you seemed to take in the reports, that I have pursued the inquiry" (19) — and he makes it clear that his approach is a voluntary one.[6] In a text in which the word "account" appears recurrently — eleven occurrences, including the titles of the first and second sections —, this preliminary point of information cannot be innocent.

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6 The figure of the "disinterested" narrator parallels Austin's own attitude, for "he never asked for monetary remuneration for any of his publications" (Zimbalatti XIII).

If we admit, as Roland Barthes put it, that a narrative is both an exchange and the staging of this exchange,[7] we may wonder what kind of exchange the text stands for, or to put it differently, what its "interest" is.

Jonathan Dunwell acts in the interest of Mr. Krauff. He is his authorized representative,[8] without being in his pay — if we are to believe him —, though he certainly has got something out of it — but what? He accepts to act as his middleman, like an authorized agent who makes transactions between the producer and the consumer possible. This peculiar status of the narrator calls for some further comments.

First, one can notice that the intermediary who by definition, "might as well not exist," "has made himself indispensable" (Reynaud 132). Jonathan Dunwell is still present in the second section of the narrative, published two years later, in 1826. But the contracting partners are apparently no longer the same. If the first episode is clearly for the benefit of a Mr. Herman Krauff — only mentioned once, significantly in the opening of the text —, the second one is addressed to the Editor of the *Galaxy,* though it is the expected sequel to the inquiry on Peter Rugg initiated two years before.

> To the Editor of the Galaxy,
>
> *Sir,* — Perhaps you may recollect that in the summer of 1824, I communicated a few particulars respecting a man called Peter Rugg. I intimated to you that if I ever heard any thing more on the man, I would inform you (33).

We will not try in these lines to solve the enigma of this double report on the same person — Peter Rugg — addressed, after an interval of two years, to two distinct addressees. In the time-space of fiction, did Herman Krauff become the editor of the magazine and Dunwell his

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7 "The narrative as a currency, the object of a contract, as economic stakes, in short, a commodity, whose transaction can be turned out into a bargain, is no longer confined to the publisher's office, but represents itself *en abyme* in the narration" (trans. from Barthes: 1970, 95).

8 The question of power appears indirectly but explicitly in the narrator's account in the opening lines of the second section: "as if it was my power to follow Mr. Rugg and relate his adventures."

permanent correspondent? Or did Jonathan Dunwell sell information to a new silent partner with whom he signed another contract? During these two years, the narrative and the process of its writing have manifestly been the objects of negotiations, if not bargaining. What motivated the second section? What drove Dunwell to pursue a "missing man" — and Austin to carry on his story? Let us only notice here the repetition of a contractual relationship and the strength of the initial contract, which, two years later, still motivates, for some reason — for whose benefit? — the narrator's investigations.

Let us add however that Dunwell will eventually use the mediation of money — he is turned into some kind of "financial middleman" — to act in his silent partner's interest. In that sense, it can be said already that Peter Rugg is the subject of some calculation. He is used as the narrator's currency, who will act as exchange broker to honor his agreement.

B) "In settlement..."

We can now put forward the following interpretation of Austin's short story: a business man from New York, Jonathan Dunwell, "acting on Mr. Herman Krauff's behalf, *accounts* for Peter Rugg's disappearance, and doing so, *accounts* for his method and results to his silent partner as well" (trans. from Terramorsi 130). The insisting recurrence of the word "account" can be seen as the denotation of the acknowledgment of an agreement. The word refers to the end of an action, to a "statement of accounts" of a narrative or a financial operation. "Account" means both "the report of real facts or events," and "a formal business arrangement" or "a record of credit and debit entries" (*Webster's*). It refers then to the banking lexicon, that of the world of Finance and Stock Market — New York and Wall Street — of financial operations and ledgers, of profit and loss. So that the text takes on the appearance of "a creditable report" (trans. from Terramorsi 130) generating a normative effect, at the opposite of the naive pleasure of reading fiction, let alone one published in a magazine.

> In William Austin's tale, the draft, even before it becomes a fictionalized theme in Rugg's wanderings and redemption, models the form of the narrative into that of entries in a ledger (trans. from Terramorsi 130).

The past, then, serves as a reference base used for mathematical calculations:

> "that Peter Rugg is now a living man, I will not deny; but that you have seen Peter Rugg and his child, is impossible, if you mean a small child, for Jenny Rugg, if living, must be at least — let me see — Boston massacre, 1770 — Jenny Rugg was about ten years old. Why, sir, Jenny Rugg, if living, must be more than sixty years of age" (26).

Memory is to be seen here as a capital, a precious reserve, submitted to (un)fair wear and tear. It is an immaterial buried treasure, hoarded along the years, which secures — but for how long? — the meaning and the value of the events. In this treasure hunt, time is counted: "If the present generation know little of him, the next will know less" (26). This knowledge is both social and historical: it belongs to a generation.

