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**A Poetics of Colloquy, Omission and  
Indirection:  
How Henry James's Experimentation of the  
1890s Helped Shape *The Wings of the Dove***

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The novels of James's 'Major Phase', which is comprised of *The Wings of the Dove* (1902), *The Ambassadors* (1903) and *The Golden Bowl* (1904), are rightly seen as a sharp break from his novels of the previous phase, his 'Experimental Period' of the late 1890s, during which James sought, following his failed stint as a London playwright, to apply his hard-learned lessons from writing drama to his new novels. Most scholars see this earlier period of intense experimentation as reaching its peak with *The Sacred Fount* (1901), an experiment gone so haywire that James would practically disown it, before the author, the experimental urge out of his system, returned to themes he had abandoned for years and, free of the self-imposed constraints of his experimental impulse, wrote his three most astounding, complex works of the Major Phase – his final, crowning literary achievements. For decades, Jamesian scholars have drawn a sharp contrast between the novels of the late 1890s and his trio of masterpieces of the early twentieth century, and often painted the 'experimental phase' as a period of soul-searching and self-healing, as an anomaly in the Jamesian canon triggered by his need to prove to himself that his five years of writing plays that were never produced and the traumatic experience of the failed premiere of the one play that was finally brought to the stage, *Guy Domville*, had not been a waste of time but could be used to find the perfect 'hybrid form' between the stage play and the Jamesian novel.<sup>1</sup> One indeed need only consider some of the

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<sup>1</sup> One should mention that the failure of James, the master novelist, to write a producible stage play for five years and the fiasco that put an end to that endeavor, the London premiere of *Guy Domville* on 5 January, 1895, at which the crowd's calls of "Author! Author!" were designed to allow them to hurl insults at James rather than to shower him with praise, have become the stuff of legends, amplified in the public consciousness by popular fictionalized accounts

other names given to the Experimental Period over the years by Jamesian scholars: for Leon Edel they were “The Treacherous Years”, for F.W. Dupee and David McWhirter respectively “The Awkward Period” and, incorporating the title of one of the novels of the period, “The Awkward Age of Henry James”, and for Maxwell Geismar a mid-life and mid-career “crisis” (Edel 1969; 164; Dupee 142; McWhirter 123; Geismar 183). Even James, who at the time so fervently believed in the literary experiments he was carrying out, would later look back on some of them, particularly “The Turn of the Screw” and *The Sacred Fount*, as “an amulette”, “the merest of jeu d’esprit” or “an incident in technics pure and simple” carried too far (*LC2* 1184; *Letters IV* 185-86). Perhaps most telling is a letter James wrote in 1913 to Mrs. G.W. Prothero, who had asked which five Jamesian novels best represented the author and should be recommended to a young man seeking to discover his essential works. James provided two lists of 5 novels that included *none* of his experimental works but that touted two if not all three of the works of his Major Phase. Both lists featured *The Wings of the Dove* as one his true masterpieces (in *Wings* 471-72).

However, it would be misleading to think of *The Wings of the Dove* and the other works of the Major Phase as completely disconnected from James’s earlier experimental works, as is made evident by the fact that the “germs” and initial plot ideas for all three later novels can be found in James’s notebook entries from 1892 to 1895, and were indeed slated as projects for the stage or the hybrid dramatic novel. *The Golden Bowl*, the last major novel, was thus sketched out before *any* of the novels published after his dramatic years, in November of 1892, just before three experimental works were first imagined: *What Maisie Knew* (1897) in August of 1893, *Spoils of Poynton* (1897) in December of 1893 and *The Sacred Fount* in February of 1894. Then came *The Wings of the Dove*’s three main entries, two in November of 1894, just two months before the *Guy Domville* incident, and one a month after it, in February

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of that fateful evening at the Saint James Theatre, including David Lodge’s *Author! Author!* and Colm Tóibín’s *The Master*, both in 2004. On the other hand, certain scholars claim that the legend has unfairly maligned James’s talent as a playwright: see for example Dee MacCormack’s “Tradition, Transmission and the Théâtre Français: Re-configuring Henry James’s Dramatic Heritage” in *Reading Henry James in the Twenty-First Century: Heritage and Transmission*. Dennis Tredy, Annick Duperray, Adrian Harding (eds.). London: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2019, 85-94.

of 1895, four weeks after his “germ” for “The Turn of the Screw” (1898). By March of 1895 he had sketched out *The Awkward Age* (1899) and in October the only remaining major novel to come, *The Ambassadors* (1903). It is important then to note that the novels of the Major Phase were ‘born’ in the same litter, as it were, as the ‘experimental novels’, at the height of James’s failed stage endeavors and his desire to redefine the novel as a fusion of fiction and drama. And it is *The Wings of the Dove*, the only work sketched out just before and just after the failed *Guy Domville* premiere, that seemed most designed to be a leading experimental work. In his first entry for the novel that would become *The Wings of the Dove*, James had imagined the main plot slightly differently: a young man would convince his “fiancée” to allow a younger, dying girl who is “in love with life” to experience love and life *with him*, as an act of kindness – though James would worry it could be taken as mere “adultery” and seen as too “vulgar” for English readers, whereas the French would not bat an eye (NB 168-70). By the much longer second entry a few days later, the plot had thickened: the dying girl would be wealthy and generous, willing to help the poor couple in an “act of... passionate beneficence”, and the “fiancé” would be kept in check by a more manipulative “fiancée”, who has come up with the now somewhat sinister plan to get the dying girl’s money. Though yet unnamed, Kate Croy was to be the *main character* in what he saw as a “little three-act play” in prose, with the third act already mapped out: the couple would get the money as a gift but the “fiancé” is now in “love with a dead girl”, triggering “a very painful, almost violent scene between them”, after which the “fiancée” breaks it off and marries a pathetic suitor she has been keeping at bay, a Lord X, *out of spite* (173-74). To further the connection to drama, James also mapped out how the same ‘germ’ could be made into a stage play, and what would have to be changed: all of the scenes would be colloquies in hotel salons or garden sets (just like the play he was then working on), he would add some comic relief for London audiences through an American businessman who would take care of the dying girl’s affairs and be her confidante (there was no sign of Susan yet), and most importantly there would have to be a happy ending: the “fiancé” would marry the dying girl and give his former ‘fiancée’ all the money she desires, and by choosing the dying girl he would “revive” her and the two would embrace as the final curtain falls (175). By the February entry, after he had decided to return to the novel and give up the London stage, James sees his earlier sketches of this plot as a prime vehicle for his new impulse toward “compensations and solutions”

through “hybridization”, so much so that when James finally chooses which sketches are to become the “six immortal short works” to come he had announced in a letter to William Dean Howells at the very moment he left the stage to return to the novel (*Letters III* 513), *The Wings of the Dove* (temporarily entitled *La Mourante*) would be on top of the list, with *The Golden Bowl* (or rather *The Marriages*) a close second (NB 233). Yet this initial list would change as James went deeper into his formal experimentation, and both *The Wings of the Dove* and *The Golden Bowl* would find themselves repeatedly put off and eclipsed by a series of six shorter, more pointed experiments: *The Spoils of Poynton* and *What Maisie Knew* in 1897, “In the Cage” and “The Turn of the Screw” in 1898, *The Awkward Age* in 1899 and *The Sacred Fount* in 1901.<sup>2</sup>

