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“A conspiracy of silence”: The Unsaid and the Unsayable  
in Henry James’s *The Wings of the Dove*

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Insofar as Derrida defines consciousness as “that place in which is restrained the singular power not to say what one knows, to keep a secret in the form of a representation” (Derrida 17), an idea taken up by Sanford Burdick and Wolfgang Iser who assert that in consciousness “there is always a secret of denial and a denial of secrets” (Burdick and Iser xvi), and insofar as James focuses his narrative attention not upon one but upon several consciousnesses, his 1902 novel almost inevitably develops and foregrounds, explores and problematises the ideas of secrecy, denial, unsaying and speechlessness. What is thought-provoking and what constitutes the basis of this reflexion is the ambiguity of consciousness’s negation of speech, a negation which may be strategic or ontological, deliberate or inevitable, inscribed in a design or in a linguistic law. And since these general secrets of the mind are reflected in the particular secrets of *The Wings of the Dove*, the aforementioned ambiguity is also present in James’s novel and we will therefore explore the problematic relations between the novel’s extensive recourse to secrets, its narrative strategy, its aesthetic posture and its linguistic (meta)speculations.

As Burdick and Iser’s chiasmic phrase aptly conveys, the relations between secrets and denial are intricately dialectic and the inherent negativity of secrets explains then why the critics consider them as intrinsically apophatic – apophasis being the rhetorical figure in which one feigns to deny what one really knows, says or alludes to. Secrets, the unsaid and the hushed seem to structure James’s narrative and the question of the purpose of such apophatic devices must therefore be tackled. That the unspoken is necessarily part of a wider individual or narrative strategy appears indubitable if one takes into account the paradigmatic nature of denials and discursive evasions. To refuse to speak or explain is of course first and foremost part of a modernist programme aimed at refuting realist causality, but it also inevitably generates a warped approach to truth, an avoidance of alethic responsibilities representing a singular conception of linguistic ethics and

the novel's first aspect we shall examine. Since the apophatic secrets are never outspoken in *The Wings of the Dove* they cannot only or mainly bespeak of a narrative strategy and it is our second argument that they rather reveal an aesthetic choice privileging reserve and reticence, puzzling silences and meaningful unspeech. Beyond its aesthetic function, though, the unsaid seems to point to ontological and linguistic impossibilities and the connexion with the unsayable looms large in the proliferation of metaphors which create so many associations and approximations that the possibility of fixing a meaning seems to become inaccessible. After this deliberately inextricable figurative labyrinth we shall analyse the novel's multiple oxymorons which similarly create semantic confusion so much so that the oxymoronic referents turn out forever unknowable or unrepresentable. The novel's contradictory associations include modal or generic concepts and the stalemate of the various generic attempts will constitute our final basis of reasoning to try and prove the novel's avant-garde demonstration of a (post)structuralist principle of indeterminacy and unspeakability.

#### **Unethical or Post-Ethical Ethics**

The opening chapter of *The Wings of the Dove* introduces Kate Croy and her father, the latter being guilty of an unnamed misdeed which constitutes one of the novel's central secrets. Lionel Croy's infamous mystery is initially presented in a periphrasis as "whatever it was that was horrid" (26), the pronoun "whatever" creating a multiplicity of hermeneutic possibilities and therefore making it impossible to fix a single meaning. Later, in Book Second, the father's "dishonour" (57) is evoked at greater length and associated three times with "the silence" (57), that is, the lack, the refusal or the negation of speech, thus associating the secret with a strongly present absence and thus drawing attention to a referent which "remains alien to the order of presence and absence" (Derrida 39). The secrecy of the secret, the absence of the absence, is further enhanced when it is specified about Lionel's unknown lapse: "no one can name it" (57), as if the secret were beyond linguistic representation, as if the secret were by essence unsayable and therefore for ever unknowable. When Kate says that her father "has done everything" and Densher answers "everything's nothing" (57), the universal scope of the nothingness mentioned perfectly conveys the apophatic nature of the secret in this context, a secret fundamentally denied, negated, avoided. It is simultaneously said and unsaid, asserted and negated, a paradoxical full void which destabilises traditional

ontology, generating what Miquel calls “un vide nontologique” (Miquel 104). Crucially, the father’s secret is not known but it is shared since Kate asserts, “it is part of me” (57), a claim seemingly revealing a metonymic link between daughter and father but actually establishing a synecdochic relation between Kate and the secret as if the secret were a fragment of her very constitution, an additional limb, a sylleptic prosthesis<sup>1</sup>. It is then not just a secondary actor but one of the novel’s central characters who is concerned and possibly defined by the unsaid of the secret and the secret of the unsaid.

Inasmuch as the father’s initial secret is also presented as “the ‘unspeakable’ in him” (28), the question of the reason of such unspeakability becomes inevitable<sup>2</sup>. In a first stage Kate is said to know nothing of the secret (“thank God they didn’t really know!” (26) “It’s known – only, thank God, not to us” (57)), but, when, much later, she beseeches Densher, “If you love me – now – don’t ask me about father” (392), it is not the knowledge of the deed which is negated anymore but the will to impart such knowledge. Kate’s refusal to speak up is then a linguistic and epistemological shortcut, a way of turning her back to the truth, of hushing the extent of her responsibility, in short one of her various ethical evasions or dismissals. Fascinatingly, all the characters seem to harbour towards truth a relation of avoidance or reserve. Milly and Kate, the two heroines, are depicted as the best of friends but neither of them reveals to the other the extent of her acquaintance with Densher, so much so that Densher appears as a forbidden topic, a secret issue, an unspoken subject and, of course, the object of a lie by omission, again a trace of ethical faltering. When she has to see a doctor, Milly confides that she “must be wicked and false about it” (140) and her deception of Susan shows that even the role and term of “confidant” (85 and *passim*) are unreliable, the relation to truth being systematically partial or perverse<sup>3</sup>. Even Sir Luke Strett, the medical man, the voice of scientific

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<sup>1</sup> Incidentally, it is this passage of Kate’s confession which may explain the assumption of an incestual relation between father and daughter since, if the secret is part of her, it is reasonable to wonder whether she is not part of the secret and therefore entangled in the shameful sin.

<sup>2</sup> According to Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, “the code of naming something ‘unspeakable’ is a way of denoting (without describing) male same-sex activity” (Sedgwick 75).