"Time is money;" in modern capitalistic societies, time measures the value of everything. The passing of time troubles both Jonathan Dunwell and Peter Rugg, who is eager to go back home. Accordingly, Pierre-Yves Pétillon remarks that "the whole narrative is a race against the clock" (trans. from Pétillon 58). Hence Dunwell's systematic efforts to collect facts quickly. The narrator shows his constant concern for capitalizing information. Nothing is left aside, all the knowledge about Peter Rugg must be gathered: rumors, superstitions, facts, the testimonies of his neighbors, the results of the inquiry led by Mrs. Rugg's friends. As if he were accountable for every detail concerning Rugg, investigator Dunwell neglects no source of information: all the witnesses have to account to him for what they know — "Sir, give me some account of this man" (22); "This is all the account of Peter Rugg I could obtain" (25). Moreover, he is anxious to verify the reliability of the data he gathers — "I despaired of gaining any intelligence from him" — and he cross-examines every testimony — "pray, let us compare your grandfather's story of Mr. Rugg with my own" (26).

His produces a detailed report, with accurate references, verging sometimes on bizarreness and absurdity, in a modern reader's eyes: "Once Rugg was seen to bite a *ten-penny nail* in halves" (27); or: "An ammunition wagon . . . had dropped an *eighteen pounder* in the road (39);" or else: "it was like the sound of many shipwrights driving home the bolts of a *seventy-four*" (50, emphasis added). Each of those who once met Peter Rugg is taken into account and scrupulously identified: surname, Christian name, sometimes age, address and occupation. Dunwell's method is that of a police detective. A whole network of informants is organized — "Mrs. Croft . . . directed me to an elderly man Mr. James Felt" (25) — but their reliability is systematically questioned — "...if my grandfather was worthy of credit" (26).

Whereas Peter Rugg wanders in a world deprived of any perspective, the time and the space of the narrative are those of cadastral survey. As Pétillon put it: "the story . . . stretches out on a map" (169). Let us mention first the inflationary profusion of place-names, which the reader, under Dunwell's control, makes a count of. Middle Street, in which Peter Rugg used to live, is quoted ten times, among many other toponyms: twelve street names, seventy-five occurrences of Boston, a hundred names of cities, States, bridges or rivers literally punctuate Peter Rugg's wanderings.

Various other spatiotemporal references turn Dunwell's narrative into an authentic report. Here is a list of them, after Dunwell's own account:

— Dates and seasons: "in the summer of 1820;" "in the summer of 1824;" "In the autumn of 1825;" "in the year 1806;" "where does Peter Rugg spend his winters? for I have seen him only in summer."

— References to cardinal points: "eastern direction;" "one man tells me it is to the East, another to the West;" "you perceive to the Eastward;" "to the East, so near to the Atlantic;" " now West Cambridge;" "he had . . . pursued a Westerly direction;" "look to the West;" "From the West;" "I travelled to the North for my health;" "my horse is impatient, he sees the North End;" " he sees the North Church;" "Philadelphia;" "in all North America;" "there is no such place as this

in all North America;" "Men on the North End;" "just to look at the North End of Boston;" "the toll gatherer . . . was more severe in his vicinity than farther South;" "waiting the next south wind to project itself into the street;" "the clouds are gathering in the South."

— Numerous references to measures: weight, distances and speed: the distance already covered and that which is left — the number of miles to Boston appears thirteen times — the speed of the chair — "twelve miles an hour" —, the dates and frequency of Rugg's passages — "he had met that man and his carriage, within a fortnight in four different states" —, and the place where he was seen for the last time.

By telling Rugg's story, Dunwell tries to order, evaluate and decipher what appears scattered, indecipherable and devaluated. By doing so, he tries in vain to normalize, quantify, and rationalize an inflationary journey which, in fact, cannot be accounted for. Peter Rugg's peregrinations makes one feel dizzy for he seems to follow what a puzzled mathematician may call "an underivable curve."

> A non-oriented course, a displacement without any direction to follow, whose continuity is mere contiguity . . . , a rout, but not a route, a line of unaligned dots, alien to any cause, with each of its points . . . unrelated to the previous one (trans. from Goux 153-54).

The road, for Peter Rugg, does not stretch between two points; it is an entropic random space, polymorphic and monotonous, repetitive and abrupt, uncertain even when expected. As the result of a genuine, wanton movement, this rampant polysemy will only be interrupted by the use of money. Money *accounts* for the links to be established.

I - 2 Money circles and the question of (free) circulation

Peter Rugg obstinately refuses to pay the tolls. He forcibly goes through toll-gates, and intends to travel without any expenses, relying on the old colonial legislation.

> About the time Rugg was missing, a horse and wheel carriage, with a noise equal to a troop, would at midnight, in utter contempt of the rates of toll, pass over the bridge (28).
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> .....
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> The toll gatherer then demanded why he had run his toll, so many times?
> "Toll! why" said Rugg, "do you demand toll? There is no toll to pay on the King's highway."
> "King's highway! do you not perceive this is a turnpike?" (38)
>
> .....
>
> "Your toll, sir, Your toll!" "I will not pay you a penny" said Rugg; "you are both of you highway robbers; there are no turnpikes in this country" (38).

Peter Rugg comes from the depths of the past, but he is just an outmoded man out of his depth. "In those days," the text reads, "life was simple." Peter Rugg missed the Revolution and his way remains the King's highway, the way of pre-Revolutionary times. He keeps wondering at what he sees around him and blindly rebels against tolls:

> Let us underline now the implicit paradox established — written — by William Austin — a politician: in times past, under British supervision, . . . people could circulate freely in an available space (trans. from Terramorsi 127).