It is thus clear that *The Wings of the Dove* in particular may not be as detached from James’s experimental impulses of the late 1890s as the easy division into two separate phases, ‘Experimental’ and ‘Major’, may imply. Given how intertwined his first sketches were with James’s dramaturgical and experimental intentions, and indeed how the story of Kate, Milly and Merton’s love triangle and “communities of doom” (LC2 1292) was originally intended to be the *very first* of his experimental novels, a closer look at those connections, a comparison and contrast of *The Wings of the Dove* and key aspects of works of the Experimental Period, should allow for a better understanding of James’s style and technique in the later masterpiece, and that is indeed the goal of this study. Starting with elements of contrast, this paper will first outline the main differences that support the notion that *The Wings of the Dove*, in

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<sup>2</sup> Scholars of James may notice that this final ‘list’ designating the six novels and long novellas of the experimental period does not include the very first novel published after the author left playwriting and returned to fiction, *The Other House* (1896). The reason for this is that the novel is more a work of recuperation and direct re-transcription than an experimental work *per se*, for it is a quick novelization of an unproduced play by James from 1893, *The Promise*, with dialogue directly transferred and scene directions expanded into narration. *The Other House* can be seen as an exercise in conversion to leave his London stage days behind him in 1895 in much the same way he had gotten into it in 1890, when his conversion of his novel *The American* (1877) into a successful stage play convinced James to devote himself to dramaturgy. That James himself never really saw it as a bona fide novel can be seen by both the fact that he did not include it in his collected works for the New York Edition and the fact that in 1909, he in turn converted it back into a play, which was again never produced.

spite of its original conception, represents a clean break from the author's experimental endeavors of the 1890s, before focusing more squarely on aspects of the later novel that point to similarities with those earlier works and the way in which *The Wings of the Dove* could be seen as an extension to, rather than a break from, the previous period. Those similarities and elements of continuity are vast and multi-faceted, but all seem to fall under the umbrella term of a 'poetics of omission and indirection' that dominated both "phases" and that clearly ties *The Wings of the Dove* to the experimental works of the 1890s at nearly every possible level: from overall construction, to staging, to focalization, to colloquy and dialogue, down to the very language that constitutes both narration and dialogue.

### **A Break and a Return**

There are of course some stark differences that set *The Wings of the Dove* apart from the works of the previous period, and that justify the notion of two distinct 'phases' in James's canon. Most of these more obvious differences stem from James's newfound freedom from the self-imposed restraints that he had devised for his experimental works. For example, each work of the previous period could be seen as testing ground for a specific experimental trial devised by James, each of which could be easily summarized in terms of the one specific narrative experiment being carried out: from making "things" the "centre" and letting art objects "speak for themselves" in *The Spoils of Poynton* (LC2 1141), to letting "dialogue speak for itself" in *The Awkward Age* (LC2 1128), to blending a mature authorial voice with a child's perspective and allowing the growing child-reflector to slowly usurp 'authority' over the text in *What Maisie Knew*, to allowing a "centre of consciousness" with an "infernal imagination" to get "carried away" and mislead or confound the reader and the representation, either as the main center of consciousness ("In the Cage") or worse still as a character-narrator with full "authority" over the tale ("The Turn of the Screw" and *The Sacred Fount*) (LC2 1115, 1324; TS 175, 162). For *The Wings of the Dove* and the other 'Major Phase' novels, James is unfettered by such one-off experimental focus, allowing both his newly acquired experimental ideas and his previous narrative techniques to blend into a rich and free-flowing current.

Similarly, James was no longer shackled by his nearly obsessive desire to be more *concise* in his presentation, to keep the new novels both

short and “rich”, an ideal that he felt was both a key lesson learned from his years as a playwright and a way to please both publishers and a broader reading public, who too often chided James for his verbosity and *lack* of concision. In his notebooks, it is almost quaint to hear James call on the ghost of Guy de Maupassant to guide his pen toward more concision (e.g., “Spirit of Maupassant, come to my aid!” NB 89) and then to see how, in successive notebook entries, each experimental work grows beyond his control, forcing him to add a few thousand words to its estimated word count each time. Such is the case most notably for the two first experimental novels, *The Spoils of Poynton* and *What Maisie Knew*, each of which was supposed to be a ten-thousand-word experiment but grew to over 70,000 and 90,000 words respectively, each through ceaseless, incremental concessions on word count. These two works were also the ones for which more notebook pages were devoted than any other novel, as James had convinced himself, notably in his third notebook entry concerning what would become *The Wings of the Dove*, that “a key that... fits the complicated chambers of both the dramatic and narrative lock” was in fact “the value of the narrative plan,” which he ventured to call “the divine principle of the Scenario” (NB 188). The idea was to fully write out a detailed narrative plan ‘behind the scenes’ as it were, in order to be more concise in the final written work, much as he had done when writing his plays. For his experimental novels, these ‘scenarios’ served a double purpose, as they were also shared with James’s publishers, who were publishing the would-be novellas in installments and needed to see where James intended to go with each story and how many installments would be required. However, *The Wings of the Dove* marks another moment of freedom for James as it is the first work for which he had decided *not* to seek publication in instalments and thus had not completed a “narrative plan”. In a letter from James dated 15 November, 1902, to H.G. Wells, who had asked for a copy of his usual “preliminary statement” on *Wings*, James explains that bittersweet freedom of not having to do a detailed narrative plan for instalments, for on the one hand it meant the loss of a steady income and, more disturbingly, it was the result of publishers no longer thinking his works popular enough to be put in their magazines (“Evidently no fiction of mine can or will now be serialized”), yet on the other hand James could finally free himself from the restraints of popular tastes and concision that went into serialization, and write his novel “on a more free and independent scale” (*Letters I* 413), a sentiment he would repeat in his 1909 Preface for the New York Edition, stressing how the “free hand”

this gave him allowed him to experiment with a more complex system of indirect representation than ever before (*LC2* 1293). It also meant that, thus unbridled and unbound, the novel swelled to become the longest work of fiction he had yet written, clocking in at over 186,000 thousand words.

