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Everything and Nothing: Disembodiment in *The Wings of the Dove*

Kendra Drischler

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Henry James explains in his « Preface » to *The Wings of the Dove* that he set out to write a book about the death of a young woman without ever actually describing that death: « the way grew straight from the moment one recognized that the poet essentially *can't* be concerned with the act of dying » (4). His path, in a sense, would be around his character's death rather than through it. The act of dying had of course been commonly dramatized in the Victorian novel, perhaps most famously with Little Nell's deathbed scene in Charles Dickens' *The Old Curiosity Shoppe* in 1840, but what James means in this passage by « the poet » is the artist he aspired to be at the end of his career, one who could write a novel about everything around a central event that is never described.

This structure, this plot around an absent center, seems to have been facilitated by James seeing his novel rejected for serial publication. Rather than plan monthly installments to appear in magazines, James was able to conceive of his novel as a more diffuse whole. This freed the author up to experiment with the form of the novel and work toward what become his late style, beginning with *Wings* in 1902, then further developed in *The Ambassadors* (1903) and *The Golden Bowl* (1904). One of his innovations is his telescoped approach, in which moments are analyzed for much longer than they last: « It lasted, as usual, the strange sense, but fifty seconds; yet in so lasting it produced an effect. It produced more than one, and we take them in their order [...] » (208). This unpeeling of layer after layer of meaning, this highly refined attention to psychology in the spirit of the times at the turn of the twentieth century, was part of the new density and indirection to James's writing style that he achieved late in his career. Thus, in a sense this novel that does not describe what it is most about also has a style that itself constantly defies the reader's expectations of what a novel should be. A death is never described, but we do see the birth of a certain mode of narrative and description. Both the characters and the language of the

novel participate in a movement toward modernism by way of disembodiment.

To be disembodied is to be simultaneously full and empty, existing but without a physical manifestation. We see this in James's word choices in *The Wings of the Dove*. In fact, the text abounds in uses of the words « everything » and « nothing » for subjects of various sorts: those which cannot be discussed directly, those which are never identified at all, and those that can potentially mean numerous things. Kate Croy tells Merton Densher early in the story that she does not know what crime her father has committed that has brought shame on the family, and what is more, she does not *wish* to know: "What has he done, if no one can name it?" "Oh—everything! Everything's nothing" (72). James creates enormous ambiguity with these lines. « Everything » here could mean « the worst possible things » or « a small amount of numerous bad things, » while its « being nothing » could mean « it does not matter to me that he has done the worst possible things » or « beyond the small amount of numerous bad things he has done something even worse ». Merton never learns what the father has done, Kate says she and her family do not know, and of course the reader never finds out either. Even the status of the crime in Kate's eyes remains inscrutable, given that she nonetheless seeks reconciliation with the man. The reader does not know whether to judge Kate as generous toward her father or somehow calculating.

Knowledge of others is more absolute, if nonetheless equally vague, when described as « everything ». On page 479, Merton tells Kate that Mrs. Stringham knows « everything » about what has happened in Venice. This could mean that Mrs. Stringham knows that Merton has sought to marry Milly Theale for her money just before her death and failed. It could also mean that she « knows » that Merton was really in love with Milly the whole time, which is a lie that she has promised him to believe if he says that it is true when they speak in Venice: « What I believe will inevitably depend more or less on your actions. You can perfectly settle it—if you care. I promise to believe you down to the ground if, to save her life, you consent to a denial » (452). Thus, the reader cannot quite be sure that the « everything » Mrs. Stringham knows refers to the false romance or to that she won't believe it, that is no longer so false, since Merton's feelings have changed. The reader does not know, though through their regular letters we do know that whatever truth is, whatever « everything » refers to, Merton and Mrs. Stringham share their knowledge of it.