When Peter Rugg refuses to pay tolls, he infringes the contractual regulations of the new democracy: a service — the passage — against money. His extraneousness to the social pattern is here quite enlightening: by refusing to pay, Rugg remains in a space made of sheer mobility, a reflexive space, a space of monotony and redundancy, which no longer conveys any meaning: "I have met him more than a hundred times, and have been so often asked the way to Boston by that man . . . that of late I have refused any communication with him" (20).

Like Melville's Bartleby (1853), Peter Rugg, unable to participate in any system of exchange, is also incapable of sharing the new values of the young republic. He is depicted like a stranger from within:

> [Not] what is conventionally called an outlaw; he is only cut off from the law, in the sense that the law cannot account for him and that he is no longer accountable for it (trans. from Imbert 64).

So, what is Peter Rugg actually doing? He is just "not stopping," endlessly, as if his passage, a criminal act because it is gratuitous and free, did not count: "The highways refuse me a passage," — "to pass," "passed," "passage," "passengers," twenty-three occurrences in the text...

What the narrative questions here is the "passage," the object and the signal of the new social rules. Paying at toll-gates becomes the principle on which the advancement of society is based. The gate, beyond its accepted symbolical meaning in the literature of the Fantastic, is a metaphor representing both a place of change and the way leading to change. It is a historical and symbolical space, between the old colonial order and the new democracy. In the same way, the conflicts engendered by Peter Rugg's passage illustrate the clash between the old and the new worlds: "for in the midst of this altercation, the horse, whose nose was resting on the upper bar of the turnpike gate, seized it between his teeth, lifted it gently off its staples, and trotted off with it" (39).

Rugg's refusal of spatial mutations amounts to contesting the rules which motivate the mercantile society, justify political freedom and found the new social compact. Throughout his narrative, Austin insists on the relation of his various characters both to economics and to space. There is the narrator on a business trip, the coachmen, the peddler who was obliged to take an insurance for his goods, the innkeepers who "held [him] in light esteem . . . for he never stops to eat, drink, or sleep" (22). But also Peter Rugg himself, who refused to pay tolls, who nevertheless sailed to Amsterdam and "bought goods of Vandogger" (45), the toll-gatherers, the macadamized roads, the fares on the Hudson ferry, and, last but not least, the auction sale of Rugg's Bostonian estate. A whole lexical paraphernalia supports this spatial and financial double register. Money is mentioned seventeen times — "shilling," "penny," "dollar," "coin" — and always when it comes to pay for one's passage.

The word "toll" is used thirty-three times, "turnpike" twenty-one times, and "rate" — a fixed ratio between two things, whether it be money or speed, the connotation being the same — appears three times.

In a country which has just shaken off the British colonial yoke in the name of the free-exchange of men and commodities, "Peter Rugg, the Missing Man" questions roguishly both the American canonical discourse about the "abandonment" of the Old World and the imperious necessity of the free circulation of men and goods. By staging in the foreground turnpikes and toll-gates as symbols of social evolution and economic progress, Austin produces a literary version of what F. J. Turner will theorize in 1893 with the notion of the Frontier as a meeting space, always fleeing forward, between a civilized space and the wilderness, where one gets rid of one's rags from the Old World to go forward and become a new type of man, an American.

I - 3 A clearing

> Though Rugg refused to pay toll at turnpikes when Mr. Hardy reached his hand for the ferriage, Rugg readily put his hand into one of his many pockets and took out a piece of silver, and handed it to Hardy. "What is this?" said Mr. Hardy. "It is thirty shillings," said Rugg. "It might have once been thirty shillings, old tenor," said Mr. Hardy, "but it is not at present" (43).

Whereas Rugg obstinately refuses to pay tolls on turnpikes, he accepts to pay his fare on the Hudson ferry. But he gives a bad coin. It is no forged currency, but a coin which was stamped in London in 1649, a British half-crown, which is no longer legal tender in modern America: "it was a half crown, coined by the English Parliament dated in the year of 1649. On one side, 'The *Commonwealth of England*,' and St. George's cross encircled with a wreath of laurel. On the other, '*God with us*,' and a harp and St. George's cross united" (44). Money works here as a social link for it appears as both the form of and the stakes in the process of connection of individuals into a group. It is "a system of payment . . . which makes the coordination of economic actions by individuals possible. . . . Without it, the existence of market is unthink-

able. . . . It gives a sense to market social division and to individual economic freedom" (trans. from Cartelier 61-62).

Rugg's coin still has value for the numismatist, but not for the banker. It testifies to his economic and social marginality. He cannot fit in the new American market for, whatever his "actual wealth," he ignores the new "account unit" (Cartelier 74 et passim) and has no access to the new currency. Consequently, he cannot sell or buy anything, even if his coin has some value. Peter Rugg is isolated in a spatiotemporal stalemate, because he is in a *financial* stalemate. His coin is nothing more than "used" money from the beginning of time, "historic" money, not unlike historic monuments, the "coined" memory of what was and no longer is — the colonial era —, the "coined" testimony of Independence and of the new sovereignty of the United States.