<sup>3</sup> That the novel’s relation to truth is perverse may be noticed in the comparative effects of truth and lies: whereas Sir Mark’s singular revelation of the truth literally kills Milly, Susan’s lies are presented as soothing. If then, in James’s world the truth is lethal and

truth, takes part in the general strategy of impaired or untrustworthy speech when he tells Milly “not to worry at all” or more generally “to live” (151), thus negating the inevitable restrictions imposed on a seriously ill patient and of course obliterating the illness itself, another apophatic instance of reality always denied, never acknowledged. Not only is Milly’s illness never named, but it is almost refuted when the doctor reports to Densher “Yes, she’s better” (353), whereas Milly is in fact in the last stages of life. Lies, distortions, concealments appear then as dominant discursive practices in the whole diegetic world and the lengthy discussions between the various characters seem more noteworthy for what is not said than for what is imparted, for their evasions rather than their revelations, the result being a grammar of the unsaid and an ethics of untruth or an unethical ethics.

Not restricted to the characters, the cult of the unsaid is shared by the narrative voice and its numerous untold secrets. When one considers that one of the most salient features of the narrator’s techniques is the alternation and multiplication of diegetic perspectives and consciousnesses, a variation of insights which flaunts a form of omniscience, then it becomes obvious that the untold episodes cannot proceed from lack of knowledge or want of information, but that they reveal either moral reticence or strategic avoidance. What, then, does this strategy of the unsaid consist in? What does it mean that, concerning Milly’s “secrets”, the narrator should specify “none of [them] really required to be phrased” (147)? In this metatextual comment placing secrets against the narrator’s ethical duty the unsuitability or even irrelevance of narrative explicitness and exhaustivity become a novelistic claim privileging speechlessness over outspokenness, the unsaid over the said. The paradox of asserting through speech the desirability of speechlessness stands for one of the central tenets of James’s fictional art of verbose reserve, loquacious silences and lengthy developments bent on not naming or not telling what constitutes the central diegetic acts or facts. Densher’s crucial regret “that he should never, never know what had been in Milly’s letter” (398) is thus deliberately transferred to the reader who is thus left in a state of unknowing, of frustration – the radical nature of which is conveyed by the tantalizing epizeuxis “never, never”. Rather than putting the reader on the side of the narrative instance’s omniscience, James’s novel thus sides his narratee with the diegetic

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lies are benevolent, the whole axiological and ethical scales are necessarily deregulated and deregulating.

agents to whom the truth is kept inaccessible. To a certain extent, the narrator entertains with the reader the same type of relation as the characters entertain among themselves, that is, a relation of limited frankness, of incomplete or insincere sincerity, of untruthful truthfulness<sup>4</sup>. The secrets and silences which stand out in the extradiegetic discourse, it ought to be stressed, are of a narrative or factual nature, they are not abstract, mental or spiritual and do not, therefore, coincide with the unsayable; rather, they bespeak of James's disregard for narrative truth, not just of an avoidance of the novelist's alethic task but an utter negation and rejection of such a task. By thus highlighting a narrative art of the unsaid, James situates himself beyond an ethics of truth, espousing a post-ethical vindication of untruth.

### **An Aesthetics of Ellipsis, Aposiopesis and Apophasis**

Because the various diegetic secrets are never actually divulged, they cannot be said to partake of a traditional strategy of narrative postponement. Rather, being irrevocably unsaid, these pockets of narrative blanks demonstrate that James's 1902 novel does not abide by the realist rule of narrative impetus and instead highlights the recurrent manifestations of unknowability. Ostentatiously favouring the characters' knowledge, or lack thereof, over narrative events, *The Wings of the Dove* singularly illustrates the epistemological dominant of modernist fiction<sup>5</sup> and the extensive recourse to absence and negation, ellipsis and apophasis, shows that the novel's epistemological emphasis manifests itself in its aesthetic practices. The paradigmatic use of ellipses convincingly conveys this correlation between the narrative method and the epistemological purpose. The first striking narrative omission occurs between Book Second and Book Third when Densher leaves for America, meets Milly and the whole episode lasting several weeks remains utterly untold so that the nature of the relations between the male

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<sup>4</sup> Considering the narrator's false statement that Milly's interview with Lord Mark at Matcham was "her only one" (135), a case of narrative red-herring if ever there was one, it might even be argued that the narrator's relation to the reader is one of dissimulation if not deception – in the image of the deceptiveness which is the rule among the characters. Just as Milly put "her friend off with a fraud" (147), the narrator here puts the reader off with a fraud.

<sup>5</sup> It is Brian McHale's contention that "the dominant of modernist writing is *epistemological*" (McHale 58, original emphasis). Interestingly for our argument, McHale adds that in modernist fiction "the signs of the narrative act fall away, and with them all the questions of authority and reliability" (McHale 59).

hero and the eponymous dove can never be established. It is as if the basis of the love triangle uniting Milly, Densher and Kate were missing, as if the foundation of the novel's intrigue were deliberately unavailable. Naturally, in the absence of such a crucial piece of information, the reconstruction of the narrative jigsaw is rendered impractical from the start.

Another fundamental ellipsis concerns Milly's visit to the doctor, a further informational gap which destabilises the assessment of the diegetic situation and which also makes it plain that James is not preoccupied with medical or physiological particulars: his is not a realist and even less a naturalist novelistic art. The sheer avoidance of physicality includes sexuality and the ellipsis between Book Eighth and Book Ninth obliterates the sexual consummation between Kate and Densher in what can be interpreted as a trace of Victorian decorum but which mainly brings to light James's interest in the mind rather than the body, mental mechanisms rather physical details – a sense of priorities which is reverberated in his style essentially intellectual but disincarnate, spiritual but lacking in flesh. Manifestly, though, the main ellipses are to be found in the non-narrative of Milly's final deeds and words. Her final interview with Densher, her last words spoken to her confidant and her farewell letter to Densher are unvoiced leaving the narrative incomplete, mutilated, with tantalizing blanks standing for an erased narrative and a narrative erasure. The letter, in particular, not a purloined letter but an incinerated letter, pursues the disempowerment of the tragic victim insofar as it deprives Milly of her plan of action. Deceived and betrayed throughout the narrative, Milly could have become the playwright or stage manager of her afterlife, but the destruction of the letter erases one more her will and her design, her desire and her presence in a second act of homicide. The epistolary arson annihilates then Milly's past intentions and her future hopes, it marks a retrospective and a prospective extermination. Leaving its contents uncharted, the wordless letter creates unlimited hermeneutic ambiguity: when the letter is definitely closed, the ending becomes fundamentally open.