In addition, part of that move away from concision involved a less dramaturgical treatment of dialogue. Before trying his hand as a playwright, James had already touted the versatility of dialogue in his landmark 1884 essay “The Art of Fiction” and in his personal notebooks of the 1890s, claiming dialogue to be one of the few devices in literature that can replace all others (e.g., action, description, narration, characterization, etc.) – and this theory was of course put to the test when James began writing plays (*LC1* 54; *NB* 102). When returning to the novel in 1895, James also saw, in tandem with the use of an organizational ‘scenario’ described above, that piercing the “sacred mystery” of dialogue and of “fundamental statement” was the greatest lesson he had learned in the theater (*NB* 188). When there is dialogue in the works of the Experimental Period, it is most often free-flowing and shorn of any narrative interruptions, much as it would be on the stage, and this aspect of his experiment in hybridity reached its peak with his 1899 *The Awkward Age*, James’s landmark ‘roman dialogué’, an entire novel in which he attempts to let dialogue “speak for itself” with no real authorial voice to speak of. This short-lived trend in James had the added benefit of being exactly what his publishers “craved”, for they had long been pushing him to use more “pure dialogue” and less exhaustive and often convoluted narration (*LC2* 1127, 1130-31). Anyone who has read *The Wings of the Dove* has noticed the sharp change, for there is almost no ‘free-flowing dialogue.’ On the contrary, in the many dialogue scenes in *Wings*, time slows down greatly, often to a complete halt, as the narrative delves into the thought processes and impressions of the given “centre of consciousness” providing the point of view for the scene, with often *very* lengthy explorations of the character’s impressions, even between two lines of dialogue that, on a stage, would ‘flow freely’ and have no interruption at all. Take for example, Densher’s thoughts when answering Kate’s remark on what Mrs. Lowder thinks of his spending so much time with Milly (Book VIII, Ch. 2):

“Out of which she therefore gets it that the more you have for Milly the less you have for me.” There were moments again—we know that from the first they had



been numerous—when he felt with a strange mixed passion the mastery of her mere way of putting things. There was something in it that bent him at once to conviction and to reaction. And this effect, however it be named, now broke into his tone. “Oh if she began to know what I have for you—!” (295)

His if-she-she-only-knew rejoinder is a spontaneous (and suggestive) response, yet we plunge into Densher’s impressions on Kate’s eloquence and mastery in conversation, his “mixed passion” that turned into a “conviction” and then a “reaction”, the “effect” of which was a “change in tone” she might notice – all in the blink of an eye. And this is but one of the *briefest* examples, for this pause in story-time can reach startling lengths, cementing James’s image for complex, proto-Proustian point of view devices. Take for instance one of the deep dives into Kate’s impressions while visiting her sister Marian in Book I, Chapter 2: When Marion gives Kate a well-rehearsed warning about her being courted by Densher (that though she may be overstepping and in no position “to preach” she still feels Kate has no “right...to throw [herself] away”), Kate’s irate response, in the real world, would be immediate: “I don't quite see... where in particular it strikes you that my danger lies. I'm not conscious, I assure you, of the least disposition to 'throw' myself anywhere. I feel that for the present I've been quite sufficiently thrown” (42). However, in the written narrative, the reader is plunged deep into Kate’s mind between those two lines of dialogue for *several pages* of text – during which Kate muses on Marion’s motivation and self-justification, on the influence of Marion’s late husband’s sisters, on her children, on how terms like “vulgar” and “snob” could apply as much to these women as to her Aunt Maud, and how her sister was selfishly insisting Kate “owed” them all a ticket out of poverty through a much better marriage while simultaneously painting Kate as the “selfish” one for not doing her duty (40-42). After nearly 700 words’ worth of instantaneous impressions, there are few readers who would not have to flip back a few pages to find out what line of dialogue Kate was actually responding to. As a result, the treatment of dialogue in *The Wings of the Dove* is about as far removed from free-flowing stage dialogues of the Experimental Period as one could imagine.

Most of the other most obvious differences are less indicative of a ‘break’ than they are of a return to Jamesian themes and devices that had been put aside during the 1890s, though upon their return they are given

a more mature treatment from a more mature author. For example, during the experimental period, James had chosen as his main protagonists and centers of consciousness almost exclusively British girls between the ages of six and twenty, all of whom found themselves in a liminal position in regards to their social surroundings (on the threshold between sheltered girlhood and aware womanhood for Maisie Farange and Nanda Brookenham, between poverty and a world of dazzling culture or wealth in the case of Fleda Vetch, the telegraphist in “In the Cage” and the governess in “The Turn of the Screw”), in all cases a vantage point from which better to assess the bewildering world presented and provide deep impressions of it. James had thus dropped the “type” of young female protagonist who had brought him such success in the late 1870s and early 1880s – that of the bewildered American girl abroad – for bewildered young Britons at home. However, the works of the Major Phase and most notably *The Wings of the Dove* herald the return of James’s ‘International Theme’, though it, much like the author, has matured in the interim. As many critics have pointed out, Milly Theale is in many ways a reprise and an amalgam of James’s two most famous “innocent” American girls in Europe: Isabel Archer and Daisy Miller. For critic Millicent Bell, Milly seems to be a more mature and even wealthier version of Isabel Archer, who was more naïve and trusting than Milly when she found herself caught in a similar intrigue in which jaded Europeans, the cynical Gilbert Osmond and his long-term mistress Serena Merle, manipulate her into marriage in order to get their hands on her fortune (xv). In spite of the clear borrowing of key plot elements from *The Portrait of a Lady*, there are even more parallels with Daisy Miller. As William Dean Howells pointed out at the time of publication, both American girls display “the same self-regardlessness, the same beauteous insubordination, the same mortal solution of the problem, [...] the same sublime unconsciousness of the material environment, the same sovereign indifference to the fiscal means of their emancipation to a more than masculine independence” in that they wield financial power they seem indifferent to (498). There is also a parallel between the male love interest and center of consciousness in each novel, Winterbourne and Densher, who will watch the young women die and realize only too late the stronger affinities that could have been and the high price that was paid for their “inaction”. However, Howells also stressed a key difference: Milly’s comparative maturity, wisdom and awareness, for where Daisy Miller came from upstart nouveaux riches, Milly was from old money and tradition; for where Daisy flaunted decorum and tradition

Milly takes advantage of her perceived ‘type’ and position to redefine them; and whereas Daisy is driven by “blind sense” and insouciance, Milly’s “eyes are wide open” (499) and she is fully aware. Not only is she aware of the possible false position she is willfully being led into by Kate and Densher’s posturing and lies of omission, but she is aware of the “extreme spontaneity” associated with her “type” (*Wings* 227) and knows how to use it to her advantage and either play off “with ease” the “awkwardness” of any social predicament, as she does for example both when she stumbles upon Kate and Densher’s secret outing to the National Gallery (Book V, Ch.7), or during conversations with Densher in Venice in which Kate’s name seems to be the elephant in the room (Book IX, Ch. 1), or get away with a brash violation of British decorum that would not be tolerated had it been perpetrated by the likes of Kate Croy, such as proposing private tea with Densher in his flat (Book IX, Ch. 1) or inviting him spontaneously to be alone with her in her carriage (Book VI, Ch. 5). In fact, Densher appreciates Milly’s skill at wielding her ‘American type’ better than anyone, for he realizes that “the type was so elastic that it could be stretched to almost anything” (325) and that Milly, in “the queerest conscious compliance” was also using it to shield *him* from any direct confrontation and uneasiness about their situation (325). Milly is indeed so aware both of her own power and the possible machinations of Kate and Densher that many critics refuse to see her as an ultimate victim, and do not see her final gift to Kate and Densher as an act of kindness but rather as a calculated and somewhat malicious act of revenge on the would-be spouses, to forever spoil things for Kate and Densher from beyond the grave (Bell xv; Sheahan 531-33; Olin-Ammentorp 546). Whether benevolent or maleficent in her final act, Milly is indeed “the transfiguration of the American girl” trope in James (Wegelin 507), for her innocence is grounded in awareness, and vice-versa.