Peter Rugg, the blasphemer — "his temper, at times, was altogether ungovernable, and then, his language was terrible" (27) — has become Peter Rugg, the bad debtor. The swearwords, the blasphemes, and Peter Rugg's coin partake of the same gesture of dilapidation. The "fatal oath" transgresses linguistics taboos, and thus becomes an intransitive form. The bad coin and the bad language are inconvertible; they cannot be negotiated for, having no match in society, they discredit all opportunities of communication or exchange.

Unable to convert his money into cash, Peter Rugg would have been excluded from the new American society for ever, without Dunwell's intervention in his behalf on the Hudson ferry: "I winked to Mr. Hardy, and pronounced it good, current money; and said loudly, I will not permit the gentleman to be imposed on, for I will exchange the money myself" (44). Simulating an exchange transaction, Dunwell eventually gives Rugg the means to pay for his passage *into* the United States. But then, is it a mere donation, implying nothing in return, or is

it a credit, *i. e.* a speculation on Rugg's capability to reimburse him somehow or other?[9]

Dunwell's financial gesture "*redeems* . . . Peter Rugg, until then totally dis*credited*" (trans. from Terramorsi 130, emphasis added). It cancels his "monstrous" debt and allows him to "*regain* possession of his estate" (133, emphasis added). Back in the Law — *nomos* — Peter Rugg can eventually go back home — *oikos*. [10] The economic power, by *stopping the payment* of the supernatural debt — as one may say for a stolen check —, has a soothing, normalizing effect. "But what kind of power can settle a supernatural debt, pay the supernatural powers and, in sum, *buy* them? . . . It must be a super-power, to say the least... " (trans. from Terramorsi 132).

Monetary relationships are then the obligatory passage, the necessary form of social relationships,[11] for "money is the first social link in a mercantile society" (trans. from Aglietta and Orlean 15). In the

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9 "Ah, Mr. Hardy, . . . you have, indeed, hooked a prize" the narrator says when he sees Peter Rugg caught up on the Hudson ferry. But what makes Peter Rugg so valuable?

10 "Among . . . its many irreducible semantic values . . . economics undoubtedly comprises those of the law (*nomos*) and of the house (*oikos*, the house, the estate, the family, the home as the locus of the fireplace). *Nomos* not only means the law in general, but also the law of distribution (*nemein*), the law of sharing out, the law *as* sharing out (*moira*), the share given or assigned, the sharing in. . . . The law impliès the sharing out, like *nomie* implies both economy and economics. Beyond the notions of law, of house, of distribution, and of sharing out, economics implies those of exchange, of circulation, or feed back. . . . At the core of any questioning of the *oikonomia* . . . [there are] circular exchanges, the circulation of goods, of products, of monetary signs or commodities, the writing off of expenditures, of incomes, the substitution of values in use for values in exchange. This motive of circulation may suggest that the law of economics is the circular return to the point of departure, to the origin, and to the house as well. Thus, what should be followed is the odyssey-like structure of the economic narrative. The *oikonomia* always follows Ulysses' tracks" (trans. from Derrida, 18).

11 Let's underline here Austin's sense of humor when he specifies in passing that Rugg's once shameful acrobatic feats are now an acknowledged source of profit. Peter Rugg does things for nothing, but in return, he accepts to travel for nothing as well.

American context of the time, money has no particular moral connotation — at least, it has no malefic power. Its objective value makes the identification of legal order and labeling of individuals possible: people are either debtors or creditors, whatever their personal attributes.[12] By quantifying social relationships, the monetary order founds original principles to define identity. In the young American democracy, "the individual can only have a representation of himself through an objectivizing abstraction — what are my rights? What am I worth? — which refers to the procedure through which he is evaluated by society" (trans. from Cartelier 108).

I - 4 The auction sale and the spirit of modern capitalism

Two months after he crossed the Hudson thanks to Dunwell's generosity, Peter Rugg eventually finds his home again, but he does not seem to wonder about what made his "circulation" free again. When he arrives in Middle Street, the auction sale has just started. By the end of this supernatural "mercantile" story, the auctioneer makes a long speech which theatrically introduces both the commercial transaction and the appearance of the revenant.

> It seems the estate of Peter Rugg had recently escheated to the Commonwealth of Massachusetts for want of heirs; and the legislature had ordered the Solicitor General to advertise, and sell it at public auction (47).

Beyond its functioning as a regulator of social links, the economic order paradoxically appears in this last scene as a factor of division. Indeed, the economic stakes raises the legal issues to the right of succession and the question of proprietorship.

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12 Let us remember here Mr. Felt's testimony. He explained, commenting on Peter Rugg's disappearance, that "as it did not appear that any creditors made a stir, the occurrence soon mingled itself in the stream of oblivion." To disappear without leaving any debts behind amounts to nothing. It does not count, except for Dunwell's account.

> "The estate gentlemen, which we offer you this day, was once the property of a family now extinct. It has escheated to the Commonwealth for want of heirs. Lest any one of you should be deterred from bidding on so large an estate as this, for fear of a disputed title, I am authorised by the Solicitor General to proclaim that the purchaser shall have the best of all titles, a warrantee deed from the Commonwealth" (48).