To chart his map of the unsaid James capitalises not only on ellipses but also on eclipses. It has perhaps not been sufficiently stressed first that his technique of shifting perspectives causes also occultation of perspectives and then that this principle of shifting perspectives fades in the last part of the novel. Indeed, the last three Books use Densher as a focaliser and the consequence is that Milly's and Kate's, the main victim's and the main victimiser's point of view are wiped out. The case

of the obliteration of Kate's thoughts and perception is the most striking and the most intriguing since her viewpoint is privileged in the opening Book, a choice of focalisation which invites the reader to perceive her as the heroine – and this all the more so that her alliterative “fine face” (22) seems to stand for more metaphorical fine features – and then abandoned for the rest of the lengthy narrative. Naturally, the unavailability of Kate's feelings, hopes, doubts and disappointments is instrumental in the progressive transformation of the romantic heroine into the fatal villain. Kate insists to the very last that she did “play fair” (393) but this benign possibility of fairness cannot be ascertained in the absence of her private thoughts. With the eclipse of Milly's consciousness – in addition to the ellipsis of her last letter – it is the very nature of her ultimate motives which turns out undefinable: is her state of mind at the very end one of forgiveness or one of vengeance? Is her financial bequest an act of love or an act of retaliation – knowing that such money would inevitably wrench Kate and Densher apart? Are her gold-laden wings meant to protect or to punish the deceitful couple? As is the case for his ellipses then, James's eclipses generate ambiguity, undecidability, indetermination, the contrary of hermeneutic comfort or closure.

If ellipses represent a void at the narrative and structural level, aposiopeses represent a void at the discursive and syntactic level and James associates the two combining blanks in the storytelling and blanks in the dialogues. Since aposiopeses are visualised by typographical quadrats which leave a sentence unfinished and which may stand for everything as well as nothing, an excess of meaning as well as a semantic void, their presence becomes quickly conspicuous. It is of course quite impractical to draw an exhaustive list of such syntactic interruptions, but it cannot be fortuitous that, most of the time, they should occur in the context of the definition of the characters' roles or understanding. Thus, when Densher tries to grasp the exact nature of his mission in Venice, his unfinished sentences, “you ask, you know, so little—” (288), “if she began to know what I have for you—” (292), and his reticence, “Only, only—” (332), eloquently express his lack of knowledge and the gaps in his mental picture as if the incomplete syntax reflected his incomplete intellectual and ethical maturity. Similarly, in his interactions with Susan Stringham, Densher does not seem to be able to reach a thorough comprehension of his interlocutor's rationale and, again, his linguistic hesitations and interruptions, “Then you know—”, “But you also know—” (339), give evidence of a faltering understanding, of a discontinuous thought-process, the typographical dashes and blanks standing for a



mental short-cut and of course a termination or even a negation of speech and communication. It is Densher's final doubts, "anything's possible—" (386), "we know—" (400), which best illustrate the efficiency of aposiopesis in *The Wings of the Dove*, the diegetic possibilities and knowledge being abruptly broken off and opened up to endless interpretations. The highly visible quadrats thus convey both frustrating silence and multiple meaning, they epitomise both "the conspiracy of silence" (347) which Densher fears but which the novel revels in and "the beautiful little eloquence involved in Milly's avoidances" (230), Milly's avoidances reflecting the narrator's own obliterations, his grammar of the unsaid, his rhetoric of silence. They may also endeavour to represent "the grace of silence" (308) evoked to encapsulate Kate's lack of explicitness and sounding like a wonderful specular motto for the novel's global aesthetic programme<sup>6</sup>. All these strategies of avoidance and speechlessness are brilliantly analysed by Todorov who identifies absence as the determining factor of James's novelistic art: "Le secret du récit jamesien est donc précisément l'existence d'un secret essentiel, d'un non-nommé, d'une force absente et surpuissante [...]. L'absence de la cause ou de la vérité est présente dans le texte, plus même, elle en est l'origine logique et la raison d'être [...] L'essentiel est absent, l'absence est essentielle » (Todorov 153).

Clearing up the reader's hermeneutic horizon, ellipses and aposiopesis may be said to work against narrative closure and resolution. Another device employed by James to create uncertainty – and to reflect the uncertainty he deems inherent in the human consciousness with which he is concerned – is the generalised recourse to negation, denial and apophasis. When Mrs Lowder thus instructs Densher, "You don't know it – that must be your line. Or rather your line must be that you deny it utterly" (248), she sums up the novel's emphasis put on the negation of knowledge and the necessity of denial, the deontic modal "must" potently signalling the characters' perverse deontology, the rule of unethical ethics. The insistence on the characters' negation or denial of knowledge, "there are things you don't know" (106), 'I *don't* know where I am, and you never will" (128 original emphasis), "I *don't* make out" (163 original emphasis), "she couldn't tell [...] and she didn't know" (180), "you won't know anything about anything" (270), "there

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<sup>6</sup> When she defines *The Wings of the Dove* as "a novel where the supposed glory of the unspoken things [...] seems stretched to the finest sublimity, Sedgwick similarly stress the aesthetic importance of silence in this novel (Sedgwick 76).

was something he didn't see" (328), "he made [...] nothing whatever of anything" (351), is once again instrumental in the generation of a novelistic universe characterised by epistemological doubtfulness. If one adds to such general cognitive uncertainty the deliberate practice of denial and obfuscation – as Kate aptly remarks, "we've told too many lies" (294) – then it becomes clear that Milly's, Kate's and Densher's world is one in which the truth is negated and unavailable, dismissed and inaccessible. Such recondite apophatic discourse is not only voiced by the characters, it can also be found in the narrator's speech. In the following sentence, "she wouldn't for the world have had him make any such point as that he wouldn't have launched them at Matcham" (133), the accumulation of negative forms makes it very problematic to decide what has been said and what has not, what has been done and what has not. Likewise, James's predilection for double negatives<sup>7</sup>, as in the sentence "[h]e hadn't only never been near the facts of her condition" (347), seems intended to deny the possibility of assertiveness as if a simple statement of facts were unsuitable and undesirable, as if the convoluted syntax were yet another means to prevent the emergence of certainty.

### **A Labyrinth of Metaphors**

In addition or in complement to the strategies of textual and narrative abstinence, the novel weaves a web of metaphors so rich, so dense, so complex that the multiplicity of figurative images engenders confusion rather than enlightenment, haziness rather than clarity. The initial and paradigmatic metaphor is of course encapsulated in the dove found at the novel's very threshold and taking its origins in two biblical excerpts. Looking closely at the sources of the image of the wings of the dove, one finds immediately divergent and contradictory meanings and symbols. In Psalm 55 ("Oh, that I had the wings of a dove! / I would fly away and be at rest") the eponymous wings stand for spiritual solace or a holy sojourn whereas Psalm 68 ("Even while you sleep among sheep pens, / The wings of my dove are sheathed with silver, its feathers with shining gold") introduces the wings of the dove as an emblem of the

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<sup>7</sup> James's use of double negatives has given rise to what Bruce McElderry calls "clever caricature", a notorious example being Carolyn Well's "paraphrase of a limerick in the Jamesian manner: 'she luminously wavered, and I tentatively inferred that she would soon perfectly reconsider *her not altogether unobvious course*'" (McElderry 155, my emphasis).

philistines, their “silver” and “shining gold” representing a concern with wealth seemingly antithetical to a religious quest. So, right from the start, a single metaphor indicates at the same time spiritualism and materialism, lofty aspirations and an attachment to worldly goods: this crucial liminal ambiguity appears programmatic of the whole novel’s treatment of lucre.