Finally, if James’s “American girl” has so notably matured in the person of Milly Theale, he himself has matured enough to deal more frontally and profoundly with more mature themes – notable death and sexuality – than he had during any earlier ‘phases’ of his career. In *Wings* a character’s death is not a mere climactic twist or stage device, as it was in *The Other House*, ‘The Turn of the Screw’ or even in *Daisy Miller*. Instead, pending death permeates the entire novel, in spite of the lack of details on the looming fatal disease, and is embodied by Milly, who is not leading a somber death-in-life existence as some condemned to die might, but instead quite the opposite – a *life-in-death* quest for the full

range of experience that comes with being alive. It is also a far more personal treatment of death than James has done before – not out of any fear of his own demise as he reaches age sixty, but honoring the death by tuberculosis of his beloved cousin Minnie Temple, a loss that he claimed had marked him for life and represented the death of his and his brother William's own childhoods back in 1870. We thus realize that the shadow of Minnie Temple had been lurking behind all of James's most noted 'American girls', notably behind Daisy Miller and Isabel Archer, whom James created to such acclaim only a decade after his family's loss, before finally stepping out into the light in the person of Milly Theale, who shares far more with her real-life inspiration than the same initials. Minnie was certainly not wealthy, but then again neither was Milly when James first conceived the plot in 1894. As Millicent Bell puts it, it is above all in her "grace", in "her blighted promise and courage, and her generous imagination of others" and her love of life in spite of pending death that James molded Milly out of Minnie, for whom his letters reveal a strong case of survivor guilt and deep regret for his inaction and inability to do anything to save her (xiii-xv). In *Wings* he gives her power, very explicitly makes her "magnificent" and possibly stages a final act of retribution against those who could have done more for her (xv-xvi; xxxii). James's ability to truly deal with the trauma of Minnie's death then came to a more mature James, who in 1901 was slipping into a "mood of autobiographical retrospection" (xvii) as he was finishing his final novels and as he looked ahead to looking back on his life and career, through the coming prefaces for his collected works and autobiographies on his childhood, the second of which, his 1914 *Notes of a Son and Brother*, devotes its entire final chapter to the loss of Minnie Temple, who "would have given anything to live" (in *Wings* 486).

Finally, if an older and wiser James did not shy away from the theme of death for *Wings*, there was another mature theme that he treated more directly – if anything can be said to be treated directly in James – than in any of his works of previous phases: sex and the sexual impulse. During the Experimental Period, adultery and sexual relations were always imagined possibilities in the eyes of the innocent and hypersensitive young woman at the novel's center: hence Fleda Vetch realizes she is being offered up to Mrs. Gereth's already engaged son as if she were "one of those bad women in a play" (*Spoils* 117) and cuts off ties with them, just as the telegraphist in "In the Cage", who is engaged to the local butcher, entertains an imagined affair with the dashing Captain Everard but scurries back to the safety of her "cage" when she realizes

she had read too much into Everard's niceties. In *What Maisie Knew* and *The Awkward Age*, we are left to wonder just how much a child (Maisie) and teenager (Nanda) actually know about sex and adultery among adults, while in "The Turn of the Screw" the governess only imagines her own sexual experience and, even more frightening to her, the supposed open sexuality of two adults, now ghosts, and its corrupting effect on two children. In *The Sacred Fount*, the male narrator plays an 'innocent' game of imagining vampire-like relationships between unmarried guests at a dinner party, accidentally revealing an *actual* case of adultery among the attendees. The works of the Major Phase go beyond such 'imagined' or perceived sexual games that test the protagonist's "moral sense" and instead make *actual* sexual affairs and adultery a major plot element – in *The Ambassadors* Strether is tempted to cheat on Chad's mother with Marie de Vionnet, until he discovers Chad is actually having an affair with Mrs. de Vionnet and is not courting her daughter, and in *The Golden Bowl* the whole plot revolves around how Maggie Verver discovers and deals with the fact that her new husband and her father's new wife are having a sexual affair. However, it is in *The Wings of the Dove* that James actually probes the way one deals with sexual frustration and sexual blackmail. Surprisingly, James springs such musings on readers only in the second volume, immediately plunging us into the depths of Densher's sexual frustration and yet-unsatisfied sexual desire for Kate, "an impatience that, prolonged and exasperated, made a man ill" (192). He feels that he cannot be expected to wait for physical contact when she is so attractive ["...a woman couldn't be like *that* and then ask for the impossible" (192)] and he even speculates that Kate might be afraid to be alone in a cab with him given his impulses ["What did she think he would do with her?" (194)]. This pushes Densher to drop not-so-subtle double-entendres when he speaks to Kate in London and in Venice, such as "I'd like to use *you* a little..." (217), "Oh, if [Aunt Maud] began to know what I have for you—!" (295) and "Good God, if you'd only *take* me!" (296). Then, while his passion simmers for Kate, other characters imply that Milly's thirst for "life" might very well involve sex with Densher, as Susan suggests to Mrs. Lowder (249) or as Kate implies to Merton, demanding he "Be prepared" with an excuse to get out of it (313). However, when Densher feels he can wait no longer, he expresses his explicit sexual blackmail as if it were a matter of "playing fair". This is how he formulates it to himself in Book VIII, Ch. 1: "Whereas he had done absolutely everything that Kate had wanted, she had done nothing whatever he had." (284), before putting it in no uncertain terms to Kate in

the next chapter: “I’ll tell any lie you want, any your idea requires, if only you’ll come to me. [...] To my rooms...” (299). Once Kate holds up her end of the bargain and they consummate their partnership, the reader again plunges into Densher’s sexualized thoughts, this time as he basks in the “prime afterglow” of his night of passion with Kate, who “had come to him [...] to *stay*, as people called it” (i.e., ‘stay the night’), and he is so overcome with intense memories of their passion that he declares his flat in Venice sacred ground that no human visitor might visit lest they desecrate it (315-17). Densher’s blatant obsession with physical love and sexual satisfaction is all the more striking as in the end, in a remarkable turnabout for his character, he finds himself caught in a spiritual love affair with Milly after her death, at the expense of a physical love affair with Kate.

### **‘A Poetics of Omission and Indirectness’ I: Staging and Props**

Given so many rather stark differences between a novel like *The Wings of the Dove* and those from the late 1890s, it would be easy to claim that the break was indeed sharp between the two ‘phases’ and that they have little to do with one another – but that would be a gross oversimplification. As demonstrated above, nearly all the stark differences were the result of a liberation of James from his prior constraints, many of which were of his own making. In *Wings* and the other works of the Major Phase, James took full advantage of his newfound freedom in terms of literary construction – freedom from the need to lab-test one-off experiments with each work, freedom from trying to justify five years wasted on stage drama, freedom from serialization and the demands of public taste imposed by magazine publishers, and freedom from stifling and most often failed attempts to rein in his novels to provide fewer pages and more ‘concision’ à la *Maupassant*. However, it is in the way James *used* that newfound freedom that his experimental impulse lived on, for he embarked on *new* experiments, like so imbuing dialogue scenes with deep impressions and point of view that time seems to stall if not stop, or experimenting with more open treatment of mature themes like death, sexual impulses and his own personal trauma than he had ever dared attempt before. If on these points the experimental impulse of the 1890s can be seen as being unbridled and redirected, one must also note that many other aspects of *The Wings of the Dove* show how James also *continued* certain experimental techniques from the 1890s, often combining and expanding them thanks to his newly acquired

freedoms. Take for example James's claim in 1909 Preface to *Wings of the Dove* that the predominant tension he had to deal with while writing the novel was that between two methods of presentation, between "picture" and "drama", a rivalry in which picture was always "jealous of drama, and drama... suspicious of picture", with each rival approach whispering in James's ear that it could do the job alone, and James hammering out "a compromise" (LC2 1289, 1296). If James here seems to be referring to trying to find the right balance between the *inaction* of description and dramatic *action*, it is clearly an extension of the main tension that dominated all of his works of the 1890s: his quest for the perfect *generic* hybrid between the novel and drama, each of which would usually pull the author in different directions. And there indeed many other more specific narrative techniques and devices from the Experimental Period that James would refit and reuse for the writing of *The Wings of the Dove*.