The auction sale of Rugg's estate is apparently perfectly legal. But the spectators and the potential buyers remain suspicious as to the lawfulness of a process according to which the passing of time alone can legally deprive somebody of his property, as if the new Power and legislation could not contradict the die-hard prejudices of the past, nor forget a customary oral Right, which appears to them as imprescriptible. This issue appears at a nexus of contradictory tensions.

The first one, evoked by Pierre-Yves Pétillon, poses the problem of the appropriation of the American space: [13]

> From Hawthorne to Faulkner, the original sin has always been the improper solicitation of a legacy, *i. e.* the monopolization of a district of the American soil, by clearing and closing it, so that what could precisely not be bequeathed — America as an open, mobile space — would pass on to the next generation (trans. from Pétillon 183).

The other source of tension, constituent of any revolutionary situation, opposes oral and written traditions. A genuine revolutionary project is by no means compatible with the respect of customs and conservatism: "Customs require time, they are anchored in the past, whereas what is written can innovate" (trans. from Didier 43). Contrarily to what could be expected from a people recently freed from the colonial yoke, it is the written law which generates some distrust — in jurist Austin's narrative... Although they are not an assembly of conservatives, the Bostonians of Middle Street betray however a "*rugged* individualism," a deep-

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[13] This theme also appears in Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The House of the Seven Gables* (1851) in which Colonel Pyncheon asks for a plot of land which was cleared by Matthew Maule, because he had a proprietary bill for it, granted on the King's behalf.

rooted aversion for any strong government, by manifesting their attachment to the primacy of the individual over the public property. In fact, a property cannot be bought twice, and if Rugg or a member of his family were still alive, their unalienable right of property would cancel any bill of sale, even warranted by the State. The auctioneer knows it perfectly, and consequently, makes every effort, to incite people to buy, to discredit all rumors mentioning Rugg's possible return:

> "This rumor, gentlemen, has no foundation, and can have no foundation in the nature of things. It originated about two years since, from the incredible story of Jonathan Dunwell . . . Mrs Croft indeed, whose husband's . . . mouth waters for this estate, has countenanced this fiction" (48).

Jonathan Dunwell is "suspected of intriguing with one of his witnesses, Mrs. Croft" (trans. from Terramorsi 133). The credibility of Peter Rugg's story is questioned, evoked as mere gossip, and the whole affair is attributed to wild rumors, defying common sense and entrepreneurship — "Such logic, gentlemen, never led to a good investment" (48).

The auctioneer's speech takes the professional city-builders to task, evoking the creative mind, the ambition and the mission of the architects who are in charge of the building of the new nation:

> "Let not this idle story cross the noble purpose of consigning these ruins to the genius of architecture; . . . a corner lot, with wonderful capabilities; . . . an architect cannot contemplate this lot of land without rapture" (49).

The acquisition of this estate has a figurative value, as it represents both a break between the old colonial city and modern America symbolized by technical progress — steam, railways, canals — and the development of the Bostonian urban policy. Once again, the motif of the contract is implicit: "I tell you the city of Boston must have a piece of this estate in order to widen Ann-street . . . I say the city must have a large piece of his land . . . What a chance! The city scorns to take a man's land for nothing" (50).

For the purpose in hand — the American Dream —, the auctioneer incites people to speculate on an estate which has so far escaped modern urbanization and land speculation:

> "The premises . . . embraced about half an acre of land. It was not uncommon in former times to have half an acre for a house lot; for an acre of land then, in many parts of Boston, was not more valuable than a foot, in some places at present"(47).
> "Here is a half an acre of land more than twenty thousand square feet . . . none of you contracted lots of forty feet by fifty"(49).

As the surviving evidence of bygone years, Rugg's estate attests that pre-Revolutionary Boston offered plenty of available space. But mercantile relationships led to such acquisitional avidity that space has become rare and land is no longer accessible.

The hoarding of money seems more frightful than Peter Rugg's malediction. For money must circulate, be invested, before it has a chance to harm his holder. To the potential buyer's nightmare of the possible return of Peter Rugg — a "bond" which weighs on one's chest, fixed and irredeemable — the auctioneer opposes the prohibition of usury and the moral obligation to make a proficient use of one's money, *i. e.* to make it circulate:

> "Your surplus money, instead of refreshing your sleep with the golden dreams of new sources of speculation, would turn to the nightmare. A man's money, if not employed, serves only to disturb his rest" (49).
> .....
> "The only oppression is, you are in danger of being smothered under a lot of wealth" (50).

Hence the auctioneer's hymn to liberty and investment, the ethic and patriotic argument, "paid into the account" of an economic theory, and the suggestive opposition of the "nightmare" — the dead money which stifles the miser — and the "golden dreams" — money which circulates:

> "Men of the North End! Need I appeal to your patriotism, in order to enhance the value of his lot? . . . there, around the corner, lived James Otis; here Samuel Adams-there, Joseph Warren — and around that

> other corner, Josiah Quincy. . . . Here is the nursery of American Independence" (50).