The association of Milly to a dove becomes accepted by all the main characters and by the narrative instance itself and Aunt Maud underlines again the parallel when she states: “Our dear dove has folded her wonderful wings” (377). The lustre of the eponymous lady-bird is conveyed here by the anaphoric alliterations (“**d**ear **d**ove” and “**w**onderful **w**ings”) and the image of the wonderful wings, echoing as it does the previous mention of Milly’s “**w**ings and **w**ondrous flights” (304, added emphasis), certainly increase the importance of Milly’s attire again in a sort of contradiction between the stress put on the aspect of the wings and their alleged spiritual meaning. The extended metaphor of the “dear dove” folding her wings is meant to communicate the idea of fragility so important for the creation of pathos, and the next mention of the wings “spread wider” for “a flight [...] to some happiness greater” (377) reads like a euphemistic evocation of death with the suggestion of a spiritual flight, a flight consolidating the biblical connotations of holy wings. In the concluding evocation of the title, however, the dimension of sacredness becomes again questionable. When Kate observes “she stretched out her wings, and it was to *that* they reached. They cover us” (403, original emphasis) and Densher repeats “They cover us”, it becomes manifest that the two lovers do not mean the same things – in spite of their similar words. In Kate’s mind, Milly protects her almost like a life-insurance and provides the financial resources indispensable for a comfortable life, the wings’ protection being purely material. For Densher, on the other hand, Milly’s wings might well be a reminder of her superior mercy, a reason for moral improvement and spiritual elevation. Milly sees the wings of the golden dove, Densher perceives the wings of a divine dove; Milly sees in these wings a material booty, Densher a moral duty. In these diverging interpretations can be seen the fundamental ambiguity of the eponymous metaphor. What must also be taken into consideration is that Milly’s wings which are supposed to protect the couple actually split up the couple. If one keeps in mind the notorious episode of Noah’s ark, in which “the dove came [...] at eventide and in her mouth an olive-leaf” (Genesis 8.11), then a certain irony creeps into the biblical metaphor for, far from bringing peace, the

dove in *The Wings of the Dove* is precisely the agent who provokes the final and fatal rift between the novel's lovers.

Turning to the other figurative associations concerning Milly, one notices that during her initial presentation she is wearing a hat "feathered from the eagle's wing" (78). Naturally, the mention of a bird's wings cannot but reverberate with the eponymous wings and the contrast between the two types of birds seems at once quite disturbing: to the fragile dove is opposed the powerful eagle as if Milly were associated both with a bird of peace and a bird of prey, as if she were both a victim and a victimiser. The next association with an animal occurs in Book Fifth when the narrator reveals that Milly had used "the wisdom of the serpent" (141). Admittedly, this instance of deceitfulness is explained by the fact that Milly does not want to worry Susan Shepherd, so it is a sort of benevolent deception; nevertheless, the symbolism of the dove and the serpent appear again particularly antithetical the emblem of peace being contrasted with the emblem of duplicity, the source of reconciliation with the source of sinfulness. That the narrator should later specify that Milly "was devilishly subtle" (155) necessarily pursues the ambiguous characterisation of Milly, the devil recalling the serpent and appearing as incompatible with the dove and its association with the holy spirit. Finally, the explicit referral to Kate and Milly's "common duplicities" (262) one more recalls the double-forked snake and Milly's "wisdom of the serpent" is then not as incidental and parenthetical as it seemed. As far as the depiction of Milly is concerned, the most important indication of her essential ambiguity can be found in Book Third when the narrative instance focuses on Mrs Stringham's astonishment that Milly "who was not robust [...] should stir the stream like a leviathan" (81). As another creature from the Bible, as another mention in the Psalms, the leviathan is necessarily read in parallel with the titular dove. And how is this creature defined? As "a female monster dwelling in the watery abyss" (The Book of Enoch 60: 7-9), a terrifying, destructive force – as can be seen, for example, in the famous etchings by Gustave Doré. How, then, is the reader supposed to reconcile these contrary associations of Milly who is simultaneously presented as a dove and a leviathan, a symbol of peace and a force of destruction, a creature of the air and a creature of the deep? Manifestly, the combination of these metaphoric connotations results in an inextricable paradox and Milly appears then as dove-like leviathan or a monstrous dove, an ambivalent figure presiding over the novel and determining the novel's whole aesthetic and ideological project.

That the metaphors used in *The Wings of the Dove* create uncertainty rather than clarity can also be seen in another metaphorical paradigm, that of acting and theatricality. When Mrs Lowder's room is depicted as "her especial scene" (37), the metaphor can be read as a simple metageneric indication that this is the stage where the novel's action will develop, but the scene is also a place and an occasion of playing a part (and Mrs Lowder is later presented as "a distinguished actress", 204), of becoming someone else, that is, of double-dealing and make-believe. On this stage, Densher progressively understands that Kate's relation with Milly "is a game", "of course it's a game" (98) and this playful metaphor is pursued to the very end when Kate persists "I played fair with her" and Densher confirms "You played fair with me, Kate" (393). All these mentions of "a game" and of "playing fair" inevitably appear questionable or ironical when one realises that they concern the deception of a friend and the encouragement of a lover to deceive that friend. The misuse of the isotopy of playfulness is possibly the main sign of perversity of this particular diegetic world: when words are misappropriated, when rhetorical figures are misleading, it is the whole referential environment which appears untrustworthy and deceptive. That this game is not playful, that this play is no entertainment is made clear when Densher witnesses the "drama" (the word is used twice) between Kate and her aunt, when he is relegated to "mere spectatorship" (205), when his lover is obliged "to dress the part", "to express the part" (204) and when in front of this spectacle he feels "the least bit sick" (204). Naturally, Densher's position of "mere spectatorship" reflects *en abyme* the reader's situation and his uneasy reaction in front of this joyless game might be interpreted as both a recognition of and a warning against the perversity at stake in this drama – the concept of drama having to be understood in its polysemy. The final implication of the extended theatrical metaphor concerns the meaning of masks, those masks, mentioned twice, which Milly and Kate "wearily put off" (261). The masks are here manifestly metonymies standing for the actors – and this might imply that Milly is included in the general play, that she too is playing a role. But masks are also fundamental because they refer to the etymology of a hypocrite who is someone wearing a mask. So, all the actors in this unplayful play are also potential hypocrites and it becomes clear then that the very extended dramatic metaphor is intended to draw attention to a world of duality (the actor being ontologically double), a duality which verges on duplicity. On the stage of Mrs Lowder's scene everyone wears a mask, hypocrisy is

potentially everywhere and the words and deeds of the acting crew partake of a vast system of double-talk and imposture. The theatrical metaphor invites the reader to consider the whole plot as a sustained performance, the performance of deceit, a performance which renders the quest for truth very demanding indeed.