Thus « everything » is crucial to interpersonal communications in *The Wings of the Dove*, between pairs of characters as we have seen, but also often in triangles in which two people share information that is kept from a third individual. The word often serves as a way of tracking what one person has told another about a third, sometimes disgracefully, or at least with implications of disgrace. Lord Mark tells Milly in London that Maud Lowder may already be informed through Kate:

Even for this his travelled lordship, seasoned and saturated, had no laugh.

“I mean *you* particularly. Has the lady with the charming face, which *is* charming, told her?”

Milly cast about. “Told her what?”

“Everything.” » (134)

What Kate, « the lady with the charming face, » would be able to tell Maud is left unsaid, but since at this point in the story Milly has not yet been diagnosed with a terminal illness by Sir Luke, that « everything » must have something to do with Milly’s greatest secret, being in love with Merton, which she has told no one and actually could only be guessed by someone with extensive knowledge of her habits. To be known another character would have to be aware of her *not* discussing Merton with Kate during their many outings together in London, and her saying to Mrs. Stringham that she wants to leave the city before his arrival in order to *not* see him. The chances are slim that Lord Mark would know these things, but James puts the reader in the position of knowing exactly what Milly worried Lord Mark has guessed. Logically this « everything » from a Lord Mark seems more like banter with a young woman who surely *must* have secrets of some kind that could be relayed through Kate, especially given that Lord Mark only finds out the true nature of Milly’s feelings for Merton in Venice.

In the very same conversation Lord Mark uses « everything » in another, more soothing sense, to mean « the life that great wealth can buy: » « “You haven’t had time yet,” he said; “this is nothing. But you’ll see. You’ll see everything. You *can*, you know—everything you dream of.” » (136) The « nothing » here is transparently « this party and all the people here, » who he later tells her aren’t even the best in London. Lord Mark hints that thanks to her money Milly can have the love she must secretly desire, and James foreshadows Lord Mark’s future proposal of marriage in Venice in attempt to be the person she marries. The exact

conditions of « everything » as « the best money can buy » contains a hint of romance, a flirtatious intrigue Lord Mark would like to have with Milly.

More often in the text, however, « everything » is used as a euphemism for two great unspeakable bodily themes, sexuality and death. James handles sexual desire as a problem, something that weakens resolve and leaves characters open to manipulation. Their resistance to its power infects their very language. On page 394, Mrs. Stringham tells Merton « You can do everything, you know, » and the narrator says « “Everything” was rather too much for him to take up gravely, and he modestly let it alone, speaking the next moment, to avert fatuity, of a different but related matter ». « Everything » is what Merton is free to do with Milly, which has sexual connotations because she is a forward American girl, particularly interested in living life to the fullest. When she invites him on a drive alone, for example, it occurs to him that Kate would never do such a thing for decency’s sake: « It was spontaneous for his young friend to have asked him to drive with her alone—since she hadn’t mentioned her companion; but she struck him after all as no more advanced in doing it than Kate, for instance, who wasn’t an American girl, might have struck him in not going it » (304). Despite being younger than Kate, Milly is freer in her behavior than the elder girl because of her wealth, so free in fact that she can challenge social norms of modesty more than a rival who is engaged to the man she is interested in. When Kate gets into a cab, she always leaves Merton behind.

Kate’s approach is more modest with Merton in public, because of her position but also because her beauty makes relations between them much more dangerous. To save Milly we have seen that Mrs. Stringham says Merton must deny « everything » (452) meaning his secret engagement to Kate. So paradoxically, in order to triumph in the game of securing the financial freedom to marry, his primary motivation, the wish to marry a particular young woman, must be vehemently denied. This parallels the sexual feelings Kate and Merton are forced to repress, but the truth will out, and it emerges itself in some of James’s most suggestive wordplay. For example, on the day the couple meet for the first time at a gallery, according to the narrator, « she had had her equal consciousness that within five minutes something between them had—well, she couldn’t call it anything but *come* » (61). Their physical attraction *itself* appears to reach some sort of climax in the space that separates them. Later it is remarks that are capable of « penetration »: «