The value of the premises is historical, hence financial: to speculate and make this land thrive amounts to commemorating the Revolutionary heroes who died to defend it. The purchaser would make a bargain by making a good civic action: entrepreneurship becomes an ethical matter. The auctioneer addresses professionals who "accomplish their duty in the carrying out of their jobs, of their occupations" (trans. from Weber 51). He appeals to a rational behavior, founded on the *Beruf*, a Protestant principle according to which "the only way to live in manner which is agreeable to God [is] to accomplish on Earth the duties corresponding to the place in society assigned by existence to the individual" (Weber 90). So, the businessmen ought to make the goods conquered and bequeathed by their elders yield profit. In that sense, risking one's money, like being generous,[14] becomes a vocation — *Beruf* —, a moral and civic obligation — "To you, then, the value of these premises must be inestimable." To invest one's money in this estate — "this holy ground" — would then be the noble gesture of a citizen who is worthy of his past, for he is capable of participating in the modernization of his country.

The new risks they are supposed to take for their country makes them a new generation of pioneers, the adventurers of the new economic order. This is a point that historian Turner will confirm several years later:

> The masters of industry, who control interests which represent billions of dollars, do not admit that they have broken with pioneer ideals. They regard themselves as pioneers under changed conditions, carrying on the old work of developing the natural resources of the nation, compelled by the constructive fever in their veins, even in ill-heath and old age and after the accumulation of wealth beyond their power to enjoy, to seek new avenues of action and of power, to chop new

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[14] What would be called in the stockbroker's circles a takeover bid, "consisting in the proposition made to the shareholders to buy their shares at a price superior to that of the market, in order to take the control of the corresponding firm." (trans. from Cartelier 115).

> clearings, to find new trails, to expand the horizon of the nation's activity, and to extend the scope of their dominion (Turner 319).

But as soon as a few hands are being raised in the assembly and the first offers made, the arrival of Peter Rugg abruptly interrupts the auction, discredits the auctioneer's speech, and literally bangs the market. By paying for Peter Rugg's return — donation or credit?—, Jonathan Dunwell destabilizes the official power. Rugg becomes a blind instrument of subversion, significantly mistaken for an "earthquake" by the Bostonians: "By his sole presence, Rugg shakes capitalistic Boston and discredits the political speech then in the hands of racketeers: to buy oneself such an expensive past is out of the question" (trans. from Terramorsi 136).

Two men, two social settings, two systems of values... On the one hand, Rugg, a surviving witness of pre-Revolutionary times, appears as a man of challenges, of excessiveness, of wrath, of dispersion and spending to the point of dizziness. He is "a giant in a disproportionate chair which swallows up monstrous distances" (trans. from Terramorsi 127). A character out of the ordinary, who questions the present by bringing up the past and who wants to know who is accountable for his misfortune: "Who has demolished my house, in my absence?" (51) Rugg is no anti-establishment fellow: he merely claims what is his by rights. His estate is still his, but he has definitely lost his home: "Your estate, indeed, remains, but no home" (52). But how could he become a Bostonian again, after half a century of exile, with his back turned to the *oikos?* The same type of question will be illustrated later on by Henry James in *The Jolly Corner* (1908).

On the other hand, stands auctioneer, a man of law, an actor of modern democracy, a calculating braggart, the mouthpiece of capitalistic rhetoric, advocating the fragmentation of space.

The staggering return of Peter Rugg, the "shooting star," puts an end to his economic and political credo. The group is no longer as well-knit as it used to be, the bidding collapses. Peter Rugg, the revenant, prevents the liquidation of the past — colonial America — by

modernity — the United States —, but he fails to establish any link between them. His absence, for more than half a century, and his inexplicable return question a perspectiveless past, a historical discontinuity, a lapse in cultural memory.

II — Economic values

In Austin's short story, economics is staged within a network of a realistic logic — numerous references to the Revolution — and of a symbolical one — when the system of references becomes the text itself. But the fact that economics pertains to the social discourse on the Revolution must not obliterate the literary nature of the text. The notion of value — in the Saussurian sense — precisely delimits the passage of the discursive to the fictional. It points out the place of the economic motif in fiction, and the specific distinction which it establishes (see Robin 112). This last questions requires some further comments.

II - 1 Economics as a setting for the narrative

In 1824, William Austin, a man of law, gives up the normative structure of judicial treatises and the Manichaean discourse of political pamphlets to write fiction. However, Peter Rugg's story is still marked by the "History of the historians" (Barbéris: 1980), as well as by the judiciary and the political, Austin referring explicitly to the Revolution, to social changes and to the modernization — in particular urban evolution — which it engendered. Thus, 1827 Boston no longer is *the* leading city of colonial America, but a city of the United States, one among others, notably New York whose economic prosperity now competes with its own. While Rugg was wandering about, the Revolution erased all traces of the past, which contributed to disorientating him: the country is now divided into States, the cities are bigger, the roads are macadamized and punctuated with toll-gates — turnpikes are among the first transformations of space favoring commerce and speculation (see Weil 48).