Two other sets of metaphors structure the novel and contribute to conveying the novel's opacity: the metaphor of the abyss and a dense metaphorical network revolving around the concepts of fluidity and liquidity. The idea of the abysmal is first introduced in the initial presentation of Milly when the combination of her wealth, her youth, her beauty and her liberty is called "romantic, abysmal" (79), a description immediately complemented by the observation that "it was unspeakably touching" (79). The abysmal suggests the idea of limitlessness and the unspeakable the idea of wordlessness, the juxtaposition of the abysmal and the unspeakable immediately associates then the abysmal and the ineffable, the abysmal and what defies representation, as if there were a secret core, an unsayable core at the very centre of the novel's main subject. As for the "romantic" convergence with the abysmal it signals the importance of imagination, the boundlessness of the abyss being an invitation for the boundlessness of imagination, Milly's imagination and of course the reader's imagination. When the term "abyss" appears, it is again in relation to Milly who exclaims: "I want abysses" (120) and, again, the context is crucial for this claim occurs just after the characters' acknowledgment that they "move in a labyrinth" (120). Linking the metaphor of the abyss to the motif of the labyrinth and the fatal disorientation of the Minotaur's victims is then another device used by James to suggest a maze of possibilities and a mesh of interpretative paths. The labyrinth is inextricable, the abyss unfathomable, both defy human understanding. So, when abysses are later mentioned in relation to Densher's silence, as if "his silence had been a labyrinth" (121), the connexion between the unfathomable and the unsaid becomes almost explicit and it is then James's whole strategy of ellipses and eclipses which appears linked to a design of narrative and semantic destabilisation.

When the trope of the abyss crops up again, it is to express one of the novel's specular mottos: "consideration might, like cynicism, have abysses" (157). If one keeps in mind that consideration and cynicism are the dialectic poles between which most of the characters waver, then the abysmal quality of these poles seems again to point to the characters' inscrutable behaviour, the boundlessness of their motives being

apparently indissociable from the idea of groundlessness. Similarly, the puzzlement of Mrs Stringham who “was too sunk in the inevitable and the abysmal” (244), just like Densher’s feeling of sinking into an “abyss” (353), constitute diegetic indications of a loss of bearings which cannot but refract the extradiegetic narratee’s similar feeling. In all these instances, as Évelyne Labbé has demonstrated in her monograph dedicated to the analysis of the motif of the abyss in James’s late novels, the abyss turns out as a metaphor of the occult, “métaphore par excellence du secret que son art sert et désigne sans jamais épuiser la force du non-dit”, “sans doute le plus mouvant et le plus insondable de tous les vides sémantiques qui hantent *Les Ailes de la colombe*” (Labbé 7, 144).

Not only does the novel develop the concept of the unfathomable linked to the metaphor of the abyss but it also uses to the full the concept of the ungraspable linked to the metaphor of fluidity or liquidity. Quite revealingly the most frequent term and image if that of the “current” repeated four times to convey Milly’s nebulous thoughts after her interview with Mrs Lowder (166-167), mentioned in connexion with Milly’s perception (143), with Densher’s (230 and 345), with Mrs Stringham’s (260) or with a general sense of bewilderment of “movements as inscrutable as ocean-currents” (209). All these occurrences of currents cannot not evoke modernism’s stream of consciousness, a liquid metaphor meant to give an idea of the unstoppable and unchanneled nature of the functioning of the mind, the “inscrutable” mystery of mental processes. So, when Kate’s “crowded consciousness” is likened to “a slow thick tide” (105), when Mrs Stringham and then Milly feel “afloat” in their alien environment (127, 135), when Milly feels submerged by “a final and merciful wave” (155), or when “something” that arises in Milly is associated to “a full appreciable tide” (164), it is always the uncontrolled essence of flowing water which seems implied and underlined. The “steadily rising tide” (395) perceived by Densher appears then as a case in point since the liquid metaphor is used here to define what “he would have been painfully at a loss [...] to name” (395) whereby it does not define anything but simply, once again, highlights the essential fluidity and vagueness of his thoughts and fears. That Densher should twice be said to be “at sea” (200, 384) perfectly shows that the water metaphor goes hand in hand with the ideas of bafflement and irresolution, water like consciousness, currents like thoughts, being intangible and unintelligible, defying representation and coming close to the unsayable.

What ought to be stressed about these numerous metaphors is that they put together a language of substitution trying to approximate the referent, to circumvent it, to describe it indirectly as if the referent were not describable or not knowable as such. As Brenda Austin-Smith noted on the subject of James's figurative speech in *The Wings of the Dove*, metaphors strive "to approximate or suggest what cannot actually be known for certain" (Austin-Smith 184). Metaphors suggest common points between the vehicle and the tenor but they never designate the identity of the phore – a metaphor introducing by definition an ontological dissimilarity. The novel's nourished figurative speech constitutes then a means of conveying a series of equivalents, a series of associations which enrich the potential meanings and facets of the characters or of their thoughts but which never reveal their true essence. The arcane metaphors linked together throughout *The Wings of the Dove* are then the ideal rhetorical device to describe a referent as a cypher and therefore to make it impossible for the reader to decipher the overdetermined nature of the diegetic world.