there were certain of his remarks—those mostly of the sharper penetration—that had been quite her practice from the first not formally, not reverently to notice » (253). What Kate admires most about Merton is his cleverness, to the point where merely speaking to him is sexual for her. Finally, Kate’s presumably virgin body is compared to an « uncut book » in some of the most explicit lines James ever wrote. Merton says to Kate: « “The women one meets—what are they but books one had already read? You’re a whole library of the unknown, the uncut.” He almost moaned, he ached, from the depth of his content. “Upon my word I’ve a subscription!” » (285) Her intelligent thinking and the idea of her untouched body combine in the erotic image of a book that has never been read, but to which he would like to « subscribe. » This moment could also reflect James’s new attitude at this point in his career toward books bought on subscription, since not selling his novel in the usual way was a key factor in allowing him to write in such a confounding yet dazzling way.

Kate may have a favorite subscriber, but she shows throughout the novel that she is conscious the promise of her appearance is felt by many other men. Her charms are the key to her moving forward in the world, for marrying well and gaining financial security. Merton seems to sense that he is somewhat incidental to this future when he asks the purpose of gaining time in their plan with Milly, and Kate says « For everything! » The passage goes on: « She spoke at first, once more, with impatience; then as usual she qualified. ‘For anything that may happen.’ Densher had a smile, but he felt it himself as strained. “You’re cryptic, love!” » (402)

What Kate cannot say is that her « everything » here means « material luxury, » and her « anything » encompasses whatever might get in the way of her achieving it. She is being « cryptic » to avoid being indecent. It is ironic of James to give Densher a reply ending in « love », since her thinking here is so clearly about her destination whatever happens to her fiancé.

The bond between them is still strong in this period though, and is cemented by the promise of sexual satisfaction, of embodied desire. Before they go to Venice, Kate keeps Merton under her control through brief moments of physical contact, for example when they spend a moment alone at Aunt Maud’s house and afterward Merton feels « the afterglow of their recent embrace » (257). Physical union with Kate becomes Merton’s deepest wish, and even the way he makes sense of the world: « And it somehow clarified *all* things so to possess her » (258).

He anticipates sex for itself, but also as a guarantee of her love. When she actually does come to Merton's rooms in Venice, she lives up to that promise, and as with the previous physical contact keeps him in her power for some time after the event, which is of course not depicted. He thinks: « What had come to pass within his walls lingered there as an obsession importunate to all his senses; it lived again, as a cluster of pleasant memories, et every hour and in every object; it made everything but itself irreverent and tasteless » (411). Sexual satisfaction saturates experience for him, and overpowers all of his other motivations, including his moral sense. Kate herself has risked tarnishing her marriage prospects in sleeping with him. In a way it is the economic system in which she lives that has debauched her though: she is too poor to make her lover wait until they get married. Early in the novel the narrator has told us « She didn't hold herself cheap, she didn't make for misery. Personally, no, she wasn't chalk-marked for auction » (25). She affirms her love for Merton by sleeping with him, but she also endangers her worth. The word « cheap » in this quotation also has associations with prostitution: this is one of numerous points in the novel where Kate acts like a courtesan.

Indeed, the first time the reader encounters Kate she and her father then speak openly in terms of what her beauty can bring the family: « It gave him pleasure that she was handsome, that she was in her way a tangible value » (27). Even when he is ready to end their relationship for practicality's sake, her appearance is enjoyable for him because it demonstrates their shared value. It seems significant that they hear a costermonger, or fruit seller, just before Kate tells her father about her aunt's offer: « Aunt Maud has made me a proposal. But she has also made me a condition. She wants to keep me » (30). A parallel seems to be made between the sale of this transaction, like a mistress who is being « kept » by a man. Aunt Maud thus figures as a kind of madame for Kate, and even as a lover.