For example, one of the key theatrical devices employed by James throughout the late 1890s was the use of key 'props' that would both have a plot-related function and deeper symbolic value, thereby making them what T.S. Eliot would later call "objective correlatives". While writing plays James of course learned to master the use of props as a revealing stage device, as he does in *Guy Domville*, for instance with scheming Lord Devinish's gem-studded gloves, which are remarked upon in Act I so that their discovery in Act II at Mrs. Peverel's will reveal their secret meetings and machinations to Guy and to the audience. James would naturally carry over this device to his experimental novels, with for example the tea-biscuit discovered on the floor by Mrs. Brigstock in *The Spoils of Poynton*, a stage-prop that reveals that the meeting between Fleda and her son Owen she stumbled upon had been hastily hidden from her and more intimate than imagined. Many props of the period have far more symbolic value, like Mrs. Wix's eyeglasses, her "straighteners" in *What Maisie Knew*, which she puts on when scrutinizing characters for signs of their "moral sense", or similarly the "nippers" that Longdon instinctively takes off when bewildered by the words or actions of his younger entourage in *The Awkward Age*.

However, by far one of the most pervasive 'stage props' that James carried over from his theater days was the infamous "letter that won't tell," which most readers of James associate with the enigmatic statement made by Douglas in the Prologue to "The Turn of the Screw", the claim the letter and manuscript he will present "...won't tell... not in any literal

or vulgar sense” (151) – a prop and plot device that cropped up repeatedly in the governess’s tale, particularly in the letter from Miles’s school that does not “tell” why he has been expelled or what he has done, and near the end of the tale when the governess’s long-anticipated letter to her employer about the strange goings-on at Bly is intercepted and thrown into the fire by Miles, who claimed it said “Nothing, nothing” in any case (305). The undelivered letter or unopened letter destroyed was a staple stage-prop used by James to deny characters and the readers any direct ‘answers’ or any one possible interpretation of events. This too was a device first used in his stage plays, as the series of letter that “won’t tell” in *Guy Domville* attest: these include letters from scheming to Lord Devinish to Mrs. Peverel, or from Mrs. Peverel to young Frank, all of which are perused but not read aloud by a character, then discarded, for they “tell nothing”, but the use of the device culminates in Act III, when an important letter arrives for Mrs. Peverel that could change the entire outcome of the play if read, but neither Mrs. Peverel nor the audience will ever know its contents or even which character it was from – for she throws it away unopened, declaring it a waste of postage for a letter that will never be read (181). Indeed, all experimental works made use of the ‘letter that won’t tell’ device at some point, either at key moments of the plot, as in *Spoils* (Fleda’s key final letter to Owen explaining her feelings is intercepted and destroyed by Mrs. Brigstock so as to ensure his marriage to her daughter) or throughout the whole work, as in *What Maisie Knew* (from Maisie watching her divorced father gleefully fling unopened letters to the girl from her mother into the fire, to the letters from Mrs. Wix that are edited and rewritten by her rival governess, Miss Overmore, before the child receives them, to letters explaining affairs and break-ups between adults that Maisie is never allowed to see or know the contents of. However, James does indeed carry this device over to *The Wings of the Dove* and gives it an even more spectacular *mise-en-scène* than he had in “The Turn of the Screw”. After so many incidents of lies of omission and letters that do not tell throughout the work (e.g., Susan’s letters from Venice to Lancaster Gate never say why Densher stopped coming to see Milly, just as Milly points out to Densher when she does finally see him again that his letter never explained why he had stayed away), the climax of the novel revolves around a remarkable double-staging of this same device: first when, after Milly’s death, her letter to Densher arrives, surely bearing both Milly’s true feelings and a huge financial gift, a missive revealing either their redemption or their condemnation which Kate throws unopened into the



fire (397). In a stage play this might have been the end of the device, but James immediately reiterates it in the last chapter of the novel, through his staging of the reception of the official letter from Milly's New York lawyers granting the surely generous financial gift. Not only does Densher refuse to open it and forward it to Kate, but it is Kate's act of breaking the seal and reading the letter and financial details that he sees as her ultimate breach of trust, pushing him to formulate a final ultimatum that will end their romance, and the novel.

In addition, many such 'props' in the 1890s were specifically related to or borrowed from the world of art, and this too will be carried over to and amplified in *Wings*. There is for example the unidentified French novel with the blue cover in Book 8 of *The Awkward Age*, which is found in Nanda's possession by Van and then frantically handed from character to character for an entire scene, for it is seen as "proof" that Nanda knows more about 'adult' matters than a seventeen-year-old should. In *What Maisie Knew* there is also the symbolic 'Golden Virgin' statue in Boulogne-Sur-Mer that looms impressively over all the adult characters just as young Maisie does in this final section of the novel, and the art object as prop is perhaps nowhere more pervasive than in *The Spoils of Poynton*: a novel in which James explicitly chose to make the 'objets d'art', the 'things', the "centre" of the presentation (LC2 1141) – that is, to focus on and instill even more value into what would usually be mere props – the most important of which being the Maltese Cross, the one art object Fleda selects as a memento of her supposedly noble sacrifice, just before all of the other "spoils" are destroyed in a fire. How then can we not see one of the main symbolic props and objective correlatives (Crowley & Hocks 450) in *Wings*, the Bronzino portrait, as not being a continuation and enhancement of this trend. The sixteenth-century portrait of Lucrezia Panciatichi is indeed given pride of place in James's novel, firmly established as a perfect likeness and an effigy of Milly herself by her entire entourage at Matcham and more profoundly by Milly herself, who sees the woman as both "dead, dead, dead" and a mirror reflection of herself, as she notes, through tears "I shall never be better than this" (139). The reader is constantly reminded of her embodiment of the portrait and vice-versa, James's 'Portrait of a Dead Lady' as it were, throughout the chapter and even later in the novel (148, 266, 268), and its prominence even spawns the inclusion of other paintings to embody other characters, as with the epic Veronese painting, *The Supper in the House of Levi* described by Susan Shepherd in Book VIII, in which she imagines herself the small "blackamour" with a bird

on his figure in the foreground, Densher in the middle-ground as the “the grand young man who surpasses the others and holds up his head and the wine cup”, and, it is assumed, Milly as the Christ-figure in the center of the painting. Once again, James has taken his notable use of the symbolic stage prop to new heights with *The Wings of the Dove*.