#### **Oxymorons and Semantic Aporia**

As the concurrent images of the dove and the serpent suggest, the novel's figurative language includes contradictory possibilities, the epitome of such contradictoriness being the oxymoron, a rhetorical device remarkably frequent in *The Wings of the Dove*. The disconcerting paradoxes of oxymorons affect not only the art of characterisation but also the novel's very atmosphere as well as its centrally thematic and ethical concerns. As soon as Mrs Lowder is depicted as "magnificently vulgar" (54) the tone is set for a narrative in which vulgarity is at the same time a subject of opprobrium and fascination, of condemnation and temptation. The adverb "magnificently" can designate both material lavishness and beauty or grandeur, and the expression "magnificently vulgar" may then be read either as a tautological association of vulgarity and wealth or as an oxymoron conveying ignoble nobility or base greatness. It must be specified that this description occurs in a passage in internal focalisation and what is then also suggested here is Densher's perception of the evil power of Mrs Lowder and possibly his fascination with the grandeur of richness. Naturally, the vulgarity in question includes the moral field or dimension and this fascination with vulgarity might then also bespeak of a fascination with the ruthless determination of Mrs Lowder's schemes. When she is later called "a beneficent dragon" (204), we are again faced with the paradox of the archetypal opponent of



the fairy-tale who is also a helper, a sort of friendly enemy, a benign antagonist, the perfect contradictory embodiment of evil goodness.

The context in which baseness and greatness are intertwined inevitably appears morally topsy-turvy and such perverseness also transpires in the oxymoronic phrase “the sublimity of her lie” (241) – the lie in question being Milly’s. Admittedly, the expression is used when Milly is trying to hide her suffering and to spare her friend, but nevertheless, the hyperbolic and eulogistic term “sublimity” being associated to deceit, what Milly is praised for is her duplicity – not her purity. If one recalls that the concept of the sublime has notoriously been defined by Lyotard as that “which puts forward the unrepresentable in presentation itself” (Lyotard 81), then the mention of “sublimity” here acquires a distinct metatextual dimension whereby James uses once again the failures of representation to bypass his narrative and descriptive task. It is then Milly’s untruth which is highlighted as that which reaches beyond words, beyond language, beyond the text<sup>8</sup>. When untruth is depicted as sublime, it is a whole axiological system which is upturned and which renders the ethical responsibility of telling the truth irrelevant. That the novel’s relation to truth is perverse seems manifest in the fact that Mrs Stringham insists on lying to Milly in order to protect her whereas Sir Mark tells her the truth in a terrible act of cruelty. It is then literally that the truth is murderous and lies are protective, that the truth-teller is the ruthless villain and the liar the benevolent protector. The intricate amalgamation of truth and lies can also be traced in another oxymoron designating Kate’s and Mill’s “frank ironies” (261). Doubletalk is once more inextricably linked with sincerity so that Milly and Kate’s friendship which lies at the heart of the novel becomes itself an oxymoronic blend of truthfulness and falseness, of sincerity and duplicity. In such a complex and contradictory climate the narrator further singles out women’s “beautiful hypocrisy” (226), “brave duplicities” (197) and Kate’s “beautiful delusion” (227), additional oxymorons undoing the condemnation of simulation and double-dealings, oxymorons revealing, on the contrary, the novel’s fascination with delusion and deception. In the light of so many reiterations of the fundamentally ambivalence of deception, it is tempting to read such

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<sup>8</sup> Since Milly is explicitly described as “beautiful, simple, sublime” (126) just as Kate “was always sublime” (284), it is the novel’s central characters, and hence the novel’s central issues, which seem to defy representation, which belong to Lyotard’s realm of the “unrepresentable”, a concept akin to the unsayable.

deception as the novel's own goal and achievement. It is hardly surprising in these conditions that the general atmosphere at the outcome of the successful deception should be one of "festal desert" (375), yet another contradictory syntagm in which excess and emptiness, fullness and absence, life and death cannot be disentangled, just as the diegetic referentiality, Christmas day after Milly's death, is composed of an admixture of nativity and mortality, of celebration and mourning.

Being determinedly perplexing because determinedly oxymoronic, James's novelistic world appears unreadable in its contradictoriness and this includes the novel's heroine to whom the title refers. In one of the novel's archetypal oxymorons Milly is characterised by her "noble inelegance" (86), an unlikely collocation yoking together antithetical qualities and making unfeasible the task of deciding whether the positive or the negative side of the combination dominates. Doubtlessly, though, the spiritual nature of the eponymous dove is challenged by the mention of such "inelegance" about which one may wonder to what extent it might be metaphorical. Naturally, if the heroine's nobility is questioned, her very status as a tragic heroine becomes problematic and the whole generic contract has to be reconsidered – of which more anon. Her nobility is further challenged by the mention of her being "pleasantly pompous" (234) with her ostentatious carriage waiting for her outside her prestigious London hotel, an alliterative oxymoron designating both her vanity and her grace, both her weakness and her greatness, but again making her undecipherable, open to sundry interpretations. Such hermeneutic plurality is also encouraged by the reference to her "ferocity of modesty" (215), a phrase allying the incompatible notions of vehemence and meekness, of violence and harmlessness. Just as the biblical title at once indicates both spirituality and materiality, both piety and vanity, just so the novel's characterisation of Milly presents an oxymoronic heroine "thwarting cognitive efforts" (Spunt 168) and combining features of a Christ-like figure and features of a secretive manipulator, features of nobility and features of conceit, features of innocence and features of guile, and with the heroine's ethical and ontological ambiguity it is the whole novel's teleology which becomes unfixed and uncertain. Even Milly's situation, "her caged freedom" (277), is of an oxymoronic nature, a paradox which, admittedly, reactivates the clichéd motif of the rich people's golden prison, but which also suggests a double bind and thus generates intellectual stimulation and diegetic abstruseness.

In the final analysis, these numerous oxymorons are particularly noteworthy and relevant because of their radical divergence from antitheses. Whereas antitheses introduce opposed concepts and notions and thus reveal the possibility or the prevalence of dichotomies, of a dual world, of clear-cut opposed values, oxymorons mix and mingle such oppositions thus rhetorically and semantically negating the very existence of dichotomy and duality. What is opposed and clearly separated in an antithesis is combined and opacified in an oxymoron and the traditional oppositions between good and evil, heroes and villains, have no place in this rhetorical device favouring syncretism and amalgamation. So, although the construction and presentation of the novel divided into two volumes suggests a diegetic world dominated by the concept of duality, the rhetorical strategy employed by James refutes and invalidates such a concept. What the oxymorons also crucially generate is a sense of semantic indeterminacy, a concept resulting from the blending of two opposed concepts defying rational meaning. So, oxymorons represent also a semantic conundrum and here resides probably the main justification of James's recurrent recourse to this figure of speech: oxymorons contribute to the persistence of secrecy and the cult of the unsaid, which lie at the heart the novelistic art practiced in *The Wings of the Dove*. When the sublime and lies, beauty and vulgarity, nobility and inelegance are not opposed anymore but form new synthetic notions and concepts, the characters and their actions become fundamentally unknowable. The dove and her motives, the daughter of Lionel Croy and her murderous friendship, Densher and his "abject affection" (262), remain then enigmatic, unintelligible, uncrackable riddles. James's idiosyncratic aesthetic of undecidability and indeterminacy serves then a dual purpose bent as it is on preserving the diegetic secrets *and* propounding a pioneering philosophy which highlights the aporetic nature of linguistic representation – thus anticipating the poststructuralist and deconstructionist demonstration of the impossibility of fixing meaning.