Several scenes after comparing her to fruit sold on the street, James uses a further food metaphor for the consumption of the young woman, of the lion savoring the prospect of devouring a baby goat: « The lioness waited—the kid had at least that consciousness; was aware of the neighborhood of a morsel she had reason to suppose tender » (43). Kate is supposed so tender that she must be kept fed and sheltered in the best conditions: « She liked the charming quarters her aunt had assigned her—liked them literally more than she had in all her other days liked

anything; and nothing could have been more uneasy than her suspicion of her relative's view of this truth » (41). Kate does not wish to be so easily bought, but her limited prospects beyond marriage force her to accept the situation. Neither her father nor her sister Marian give her any support for an alternative plan. For example her sister says: « But, all the same, if you wash your hands of me forever in consequence, I won't, for this once, keep back that I don't consider you've a right, as all stand, to throw yourself away » (47). Anything but marrying well would be considered utter stupidity on Kate's part, treating herself like trash, and nearly everyone around Kate thinks of her value on the marriage market is her primary asset, more important than any personal considerations.

At the same time Aunt Maud, her vendor, defends her morsel with all the gusto of a madame or lover. When she summons Merton to speak to her about Kate, he must wait in her impressive Victorian sitting room, encountering proof of her wealth: « It hadn't been yet so distinct to him that he made no show—literally not the smallest; so complete a show seemed made there all about him; so almost abnormally affirmative, so aggressively erect, were the huge heavy objects that syllabled his hostess's story » (78). Because of her wealth, even in patriarchal society Aunt Maud can out-manuever her niece's true love and triumph thanks to her « erect » furniture. He can never compete with the disembodied phallus of great wealth, or as the narrator puts it, hers is of greater « length: » « He knew [...] that if he didn't take care he should understand her, and the strength of her purpose, to say nothing of her imagination, nothing of the length of her purse, only too well » (80-81). Even though that purse is disembodied, kept in bank accounts, like the imagination controlling it, Kate stays in its power nonetheless. In Kate's mind Aunt Maud is Britannia itself, a manifestation of the Victorian era, with all its triumph of trade and vulgar display. As a Victorian, Aunt Maud is naturally quite sure of the direction of progress, and that her choices for Kate are the best ones: « 'I can do the best with her, and I've my idea of the best' » (82). Merton is not the best because he will never be rich, and thus in Aunt Maud's mercenary eyes he is not worthy of her, however charming she may find the young man personally.

One particularly Jamesian manifestation of Merton's considerable charm is that characters avoid mentioning him. Kate does not speak of him to Marian until Marian brings him up, Milly does not speak of him until Mrs. Stringham introduces his name, and Kate and Milly quickly become close friends in London, spending many hours together without mentioning their mutual acquaintance, as Kate tells Merton: « She threw

up her arms at his being so backward. ‘Denied it? My dear man,’ we’ve never spoken of you’ » (260). The characters are aware that this absence is conspicuous, though as we have seen it is somewhat beyond Lord Mark. Later Kate says of Milly: « All the while she and I here were growing intimate, you and I were in unmentioned relation? If she knows that, yes, she knows our relation must have involved your writing to me » (286). Without them ever mentioning Merton, Kate knows Milly knows Kate has been writing to him, and Milly knows Kate is writing to Merton. Aunt Maud knows as well, though she herself never brings him up to Kate. When she presses Milly for information on Merton’s whereabouts Milly says she can’t be sure, until she looks at Kate and knows from her *bearing* alone that Merton is in London: « Kate had positively but to be there just as she was to tell her he had come back. It seemed to pass between them in fine without a word that he was in London, that he was perhaps only round the corner [...] » (219). Merton creates a kind of verbal vacuum around the three female characters, with his presence of greatest importance when they talk about him least.