### **‘A Poetics of Omission and Indirectness’ II: Construction and Colloquy**

As noted above, James’s use of symbolic props in his novels, especially that of the “letter that won’t tell”, was in fact part of a larger strategy of indirection and omission, of not presenting “the facts” directly to the reader. And it is in that larger strategy that we again find remarkable lines of continuity between the Experimental works and *The Wings of the Dove*. The bulk of James’s long 1909 Preface to *Wings* focuses on its structure being an *experiment* in indirect representation that regrettably got away from him, a strict exercise in “indirection” at first was the result of the taboo subject matter (sex and death) and secondly a formal challenge whose “possible treacheries and traps” “charmed” him (*LC2* 1287). He employed several metaphors for the overall structure that put Milly and her condition at the center but treated them “circuitously” (1303): that of the spinning medal embossed on one side with Milly’s true face and the other with Densher and Kate, a medal left to spin freely so that we would always seem to see one side when our interest at that moment was in the other (1292, 1298), or that of building a bridge or an edifice out of “sufficiently solid blocks of wrought material” from *other* centers of consciousness “in arranged alteration”, starting with Kate as the cornerstone for Book I (1294). Only the perfect dovetailing of these indirect “blocks” could build Milly’s palace. His regrets and the eventual design flaws in these self-imposed specifications for construction are what James devotes most of his lengthy Preface too, feeling that he did not intersperse blocks from Milly herself early enough, that his “misplaced pivot” to his second act came too late, creating a “makeshift middle” that cut too many corners and did not allow him to add the extra blocks he had planned for Kate Croy, Susan Shepherd and even Merton Densher, not to mention a few for characters who never even got an opportunity to be conscious “centres”, like Mrs. Lowder and Sir Luke (1296-97, 1299, 1302-03). The full “application of method”, from the sound of it, would have required hundreds of additional pages of text, if not several extra volumes, yet one of the most

remarkable aspects of this indirect design is that James *had attempted it earlier*, during the Experimental Period, with his *roman dialogué*, *The Awkward Age* (1899). In the Preface for *that* particular work, James explains that to illustrate the novel's structure to his editors, he "drew on a sheet of paper – and possibly with an effect of the cabalistic... the neat figure of a circle consisting of a number of small rounds disposed at equal distance about a central object" – that object would be young Nanda, and each partially overlapping "round" of dialogue would be a "lamp" that only very partially illuminates the main subject (1130-31). This "cabal" or Venn diagram of a series of "colloquies" indirectly shedding light the central female figure sounds nearly identical to his explaining that in *Wings* "one began... with the outer ring, approaching the centre thus by narrowing circumvallations" (1292). What is different is what those "blocks" or "rounds" are made of.

In both cases, they are made of "colloquy" – that pet term so dear to James after his time in the theater. In his plays, James takes great pangs to ensure that only two characters talk on stage at any given time, in sets that facilitate such staging, mainly sofas in drawing rooms and garden benches. In fact, H.G. Wells, who attended the dreadful opening of *Guy Domville* and was friends with James, still openly mocked the contrived staging that seemed ridiculously designed to keep only two characters on stage at a time: "People come and go in the house unchallenged like rabbits in a warren," Wells joked in his review for *Pall Gazette Magazine* (*GD* 105). Readers who know the experimental works know that James applied the same settings (think of the number of sofa and park bench scenes in *What Maisie Knew*, for example) and the same strict dedication to *colloquy*, though for his hybrid novels of the Experimental Period limiting most dialogues to two people allowed James to let dialogue flow as freely as in the theater, with no need for any narrative intervention, not even to indicate who is speaking. In *The Wings of the Dove*, we find this same obsession with colloquy on the part of James, to such a point on the rare occasions that the narrative presence steps in it employs the term to comment on the previous, current or coming "colloquy" before the reader (*Wings* 123, 127, 220, 247, 291, 347, 368). More importantly, each building "block" mentioned by James for *Wings* is in fact a colloquy – though the goal, as explained above, was decidedly *not* free-flowing dialogue – and much like in his earlier works James often comes up with contrived circumstances to maintain only two characters 'on stage' as it were : take for example Kate's arrival just as Milly goes into the other room to change, allowing each a colloquy with Densher, and her

departure just Milly returns (Book VI, Ch. 5), or the way James very occasionally ‘zooms in’ on only two characters in a larger group, what Leon Edel once dubbed James’s “camera eye” (1976; 177), so that it reads as if they were alone, as occurs in the first colloquy between Milly and Lord Mark at dinner at Lancaster Gate. However, what makes the indirect colloquy design of *Wings* so much more complex than that of *The Awkward Age* is the use of successive and shifting centers of consciousness. In his *roman dialogué*, James had colloquy made of pure lines of dialogue with only occasional, objective narration. In *Wings*, we plunge deep into the given center’s consciousness, impressions and interpretations each time, each providing an indirect view on the main point of interest at that moment, in a never-ending and shifting series of centers. In all, there are about 40 fully developed “colloquy” scenes that dominate the 38 chapters of the novel, with half of them involving and from Densher’s point of view (12 with Kate, 4 with Milly, 4 with Maud and 2 with Susan, not to mention silent or reported exchanges with Sir Luke, Lord Mark and Eugenio) – and all but two of which are in Volume II. The other side of the “spinning medal”, Milly, provides the point of view for ten of her colloquies in Volume I and only 3 in Volume 2, while Kate and Susan, much to James’s own disappointment, were only allowed to provide focalization for two extended colloquies each, both in Volume I. To further complicate matters of indirection and omission, *Wings* has the added feature of simply *leaving out* key colloquies that would more clearly define his subject, key moments in the plot that no playwright would dare leave out of his storyline. Much like James’s “letter that won’t tell” these are scenes that *cannot* tell, as they are never presented to the reader. As Millicent Bell points out, so many key scenes are purposely omitted in James’s shell game: from Densher and Milly’s early colloquies in New York, which sparked her romantic interest, to their final colloquies in Venice, which would have certainly been tear-jerkers had they been on the stage; from Milly’s colloquy with Sir Luke when she learns she is condemned to die, to her colloquy in Venice with Lord Mark, whose revelation of her manipulation by Kate and Merton breaks her will “to live”, from what should have been heart-wrenching final colloquies between Milly and Susan, not to mention her death scene, to epilogues both for Densher and, decidedly separated, for Kate (Does she take the money and marry Lord Mark, as James planned in his notebook entries?) (Bell xvii-xviii). In this way, James manages, in spite the incompleteness of his structural experiment, to both redefine *colloquy* and reinvent the indirect structuring of it that he had originally devised

for *The Awkward Age*, creating a dizzying constellation of misdirection and omission.