#### **Generic Failure and (Post)Structuralist Indeterminacy**

The novel's aporetic demonstration is not limited to the semantic field, it extends to the generic field. Unicity, homogeneity and purity are not only deconstructed conceptually but also generically. As might be expected in a narrative introducing first "our young woman" (48) and then "our young man" (56), the first generic track explored is that of romance. As an object of generic metadiscourse, romance is evoked both

by the characters, as when Kate claims “I cling to some saving romance in things” (60), and by the narrator who mentions Milly’s desire “to open the door of romance” (79) or Densher’s “romantic obscurity” (73). The fact that romantic expectations are spelled out in relation to Kate, Milly and Densher seems to self-consciously point to the traditional love triangle of romance. There is even a clearly playful self-reflexivity about the romantic metadiscourse when Kate confesses “I’m not the sort of stuff of romance that wears” before referring to her lover’s “pride and prejudice” (69), thus signposting a romantic situation à la Jane Austen. This unmistakable instance of ludic intertextuality is particularly astute and misleading since romance à la Jane Austen is manifestly a false promise, a generic red herring, a narrative dead-end.

The deceptive nature of the romantic path becomes manifest through the narrator’s recourse to irony. When Milly finds herself at Lancaster Gate in Mrs Lowder’s domain which has been presented as “a cage” and “a Market Place” (37), it is in this context in which people are equated with “investments” (65) and Milly with “a trophy” (97) that the dove has “her first full sense of a situation really romantic” (97). The strategic placing of this thought after the disparaging description of Mrs Lowder’s “battlefield” (37) underlines the utter irrelevance of or delusion of Milly’s romantic conception, a romantic conception which is thus undone, erased, nullified by the ironic discrepancy between such a conception and the context, between Milly’s idea and the diegetic reality. In the final recourse, it is Milly herself who unwittingly proclaims the verdict of the novel’s romantic vein when she cries out: “Oh the impossible romance—” (266). This exclamation is wonderfully double-layered for, at the diegetic level, it seemingly strengthens the romantic potential, the impossibility of a love affair being a staple of romance, while at the metatextual level it expresses the truth of a generic failure, the mercantile mentality of Lancaster Gate being incompatible with the idealist essence of romance. Besides, Densher’s perception of his romance with Kate is conveyed in terms of “the abjection of love” (228) and “an abject affection” (262), two oxymoronic expressions highlighting the impasse of romance. If one accepts Kristeva’s association of the abject with horror<sup>9</sup>, then such a conjunction of love and horror, denying

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<sup>9</sup> The title of Kristeva’s essay, *Powers of Horror*, is itself meant as an oxymoronic paradox suggesting the fascination of horror, a fascination to which James may not have been indifferent.

as it does the lofty nature of love, clearly annihilates the suitability of romance.

Next to and sometimes intertwined with the romantic vein, the fairy-tale is repeatedly referred to as another generic model. As soon as Milly is introduced through Mrs Stringham's perspective, the word "princess" crops up four times (85) accompanied as it is by the term "confidant" which corresponds to what Propp in his analysis of the structure of the fairy-tale has identified as the traditional helper. The codes of the fairy-tale are activated throughout the narrative and Milly is often called a princess not only by her confidant but also by Mrs Lowder (134) and by Densher (369); similarly, Mrs Stringham is called "a fairy godmother" (97) and "an attendant fairy" (134). When the narrative instance refers to the heroine as "a princess in a palace" (264), the alliteration and the clichéd type of setting already point to a playful treatment of this generic trend and when Mrs Stringham cries out "Ah she's a thousand and one things!" (208), the reference to the thousand and one nights of the canonical tale begets an additional metageneric dimension which creates a ludic distance with fairy-tale model. There are also distinct cracks in such a model and when Kate is identified as another helper of the princess as "the worthiest maiden" waiting on "the princess" (111), this identification amounts to a false track since Kate, considering her instrumental role in the deception of Milly, can only be a perverse helper or a treacherous helper, a role hardly in keeping with the actantial paradigm of the fairy-tale.

What also undermines the continued relevance of the fairy-tale is the absence of a prince. Because Densher appears as a puppet manipulated by Kate and Mrs Lowder and because he does *not* fall in love with the princess, he cannot fit the role of the prince<sup>10</sup>. Additionally,

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<sup>10</sup> It might be argued, though, that Densher's inadequate status and stature are modified in the conclusion of the novel. When he finally perceives Milly's "highest heroism" and recognises that "she was indeed so perfectly the princess" (369), the remarkable anaphoric alliterations may well suggest the emergence of aphorisms that sound like revelations. That he acknowledges Milly as the princess and feels the inevitable admiration for the heroine of the fairy-tale is what becomes manifest in the very last chapter when Densher thinks of the princess not only as "rare" and "precious" but as "sacred" (398). This adjective contrasts with the adjective "poor" applied to Kate in the same passage and perfectly conveys then his conversion to the worship of the princess-goddess. It is then a typical instance of his "aftersense" that Densher should fall in love belatedly just as he understood the exact state of affairs only belatedly. He becomes then a sort of after-prince who is united in spirit to with the princess in a sort of after-

because the narrative discourse relies on lengthy developments about the characters' thoughts, scruples and dialogues rather than on schematic actions and descriptions, it cannot coincide with the narrative prose of a tale. Eventually, it is again in an oxymoronic collocation that the miscarriage of this generic pattern can best be grasped: when Milly is called "a practical princess" (113) the paradoxical association of two opposed isotopies, strengthened by the later mention of "an angel with a thumping bank account" (214), engenders a baffling image combining a material and an ideal semantic field, pragmatic and heroic considerations. The intrusion of money and quantities, and later the appearance of doctors and wills shatter the magic of the fairy-tale and fundamentally subvert its spirit, the realist impact of money and legacy being opposed to the timeless and symbolical dimensions of the tale. Likewise, when Milly is identified as "a pale princess" (262) and this paleness is not to be cured by the prince but "might be tragic" (262), the possibility of a happy end becomes excluded and the generic alternative of tragedy seems to assert itself.