Later in London the character of whom the others do not speak becomes Kate, this time for Milly and Merton: « Nothing probably so conduced to make it go as the marked circumstance that they had spoken of all the while not a word about Kate [...] » (298). Once again it is « marked » for the two characters that a third has turned into the dark matter of their relationship. This is not unprecedented: James implies that Milly and Merton also saw each other three times in New York without him ever mentioning a fiancée back in England. What’s more, it is a state that occurs again during the plot’s Venetian period, when Kate will willingly make herself absent from Merton’s life by writing him no letters after she has gone: « She had said in their last sharp snatch of talk—sharp though thickly muffled, and with every word in it final and deep, unlike even the deepest words they had ever yet spoken: “Letters? Never—*now*. Think of it. Impossible” » (435). Her most intimate request is that they cut off all contact for some period, to save appearances while he gets closer to Milly.

Merton is to a certain extent thwarted in this because of Milly’s frequent absences from social events. Unlike Merton and Kate though, when she is not present she is *always* spoken of. At an early missed dinner the narrator tells us « it was already as if the young man had, by an odd impression, throughout the meal, not been wholly deprived of Miss Theale’s participation » (267). This is partly due to the presence of

Mrs. Stringham, who, Kate correctly guesses, has been sent by Milly to observe Merton: « “Her preoccupation is probably on two different heads. One of them would make her hurry back, but the other makes her stay. She’s commissioned to tell Milly all about you” » (276). When the action shifts to Venice Milly is often too unwell to join the rest of the party: « He had then been out with the three ladies [...] and had kept afloat with them, under a sufficient Venetian spell, until Aunt Maud had directed him to leave them and return to Miss Theale » (366). Being left with three females foreshadows Merton’s future relations after Milly’s death. The agreed-upon lie among Milly’s friends is that her illnesses are temporary and not part of a permanent decline, as in this further scene when she fails to join her friends in Venice: « Milly had sent them word that she hoped they would go out and enjoy themselves, and this indeed had produced a second remarkable look, a look as of their knowing, one quite as well as the other, what such a message meant as provision for the alternative beguilement of Densher » (380). Her friends are to enjoy each other, particularly Kate and Merton, playing along with the illusion that she is second best.

Through all of this Merton and Milly fall into patterns that mimic courtship to a certain extent. Indeed, Merton even sometimes thinks of Milly in sexual terms. For instance, when he remembers meeting Milly in New York we learn in free indirect style that: « Behind everything for him was his renewed remembrance, which had fairly become a habit, that he had been the first to know her » (375). This literally means they have met before, away from all the other characters, a fact that gives him a sense of moral absolution, but « the first to know her » also has Biblical, sexual connotations. At the same time though, Merton has his limits to how far he can go in his play-acting: « He made the point for his hostess that her own high chambers, though they were a thousand grand things, weren’t really this; made it in fact with such success that she presently declared it his plain duty to invite her on some near day to tea » (370). Milly does not understand Merton’s resistance to having her over for tea, not knowing that the rooms were taken in an effort to finally seduce Kate, or that she still haunts them for him. Even under the most innocent of circumstances, inviting Milly to his rooms would be a kind of sacrilege.

Afternoon tea will also be the occasion for Merton’s learning that his access to Milly’s palace and person have been withdrawn. The narrator says that one day in Venice: « It wasn’t till a certain occasion when the twenty days had passed that, going to the palace at tea-time, he

was met by the information that the signorina padrona was not “receiving” » (426). Lord Mark has taken Merton’s place, just as previously he was turned away in favor of Merton, a fact he learned when observing the delivery of Merton’s card: « Pasquale offered to sight a small salver, which he obsequiously held out to her with its burden of a visiting-card » (362). It was only then that he learned who Milly was really interested in: « “Yes, and he also saw you. He saw you received, as it were, while he was turned away” » (447) At the moment when Merton sees Lord Mark reading *Le Figaro* in Venice his rival has returned to get revenge by revealing Merton’s secret. Thus, because of Lord Mark’s revelation Milly closes herself off from Merton, barring him from her inner sanctum. When he learns this Merton thinks of Lord Mark: « His visit would have taken place just before or just after luncheon, and it was the reason why he himself had found her door shut » (432). From that point forward her door is open only to men who seem trustworthy.