### ‘A Poetics of Omission and Indirectness’ III: Elusive Language

James’s poetics of omission and indirection thus permeates every level of the presentation in *The Wings of the Dove*: the outer structure, the building blocks of colloquy, the use of indirect lamps, down to the nature of the colloquy and its inherent redefinition of dialogue as deeply imbued in a given character’s deepest impressions and interpretations – even down to the very make-up of those thoughts and that dialogue, *language*. Though the language used by James throughout his career in both narration and dialogue has always been an exercise in deflected meaning or empty signifiers – which explains the many Lacanian readings of James’s entire canon – *The Wings of the Dove* explicitly foregrounds this indirectness in speech, drawing a strong parallel his experimental work *What Maisie Knew*, which carefully documented the child’s progressive language acquisition and her exposure to and eventual proficiency in the nuances of using language that ‘does not tell’. In the 1897 novel, for example, we witness the child-reflector ‘pick up’ and then use dozens and dozens of adult expressions, most notably modern slang and Americanisms such as to be “put out”, to “go round” or to “knock about” (*Maisie* 11, 18, 39). The same device is used repeatedly in *Wings*, though the adult-centers in this case are often either playing witty word games with the slang words [e.g., Densher would rather “put her in” than “put her out” (*Wings* 172), while Kate feels it is not a “break-up” but a “break-down” affecting Milly (216)], or most often, in Densher’s case, taking in and using Americanisms picked up through Susan and Milly [e.g., “it had ‘come out’, as Mrs. Stringham said” (120); Susan seemed “as in the native phrase, keyed up” (208); Susan “having decided to—as they might say—turn him on” to *her* plan (351); or Densher’s decision not to “go behind” “as they said in America” the official reason that Milly could not see him (371)], or even Densher’s coining of his own phrases [e.g., “his turning up, as he always called it, at the palace” (292); “the scheme on which he had been, as he phrased it to himself, had out” – that is, discovered (292)].

This taking in and borrowing of new signifiers is but a small part of an entire network of cross-referencing and sliding signifiers in the two novels. For example, Maisie learns early the power of the euphemism, or empty signifier, to avoid ugly words or unsightly truths – thus she learns

to call her parents' divorce "the process" (*Maisie* 76); their shared custody of her "the arrangement" (29) and their sordid indiscretions "very involved affairs" (97, 234). She also learns the power of catch-all euphemisms that can be used for almost any situation, such as "beautiful" and "splendid" and learns to use them to both praise adults or stop their negative talk in its tracks. In *The Wings of the Dove*, each of the two main heroines has her catch-all euphemism. For Kate it is "handsome" (she is indeed referred to as "the handsome girl" some fifty times in the novel), but the term also reverberates through equivocation, employed often in connection to Kate and Densher's need for money, through notions of being "paid handsomely" (28), receiving a "handsome present" (71) or naming a "handsome figure" (111). For Milly, the euphemistic buzzword is "magnificent", used invariably for praise may variously in reference to her beauty (93), to her ability to spare others by hiding her feelings (337, 343), to her grace in dying and her subtle skill in thwarting Kate and Densher's scheme (362). Yet here again the term is re-employed equivocally regarding other characters, for Mrs. Lowder finds herself "magnificent" in her ability to manipulate others behind the scenes and feels Milly's "magnificence" lies in her wealth and the good company she keeps (249-50), while one of the first impressions of Kate we have from Densher is that she could be "magnificently vulgar" (54). James does indeed have a penchant for equivocation in language, for a single signifier's ability to send us down a signifying chain of varied meanings, particularly with key notions that could have multiple if not opposite meanings. Maisie, for example, muses repeatedly over the term "being free", which at times refers to something positive but at others to something negative, as with adults being "too free" with a child (*Maisie* 191, 198, 229-30). Two other key words from the novel, both related to the ultimate decisions she will have to make, also trouble her, for "to square" someone can be kind *or* cruel, just as to "sacrifice" someone can be a very generous or instead a very selfish act. Those elusive key words will all be employed masterfully by Maisie in the final scenes, when she "squares" her mother and Mrs. Beale, "sacrifices" Sir Claude and feels she is finally "free". In *The Wings of the Dove* such equivocations abound. Most often, the double meaning reminds characters and readers of Milly's pending death, for in addition to the main wordplay on truly "living" because she is "dying" (*Wings* 153, 245), we have double meanings for her "appetite" for food and for life (161), her "leaving" either London or this world (129), her being "swept away" by her disease or by Densher's charms (216) and her fear of "going down" the Venice

staircase or giving into her declining health (216). Another set of equivocal terms deal with the inherently business-like transactions of social and emotional engagements, such as Mrs. Lowder's "dealing with" Densher – that is helping him – but also treating him as a commodity to exchange (167), or the "value" of Kate's private visit to Densher's rooms (315) which was his "business" and no one else's (331). Kate plays the same game, insisting that their waiting will "pay" in every sense of the term (303), though the main equivocal term regarding Kate is what she will do concerning "her honour" – referring variously to her word, her integrity and her maidenhood (310, 313-15).

In turn, these shifting networks of equivocal terms, euphemisms, and sliding or empty signifiers lead to both the fusion and confusion of opposite notions. In *What Maisie Knew*, the child's view of this is innocent enough: when for example Sir Claude nicknames her "My dear old man!" (*Maisie* 85), the child wonders how one word and its opposite could have the same referent (old/young, man/woman), and her first governess, Nurse Moddle, expressly taught her the substitutional nature of opposites early on, when she gave Maisie a list of "nice words" to replace the harsh insults her divorcing parents hurled at each other (12). Maisie thus learns early on never to think of a given word as having any fixed meaning, for "Nothing was less new to Maisie than the art of not thinking singly [about words]" (222-23). Densher, as a journalist and thus a wordsmith of sorts, is far less naïve than little Maisie, and Volume II of the novel, for which Densher's point of view is most frequent, abounds in more meaningful and more problematic interpenetration of opposites, including *everything/nothing*, *right/wrong*, *inside/outside* and most notably *action/inaction*, *male/female gender roles* and *lie/truth*.

It is indeed the interplay and interchangeability of the latter three pairs of opposites that dominate Densher's mind throughout Volume II. For example, from Book VIII until the end of the novel, Densher is painted as a man of "inaction", a man who "thought... much more than he acted" and who can spend three hours in a café thinking "pleasantly of further indecisions" (*Wings* 324). This indecision will result in his interminable waiting game in Venice as his relationship with both Kate and Milly deteriorate, but it is also used in a gender-bending game devised by James, who repeatedly contrasts Densher's inaction with Kate's decisive action (310). Taking on female gender roles of the period, Densher, on one side, waits for Kate's orders and decision (238) and relies on Kate to calm and reassure him (403), while on the other side, he realizes that Milly is in fact "supporting him" financially in Venice, causing him to

put in question his masculinity – one that leads to his fear that other men will see him in this “circle of petticoats” (302), to his man-crush on “strong” and decisive Sir Luke, and to his jealousy of Lord Mark, his rival on two fronts and an obtuse “man of action” (331). Such blatant gender-bending is as audacious and unusual in the Jamesian canon as is Densher’s delving into his sexual frustration, but it is above all part of this game of shifting and switching opposites.<sup>3</sup>

However, of all of these games with opposites forging the Jamesian dialectic in *The Wings of the Dove*, the one that is most instrumental in the ever-growing and dizzying network of sliding, empty and false signifiers may be that involving *truth* and *lies*. Whereas Maisie honestly and naively attempted to see through the language of the latter to discover the former, Densher is far more sinister in his conviction that a lie by omission is not a lie and in his mastery of using the surface-truth of words to hide a deeper lie. By agreeing to play along with Kate’s plan, Densher finds himself in a false position, yet he clings to the fact that he has not *done* anything himself (a pillar of his above-mentioned *inaction*) and that he has never lied to maintain some moral high ground. However, the entire plan relies on a key lie of omission: letting Milly think that Kate is not romantically interested in Densher. Densher takes pride in the fact that he has never *spoken* a mistruth on that matter, takes great “solace” in his “not speaking the particular word to her” (227, 230). Clinging to this technicality, he even throws this difference in Kate’s face, for when she laments that they have “told too many lies,” his