But is it so surprising that the background of a story written between 1824 and 1827 by a politician, a story which (also) tells the history of the War of Independence, is modeled both by its starting point — Boston — and by the "argument" of the Revolution — economics? The long series of acts passed by British parliament after 1760 dramatically increased the financial and economic pressure as well as British control of American trade, so that the colonists had to resort to the boycott of British goods. Beyond their disapproval of custom duties which were often judged unfair, the Americans just could not accept "taxation without representation." After a pause in the British coercive policy, Parliament returned to the attack by imposing "new importation duties . . . on glass, lead, paint, tea and paper. This time they were *duties*, not *taxes*" (trans. from Kaspi 96). In March 1770, direct confrontation between the Redcoats and the colonists — the Boston Massacre — rekindled American resentment. In 1773, the exorbitant privilege granted to the East India Company, authorized to sell duty-free tea in the colonies, lit the powder keg, and triggered off insurrection. In Spring 1774, British Parliament retaliated to the Boston Tea Party by passing the Intolerable Acts, soon followed by open conflict.

These are well-known facts, but what must be remembered here is the fact that the Revolution was largely motivated, beyond the ideological dissidence, by economic grudges, for originally, "the insurgents were not so much Revolutionaries who wanted to impose innovative principles and change society, as conservatives who wished to preserve the British constitution as they imagined it" (trans. from Kaspi 96). This analysis parallels Pierre Barbéris's on the French Revolution in 1789, as he shows that the democratic principles were then engendered by the requirements of commerce — not the other way round: "As commerce needs to fight harassing regulations, excessive taxes and constraints of all kinds, it engenders economic freedom, which in turn, brings about political freedom" (trans. from Barbéris: 1978, 264). And so it was for the American Revolution, for the colonists' rebellion originated, beyond the political issue, in their will to preserve commerce and avoid taxes.

The History of the historians constitutes one of the requirements for the readability of a literature which definitely turns its back, with the Revolution, on some of its theological roots, to favor economic and social sources of inspiration (see Béranger and Gonnaud 45). In that sense, economics would be one among other relevant references of the time, providing a readable framework to the story based on connivance. In fact, fiction conjures up extra-textual elements inspired by a socio-cultural referential space "to negotiate the production of sense" (trans. from Robin 104). Dates, names, places, measures, contracts, the implicit reference to the *New England Galaxy*, toll-gates, money, macadamized roads, the new urban developments in Boston, the national heroes' hagiography, all these elements contribute to the informative dimension of the short story. However, as dense and accurate as they may seem, the extra-textual recurring elements are systematically, in the narrative space, reworked — magnified or understated — or contested through literary expedients such as irony, protest, or displacement.

II - 2 A political fable

In this first short story written by the jurist and politician William Austin, economics is an obsessive theme whose ambivalence revolves around the pivotal event of the Revolution. Money, for instance, is both the agent of the production of social links — according to our interpretation of the toll-gates and Hudson episodes — and the vector of a social "de-linking" process — as with Rugg's demonetized money and the auction sale of his estate. This thematic bipolarity fictionalizes the Revolution as an unstable, conflictual entity, generating social progress and hardships, a source of both enchantment and disenchantment.

The set of representations constituted by the conflictual utterance of the value of economics is staged in the narrative of the peregrinations of an emblematic protagonist, Peter Rugg. The blasphemer was cursed and doomed to wander endlessly. As a consequence, he missed the Revolution. The money of a commercial traveler allows him to cross the Hudson legally, and to come back to his native town, Boston. His

impressions of the new society, of the new values and of his incapacity to integrate them, reflect his personal evaluation of the Revolution. After the time of every challenge, comes the time of disarray.

Through the eyes of a character who is the victim of change, the fiction of the notable William Austin "stages a number of anxious questions on modern America. . . . This disillusionment would have been difficult to express outside the field of fiction, in the nationalist aftermath of the War of Independence" (trans. from Terramorsi 127). Mistaken for Boston, New York, the symbol of the new nation, is depicted as a supernatural manifestation, whose reality is hardly conceivable:

> "There is no such place as this in North America, this is all the effect of enchantment; this is a grand delusion, nothing real; here is seemingly a great city, magnificent houses, shops and goods, men and women innumerable, and as busy as in a real life, all sprung up in one night of the wilderness. Or what is more probable, some tremendous convulsion of nature has thrown London or Amsterdam on the shores of New England. Or possibly, I may be dreaming, though the night seems rather long" (44).

In Peter Rugg' eyes, the actualization of the American Dream looks like a natural catastrophe, a mirage, a grandiose but flimsy ephemeral scenery. New cities just come out of the ground as if by magic and look so much like the old European capitals that one cannot tell them apart! "The queen of New England" merges with London or Amsterdam! What a surprise, but also what a disappointment to see the "primeval greenery" spoiled! Was the American Dream just a copy of the urban European patterns?

Land speculation, that plague which eats at the country, is another motive for disappointment for Rugg. The "open and mobile space" — according to Pétillon's seminal phrase — has become a commodity among others. New England — Boston, at least — is no longer like Whitman's "buffalo's skin," generously spread on the continent. Space is shriveling up, shrinking away, and is now the theater of vain competition since space is no longer available. Peter Rugg discovers a crammed Boston, evoking European limited urban space. Many settlers,

refusing to see their living space — and their hopes — so reduced, chose then to go West.

"You were cut off from the last age, and you can never be fitted to the present. Your home is gone and you can never have another home in this world" (52). Austin's text closes on this radical *objection*[15] which sounds like the official notice of his definitive banishment. The hero is eventually nonsuited: the auction sale is turned into an open air tribunal — that of History — sentencing one of the first fictional heroes of American literature.