A special case among them however is Milly’s doctor, Sir Luke Strett. Beyond the two explicit romantic rivals of Merton and Lord Mark, Milly has a rather sexualized relationship with Strett. James uses the term « full-blown » in the Preface several times to refer to Milly’s mental state, both as a blooming girl and as someone in the final stages of an illness. Strett is present in both sides of the image, with access to her palace and the ability to know « everything » about her: « Of course he couldn’t in the least have asked, or have wanted to; there was no source of information to his hand, and he really needed none: he had found out simply by his genius—and found out, she meant, literally everything » (193). This is another particularly dense « everything, » meaning Milly’s illness, Milly’s love for Merton, the way that love sustained her health for a time, partly on doctor’s orders, and the way that being told it was false has put her on a path to death, only slowed by her doctor.

In the final phase of her illness Sir Luke Strett begins to be a sort of personal weathervane indicating the state of his patient to others. Her bodily state is manifested in his. This is because of the decision of hers to never be publicly sick, and because of the technical challenge James has given himself of depicting an illness in a novel without writing any melodramatic deathbed scene. The one true, frank discussion of the state of her health is between Strett and Mrs. Stringham in the first London period of the plot, and James does not give us the scene, just a description of how devastated it leaves Milly’s friend. In Venice scenes of ailing are not presented, but Merton can read Strett’s face and see

Milly's suffering: « Once or twice while they rested the great man closed his eyes—keeping them so for some minutes while his companion, the more easily watching his face for it, made private reflexions on the subject of lost sleep » (460). We can assume the doctor's state has to do with Milly, because he has cared for her in the night. When Milly has recovered enough from what Mrs. Stringham calls the « blow » of Lord Mark's announcement, it is then Sir Luke Strett who ventriloquizes Milly by saying she can « receive » Merton, showing her recovery. Later in London Merton and Kate know that the doctor's return to Venice is a sign that Milly is about to die:

« “Has Sir Luke Strett,” he asked, “gone back to her?”
“I believe he's there now.”
“Then,” said Densher, “it's the end.” » (471)

If his going to Venice is ominous, his return signals doom: « The carriage, so possibly at such an hour and on such a day as Luke's own, had struck him as a sign that the great doctor was back » (496). Merton knows that Sir Luke Strett's presence is Milly's death knell.

It is only when Milly has died, when she has become bodiless, that she has the strongest influence on Merton's thoughts and behavior. James sets us up for this transition long beforehand, for example when Kate gives Merton her blessing for him to go to Venice to carry out their plan: « By the time he had dropped her hands he had again taken hold, as it were, of Milly's. It was not at any rate with Milly he had broken » (308-309). Merton's virtual taking of Milly's hands suggests a wish for a mistress who could never share him. There is another hint of what is to come during Mrs. Stringham's visit to his rooms: « It wasn't, strange to say, of Kate either, for Kate's presence affected him suddenly as having swooned or trembled away » (444). Suddenly the enchantment Kate has left behind disappears in the light of Merton's powerful guilt about what he has done to Milly. Back in London James repeats the expression « of old » to describe how Merton and Kate think about the previous state of their relationship, because it has changed beyond recognition. Their trips to the park are different: « This and that tree, within sight, on the grass, stretched bare boughs over the couple of chairs in which they had sat of old and in which—for they really could sit down again—they might recover the clearness of their prime » (490). Even physical touch between them has lost its charms: « He had delayed after she had joined him not so much more than long enough for him to say to her, drawing her hand

into his arm and turning off where they had turned of old » (491). Merton's potential wealth through Milly's estate crushes his trust: « "Well, that I can bear no longer. *That's* simply what has happened. Something has snapped, has broken in me, and here I am. It's *as* I am that you must have me" » (492). Merton finds himself in a position like Milly's, unable to be sure how much his fortune has to do with the amorous attention he receives.