Tragedy as another generic architext is first heralded when Mrs Stringham believes Milly to be "tragically impatient" and "inexplicably sad" (82). The mystery of such affliction already touches upon a possible hamartia and when, in the same section, the narrator evokes Susan's "wonder and admiration" (82) in front of Milly, the subject of wonder and admiration acquires the noble status of the tragic heroine. In the same chapter, Milly is depicted as "the princess in a conventional tragedy" (85), a metageneric indication confirming her role as the tragic protagonist whose prime characteristic according to Aristotle is that is should be a person of eminence. Explicitly designating Milly's "definite doom" (85), yet another striking anaphoric alliteration, the narrator proleptically announces the *fatum* presiding over the heroine's destiny. Milly's thoughts after her visit to Sir Luke further hint at tragic possibilities when she realises that she "might die" and that the "beauty of the bloom had gone from the small old sense of safety" (152). The metaphor of the short-lived flower appears here as a typical trope conjuring up the idea of inevitable and premature death. It is again in relation to Milly that the narrative instance evokes "the sinister light of tragedy" (272) implying a figurative darkness quite typical of tragic hopelessness or, rather in this case, of tragic lightlessness. The

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fairy-tale. It is then certainly not the traditional fairy-tale which is consistently explored but rather a very original and innovative posthumous fairy-tale.

vocabulary, images and concepts of the tragic world become denser in the final Books with the “breath of fate” (328), “the deepest depth [of] his predicament” (348), “some refinement of the horrible” (348), Milly’s insistence to die “in her own extraordinary way” (362), “the perfection of the pathos” (368) and “the unapproachable terror of the end” (369). Pathos and terror are clearly synonyms of pity and horror, the staple ingredients of tragedy, and the death of the princess-goddess is doubtlessly worthy of the crux of a tragic tale.

However, that the tragic mode is *not* maintained to the end and is perhaps not even the dominant mode can be seen in the fact that the tragic event, the death of the heroine, is not shown but told, not performed but reported; it happens off-stage and is therefore not dramatic in the etymological sense of the term. What happens on stage at the conclusion of the novel is a confrontation between two lovers with a comeuppance of Kate, the main schemer, an ironical comeuppance which is radically alien to the spirit of tragedy. The novel ends in a circular imprisonment in a *social* environment, Kate finding herself in the same *social* deadlock as at the beginning, and thus signals that tragedy is just one dimension of the tale but not the ultimate one, not the frame which encompasses and explains the entire itinerary of the main characters. The limits of the validity of the tragic template may again be inferred from an oxymoronic formulation, namely “the betrayal of pity” (240) concerning Mrs Stringham, the main witness of the tragedy. Beyond the semantic paradox according to which human compassion becomes an act of perfidy, it is the whole logic of tragedy which is here turned upside down since the helper becomes the betrayer, the gentlewoman a villain. One could also perceive in this condemnation of pity a metatextual warning addressed to the reader and signalling the inadequacy of pity in this topsy-turvy world. And if pity is underlined as inadequate, it is perhaps because tragedy is not the relevant generic grid and Milly is not the tragic heroine meant to generate pity.

It seems then that several generic paradigms are carried out and explored but that none of them is used consistently, satisfactorily or from beginning to end. What does the faltering of these generic attempts signify? If the several models borrowed by James fall short of a thorough form of mimesis, then these generic abortions may be read as a commentary upon the impossibility or inexhaustibility of representation, they illustrate what Kevin Kohan called James’s “representational scepticism” (Kohan 135). So, reality in general and the reality of this diegetic universe in particular remain unrepresentable and what the

inaptitude of the various generic models eventually conveys then is that the truth remains inaccessible. To tell the secret or the secrets of *The Wings of the Dove* remains an impossibility, a deontological and an ontological impossibility. There is a romantic, a magic and a tragic part in Milly's, Kate's and Densher's dealings but no generic frame is available or suitable to capture the essence of these dealings and the thwarted generic attempts highlight then the persistence of the unsayable. Such a narrative strategy emphasising the unnamed and the unnameable, the limits and stammerings of representation, appears fundamentally avant-garde since, in the manner of later linguistic and (post)structuralist theories, it throws light on the limits of representation in representation itself and reflects *upon* the literary medium *through* the literary medium itself.

Synthetically then and to paraphrase Todorov, one might argue that in *The Wings of the Dove* the unsaid is essential and the essential is unsaid. Such a novelistic principle is first and foremost illustrated in the characters' and the narrator's withheld information, that is, in the diegetic and extradiegetic silences which generate a perforated, gaping, openwork narrative. The image and the idea of an openwork text seem particularly relevant because they imply the refusal to stitch together the various narrative threads and in this refusal can be seen the rejection or the subversion of a whole novelistic tradition bent on producing a coherent and continuous narrative whole. For the characters, not speaking up is another means of obfuscating or deceiving the others (or, in Densher's case, oneself), in the case of James and his astute use of a reluctant, secretive narrator, the "conspiracy of silence" represents a novelistic project reaching beyond traditional narrative teleology and causality and heralding a new fictional programme in which assumptions are more important than facts, thoughts prevail over actions, interpretation overweighs revelation, indeterminacy commands over finality. In addition to this aesthetic function, the paradigmatic silences have also a philosophical function designating as they do, along with the novel's rhetorical and generic strategies, the haunting presence of the unsayable and unrepresentable. To highlight the unnarratable in narration is the main purpose of the explicit and recurrent metadiscourse of the ineffable – for example, in the mention of Mr Croy's "indescribable arts" (24), "the 'unspeakable' in [Mr Croy]" (28), what "was unspeakably touching" (79), "something [...] nameless" (96), Mrs Condrip being "indescribably disconcerting" (124), "a thing of such unnameable shades" (218), a



“strange indescribable session” (166), “things [...] that exceeded speech” (241), Mrs Stringham’s “action, ineffably discreet” (290), “something [...] too beautiful and too scared to describe” (370). Such a conspicuously self-reflexive vocabulary of the unsayable seems also justified by the novel’s thematic emphasis on the character’s inner worlds. As the preeminent recourse to internal focalisation reveals, it is consciousness itself with which James is concerned and since consciousness stands for “an antithesis to the empirical world” (Burdick and Iser xiii), the novelistic attempts at seizing this immaterial subject can only be, like consciousness itself “open, expanding, incomplete” (Karn 137) – and, one might add, obsessed with the unsayable. Leaving behind the precedence of empirical reality, James logically gives up the realist art of factuality and espouses a modernist determination to come to terms with the irrational, the insubstantial, the unspeakable. Dealing with the unchartered territory of the mind, James deals in riddles and silences and stumbles across the unsayable. What James brilliantly achieves is the transformation of a thematic preoccupation into an aesthetic principle, *The Wings of the Dove* evincing, narratively, rhetorically and generically a poetics of the unsaid and the unsayable.

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