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<sup>3</sup> One should not that James seemed to balance these Volume II gender-bending games involving Densher with another game involving Milly, Susan and Kate in Volume I. In Book III, Ch. 1, for example, when Susan and Milly are in Switzerland, they are introduced as “our couple” and put in direct parallel with the heterosexual “couple” of Kate and Densher whom we have come to know in the first chapters (80), thereby adding lesbian overtones to the two women’s relationship – by focusing on Milly’s “companion’s feelings” for her (93), the “irresistible spell” Susan was under when watching her (84), how “taken” she was by Milly’s beauty (84), her desire “to stop time” to be forever with Milly (87), etc. James even stages an imagined same-sex triangle in which Kate eclipses Susan as Milly’s main “companion”, before Milly begins repeatedly to see Kate the way Densher sees her (159, 168), until in Volume II Milly goes as far as to say, “...if I were a man I should simply adore her. In fact, I do as it is” (278). For a fuller exploration of James’s gender-bending in *The Wings of the Dove*, see Julie Olin-Ammentorp’s “‘A Circle of Petticoats’: The Feminization of Merton Densher.” *Henry James Review* 15 (1993): 38-54. In *Wings* 535-48.



defiant response is “I, my dear, have told *none!*” (289). It is interesting to note that near the end of the novel, the tables will turn and he will similarly lie by omission to Kate – not telling her how “unexpectedly charming” he began to find Milly or that he was secretly receiving letters from Susan up until Milly’s death (319, 399). And when Densher does not lie by omission, he does something worse: carefully choosing words that, in another context, would be true but in the actual one are lies. One of the first times he resorts to such underhandedness involves his careful choice of words when, in Book VI, Ch. 5, Milly asks why Kate had come and gone while she was changing. “She hadn’t known she’d find me” is his reply, which on the surface is true but which implies that Kate ran off because she did not like him or want to see him (241), and his allowing Milly to think that is another lie of omission. This is also what he does when he finally sees Milly after staying away while spending days meandering in the afterglow of his sexual encounter with Kate. By simply replacing the words “sex with Kate” with “my book”, he can ‘honestly’ say he “broke ground on it a few days ago” and that his rooms were “propitious for it” (319-20). Though he eventually breaks down and admits he is not writing a book, he does not correct her impression that he had stayed on in Venice *for her* – yet another lie by omission (321). Densher decidedly *does not* think “singly” about words either.

In both *What Maisie Knew* and *The Wings of a Dove* then, though to different degrees, James uses language as a screen, a dense interlacing of sliding and empty signifiers, equivocations and dialectic pairs, surface-truths and half-truths, in stitching so thick that both readers and characters cannot fully perceive what is going on behind that screen of language. This barrier, along with the child’s growing control over her story, was what prevented both Mrs. Wix and readers, at the closing of the 1897 novel, from actually knowing with any certainty ‘what Maisie knew’. The screen is even thicker for *The Wings of the Dove* – which on many levels could just have easily and enigmatically been entitled ‘What Milly Knew’ – for indirect language, indirect point of view and indirect construction forever prevent us from really seeing the other side of the “spinning medal”.

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In the end, there certainly were clear differences between the works of the Experimental Period and those of the Major Phase, particularly in the case of *The Wings of the Dove*. Though the seeds for all ten novels were planted in his notebooks at the same time, as he pivoted back to the novel

after a failed stint in the theater, James would hold off on cultivating certain seeds and “germs” until he had completed the literary lab work that was the late 1890s. Ostensibly, it would be a James unhindered by intense one-off experiments, by an obsession with unattainable *concision* and demands of magazine editors and popular taste – ‘James Unbound’, as it were – and the cultivating would be done by a more mature author who used that new freedom, in *The Wings of the Dove* especially – to seek a mature treatment of far older concerns – the real Minnie Temple, the imagined Daisy Miller and Isabel Archer, for example – and of more mature themes such as sexuality and death. However, as this study has pointed out, his ‘break’ from experimentation was in fact a vehicle for new, more complex and conflated experiments, stressing a continuation of the experimental impulse and blurring the line between supposed differences regarding the two periods – yet another layer of the Jamesian dialectic.

As this study has demonstrated, the strongest connection between the two periods seems to be a vast network of what we have called James’s ‘poetics of omission and indirection’ – for it can be found scattered throughout the works of both the Experimental Period and *absolutely everywhere* in *The Wings of the Dove* – in the very *language* that makes up the *colloquies* that make up the ‘indirect’ *blocks of construction* that make up the final “edifice” – and the 1902 novel is thus both the culmination of the experimental impulse and a compendium of his experimental techniques.

In both cases as well, James has a remarkably sensitive and perceptive “centre of consciousness” provide readers with the presentation in his stead, though the single centers of each work of the 1890s evolve into a constellation of multiple, indirect centers in *The Wings of the Dove* with even more powerful, or so they believe, powers of perception. The centers in *Wings*, unlike their young predecessors, are never really “bewildered” or at a loss to explain what they see, and are confident enough in their powers to read people and silences, to claim to “make out” what is going on and to see through the dense screen of obfuscation and misdirection that they themselves participate in building, never to call their interpretation into question. The ‘bewildered innocents’ of the Experimental Period tried to see the corrupt world from a safe distance, in most cases avoiding the taint of that world and eventually renouncing it; in *The Wings of the Dove*, the shifting “centres” are all an integral part of that world, and no one is innocent, certainly, but no one is corrupt or evil either, James finally having blurred the easy stage distinctions of

‘good’ and ‘bad’ heroes and heroines that lingered in his post-theater days. Yet in both cases, James’s greatest concern was to put the deeply pensive and perceptive consciousnesses of his “centres” center-stage, suppressing the Victorian-era trend of having the authorial voice of the author-narrator step in as an arbiter of truth and helpful guide for the reader. In the experimental works, we find James achieving this suppression of his own voice by letting “things” or “dialogue” speak for themselves, letting an imaginative young woman’s or a growing child’s consciousness wrestle control of the narrative from his authorial presence, or even giving up that “authority” from the start and handing it over to an unreliable first-person character-narrator – in *every case* refusing to ever step in and reveal what is really happening or to “go behind” their presentation, as James put it. In *The Wings of the Dove*, the goal is the same. On the very few occasions that a first-person authorial voice asserts its presence, it provides no explanations or truths; instead it speaks of “our couple” or the “colloquy we have just witnessed” – always “we” and rarely if ever “I” – as if James were sitting on *our side* of the presentation and the semi-opaque screen he has built between us and an elusive objective truth lurking behind that screen. In the far more complex novel that is *The Wings of the Dove*, we again have James refusing to “go behind” the presentation and *hiding in the ‘wings’ of his novel* – though later literary scholars would come up with an even more theatrical term for what James is doing: *the Death of the Author*.

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