In retrospect Milly becomes a beacon of purity for him, and Kate a symbol of the worst kind of materialism. Near the end of *The Wings of the Dove* Merton thinks about « consequences » as abstract beings who could correspond to his mental representation of Milly and Kate: « They were not in a perspective in which they might be compared and considered; they were, by a strange effect, as close as a pair of monsters of whom he might have felt on either cheek the hot breath and the huge eyes » (494). These fearsome beings seem to represent how Merton can no longer abide by his past decisions and the position they have brought about for him. In moral terms Milly gains credibility in death. In Merton's eyes the letter from her that Kate burns becomes a « maimed child, » as if Kate had killed the young woman when she threw the letter in the fire. He mourns the fact that « Then he took to himself at such hours, in other words, that he should never, never know what had been in Milly's letter » (526). Unread words are necessarily superior to words one has read, just as Kate once was made up of unread words when she was still an « uncut book. » James returns to a favorite adjective for Milly's will to live, « throbbing, » in an extended metaphor from Merton's perspective about the letter from Milly:

« It had made of them a revelation the loss of which was like the sight of a priceless pearl cast before his eyes—his pledge given not to save it—into the fathomless sea, or rather even it was like the sacrifice of something sentient and throbbing, something that, for the spiritual ear, might have been audible as a faint far wail. » (527)

Her letter strikes him as embodying her living love, something he never read or consumed and never will. Kate's act begins to seem unspeakably violent to him, the idea of Milly « cast... into the fathomless sea, » while still alive, « throbbing, » « sentient, » and letting out a « wail » of pain. This is as close as James gets to a description of painful death, and it creates a stark contrast with all of the talk *around* pain and death in

the rest of the novel, even earlier in this final section, when Kate expresses respect for Milly for keeping her promise that « “That she wouldn’t smell of drugs, that she wouldn’t taste of medicine. Well, she didn’t” » (478). In the end this does not attenuate the pain of human loss, the overwhelming horror of death absorbing a young girl into its « fathomless sea ».

It is with this changed vision of love and death that Merton makes his final offer to Kate. In a reiteration of the scene where she has burned Milly’s letter, a new letter is before them, with details about the fortune Milly has left Merton: « She had laid on the table from the moment of her coming in the long envelope, substantially filled, which he had sent her enclosed in another of still ampler make » (528). There is layer of the package for Kate, and a layer for Milly, with the details of Merton’s new wealth inside. When Merton makes Kate choose between himself or Milly’s wealth, he makes it clear that he cannot betray a dead girl by getting away with their scheme. When Kate rejects the idea of simply sending the letter back, as Merton says « intact and inviolate, » their possibility of returning to a virginal state *not* depraved by interest in financial gain disappears as well.

Thus, Kate is right to say that Merton is « in love with [Milly’s] memory » (533), and the great irony is she has facilitated that movement. A parallel process has been at work throughout the plot of Milly’s life coming to a literal close and the emotional bond between Merton and Kate being flattened beneath the moral weight of their attempt to find the money to marry. Bodily love gives way to moral disgust and a reverence for a pure, disembodied kind. To return to the Preface, Henry James recognizes that his technique involves leaving a great deal out, with some characters less fleshed out than he would have liked, and a particularly minimal presentation of matters of the body: « Heaven forbid, we say to ourselves during almost the whole Venetian climax, heaven forbid we should ‘know’ anything more of our ravaged sister than what Densher darkly pieces together » (15). The reader too must be kept in the dark, like Densher, with the great « everything » of sex and the great « nothing » of death kept offstage, perhaps so that the same movement from seduction to moral disgust can take place in the reader. James continues that we should also not know more than « what Kate Croy pays, heroically, it must be owned, at the hour of her visit alone to Densher’s lodging, for her superior handling and her dire profanation of » (15). When Kate becomes a wholly embodied lover, he implies, she already starts down the path of being too known, too tangible and grasping and

therefore no longer able to occupy the otherworldly place of her future triumphant rival, who thanks to her total moral purity is able to replace Kate in the heart of the man they both love.