For Peter Rugg seems to have been redeemed only to confirm the damage caused by a "fantastic" growth, generating a crisis in a democracy which shows its limits with the shortage of space on the market. His presence and his disarray reveal the sporadic malfunctioning of a society, probably too busy posting and commodifying natural space to give their place to newcomers.

This is what makes "Peter Rugg, the Missing Man" a political fable inspired by Austin's critical view of the erosion of community links in post-Revolution America, submitted to the dogma of profit and modernism. For Peter Rugg, there is no prospect any longer, no hope, no historical dream. But how about the others?

Through Peter Rugg's banishment and ruin, Austin questions the Revolution, on the one hand as an "artifact" — a manufactured object without any memory, regardless of its past and origins — and on the other as a problematic modality of change: an interior without an exterior, alien to social alterity.

Peter Rugg comes back into — and by means of — a Supernatural tale to fictionalize the power of exclusion, the amnesia of society which has turned the asylum given by God into a land of speculation. Peter Rugg's return does not enlarge the frame of social representation,

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15 In the judicial meaning of the word, implying that the plaintiff's claim is rejected.

for it shows — disastrously — its very limits. Austin's short story is a written version of a world in which the "spirit of capitalism" brings a fatal stop to integration, evoked by F. J. Turner in 1893:

> Two ideals were fundamental in traditional American thought, ideals that developed in the pioneer era. One was that of individual freedom to compete unrestrictedly for the resources of a continent — the squatter ideal. . . . The other was the ideal of a democracy. . . . But American democracy was based on an abundance of free lands; these were the very conditions that shaped its growth and its fundamental traits. Thus time has revealed that these two ideals of pioneer democracy had elements of mutual hostility and contained the seeds of its dissolution (Turner 320).

Peter Rugg's return allows William Austin to question two Revolutionary patterns — one referring to historical time, the other to mythical time — which participate in two different conceptions of American identity. These two conceptions were conveyed by the social discourse of the time. For some, "the American nation was born . . . with the political revolution and the War of Independence " (trans. from Marienstras 72). But for others, "the birth of the nation coincides with the departure of the first emigrants" (72). Undoubtedly, Austin's tale questions here the founding myths of the American nation.

The first American ideologues "depicted [the new nation] as an absolute creation, an exemplary one, destined to initiate, for mankind at large, a new history [founded] on the principle of its historical discontinuity" (41). To the myth of a radical historic break, of the *tabula rasa* and absolute new beginnings of the 1770s, fiction opposes the continuity of former customs and beliefs, the slow time of mentalities, and the myth of the Founding Fathers' crossing of the Atlantic as the original break from the past. First seen as a barrier but also as a means to reach the Promised Land, the Atlantic ocean confers on the American continent its own characteristics: power, isolation, separation, freedom and free space (72).

This gives sense to Austin's insistence on associating Peter Rugg's wanderings with water,[16] and above all to the latter's willingness to pay for his crossing on the Hudson ferry. In these lines, the European legend of the Flying Dutchman merges with a very national myth: Peter Rugg, like a pre-Revolutionary Pygmalion, recreates the founding primal scene of the American nation, in which water, as an anonymous neutral space, guarantees the principles of independence and social fluidity.

This Dutch colonist, whose ancestors experienced the emancipating crossing of the Great Ocean Sea, cannot imagine that he still has to negotiate other passages and to force new enclosures. Moreover, the contract executed by post-Revolutionary men like Dunwell or the auctioneer, takes on then a quite different value: the narrative or financial contract fictionalizing the birth of the American nation mirrors the formal compact of the free citizens who, in 1776, supported the Declaration of Independence and later on adopted the Constitution.

This casts a new light on Peter Rugg's anxious disappointment when he discovered, on his way back, a tragically impossible scenery: "There is no such place as this in North America . . . some tremendous convulsion of nature has thrown London or Amsterdam on the shores of New England" (44). The Old World replacing the New one, Europe in America, symbolizes the vanity of the settlers' efforts, of their hopes for a better world. Europe, with its string of tyranny and corruption, still persecutes the immigrant who thought he had conquered a new garden of Eden, a land protected from history by the immensity of the ocean.[17] By questioning two social patterns of the time, Austin's fiction implicitly questions American identity and collective imagery.

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[16] Let us merely mention here that Rugg is always "wet and weary," that his chair is compared to a "Nantucket coach," that he "sails" sometimes to Amsterdam, etc. The polysemy of the word "liquid," though it does not appear as such in the narrative, is particularly relevant to the semantic links between the physical state of being fluid and financial notions such as "liquidation," "to liquidate," "liquidities," etc.

[17] On Peter Rugg's own persecution, see, in this volume, A. Geoffroy "What Drove Peter Rugg Raving Mad."

To write is to shake the meaning of the world, to question it indirectly, but the writer, in a last suspense, refrains from any answering. . . . One never ceases to answer what has been written out of any possible answer: asserted, compared, then replaced, meanings pass by, but questions remain (trans. from Barthes: 1963, 11).

Christine Dupuit, March 1996.[18]
(Translated by Alain Geoffroy)

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