



**HAL**  
open science

## The Art of Hysteria in The Wings of the Dove

Sigi Jöttkandt

► **To cite this version:**

Sigi Jöttkandt. The Art of Hysteria in The Wings of the Dove. *Cycnos*, 2020, The wings of the dove de Henry James : de l'oeuvre au texte, 36 (1), pp.133-159. hal-04146738

**HAL Id: hal-04146738**

**<https://hal.science/hal-04146738v1>**

Submitted on 30 Jun 2023

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

# The Art of Hysteria in *The Wings of the Dove*

Sigi Jöttkandt

*University of New South Wales (Australia)*

In *The Wings of the Dove*, Henry James depicts a novelistic world dominated by a persistent dualism.<sup>1</sup> When we enter the novel, London presents as an oppositional world characterized by rigid sets of alliances and antagonisms, all of which have reached a stalemate by the time Milly Theale arrives on the scene. Milly's presence breaks up the static circles of reflection and antagonism of the earlier chapters, opening up a space in which repetitive, stultifying patterns of reciprocal inversion move into new formations.

It is in the relationship between the two women that this change-inducing function occurs. When she first encounters Kate at dinner at Lancaster Gate, Milly is immediately struck by the "handsome girl" (*WD* 98). Milly wonders whether she and Kate are destined to pick up where Aunt Maud and Susan had left off years before, whether, that is, they will form a double of the older pair: "Were they, Miss Croy and she, to take up the tale where their two elders had left it off so many years before were they to find they liked each other and to try for themselves whether a scheme of constancy on more modern lines could be worked?" (*WD* 99). Milly rapidly finds their relationship indeed quickly blossoming, although even early on she discovers a certain opacity in her new friend. Comparing the niece with her aunt, Milly discovers that, although each represent to her a "great reality," she senses that a "tour" of Kate's mind would be considerably harder to complete:

[Milly] felt Mrs. Lowder as a person of whom the mind might in two or three days roughly make the circuit. She would sit there massive at least while one attempted it; whereas Miss Croy, the handsome girl, would indulge in

---

<sup>1</sup> This is an extracted section from chapter 2 of *Acting Beautifully: Henry James and the Ethical Aesthetic* (Albany: SUNY P, 2005). I thank SUNY Press for their permission to republish it here. Citations are to Henry James, *The Wings of the Dove*, ed. J. Donald Crowley and Richard A. Hocks (New York: Norton, 1978). Subsequent citations as *WD*.

incalculable movements that might interfere with one's tour. (*WD* 99)

What inhibits their easy formation of a pair, whether of antagonism or of alliance, is Kate's impenetrability. Milly muses to herself that "she should never know how Kate truly felt about anything such a one as Milly Theale should give her to feel" (*WD* 122). Reflecting on her new friend, Milly suddenly feels herself "on the edge of a great darkness" (*WD* 122). The form given to this darkness is of course the question of Kate's relationship with Merton Densher. The moment Milly discovers that Kate and Densher know one another, the "handsome girl" begins to acquire a new lustre for Milly, a strange otherness that presents Kate in terms of the "not wholly calculable" (*WD* 122).

Their mutual avoidance of Densher's name becomes a secret thrill for the young American whose excitement James describes as "containing measurably a small element of anxiety [. . .]. Twice over thus, for two or three hours together, Milly found herself seeing Kate, quite fixing her, in the light of the knowledge that it was a face on which Densher's eyes had more or less familiarly rested and which, by the same token, had looked, rather more beautifully than less into his own" (*WD* 121-2). What makes Kate so different all of a sudden is that Milly finds herself looking at Kate as if through Densher's eyes: "she stood there suddenly, irrelevantly, in the light of her other identity, the identity she would have for Mr. Densher" (*WD* 144).

Milly's odd behavior is not merely the awkwardness of a young, inexperienced, infatuated girl towards an older, more sophisticated couple. It marks the beginning of a more complex relationship than the structure of opposition that characterizes Kate Croy's London. The terms of this relationship are introduced in the scene in the National Gallery when Milly, having left Susan to meet with the doctor Sir Luke in her absence, comes upon Kate and Densher in a secret *rendezvous*. Turning to look at what she expects to be a painting in the "English style" remarked on by the American group on whom she is eavesdropping, Milly discovers Densher looking abstractedly at works of art. But, before long, Milly is aware that, like Densher, she has also been the unwitting subject of a gaze, Kate's, who has taken them both in unawares. Initially, the direction of the gazes is unidirectional: Kate watches Milly watching Densher. But once she discovers Kate watching her in turn, Milly suddenly begins to see herself from the place where Kate sees her; her

position shifts from an immediate relation to a mediated one, from seeing to being seen seeing:

She was unable to think afterwards how long she had looked at him before knowing herself as otherwise looked at; all she was coherently to put together was that she had had a second recognition without his having noticed her. The source of this latter shock was nobody less than Kate Croy – Kate Croy who was suddenly also in the line of vision and whose eyes met her eyes at their next movement. (*WD* 177)

Here the pattern of recognition shifts from one of a simple reciprocity to the “shock” of discovering that one is seen from outside; there is a place from which I am seen by another who is not in my reciprocal line of vision. Although depicted here in temporal terms (“she had had a second recognition”), the effect is in fact to introduce a new spatial point into the novel’s geometry. Becoming aware of Kate watching her, Milly finds herself split between an identification with Densher – like him, she finds herself the unwitting object of a look – and an identification with Kate as the seeing subject. Part of the “shock” Milly experiences, then, is the shock of seeing oneself through someone else’s eyes, of seeing oneself, that is, from the outside or even, paradoxically, from the back of one’s own head. The effects of such a perspectival shift, however, are immense, for with this addition of a third space from where one sees oneself from the point of view of a non-reciprocal other, the novel’s static pattern of dyadic identifications is breached, enabling the formation of new relations.

In fact, the scene in the National Gallery simply translates into visual and thematic terms the structural change that has occurred on the economic level with Milly’s arrival in London. Into Maud’s world of fixed exchange, where every party’s value is known in relation to everyone else, Milly introduces a rupture precisely because she doesn’t know what her value is (do people want her for herself or for her money?). Extending Julie Rivkin’s point when she argues that Milly introduces a radically unamortizable figure into the restricted economy of Kate’s and Maud’s London, one might explain the change in terms of the difference between a barter or, more specifically, as James’s many references to Maud’s “gilded beak and claws” suggest, a gold-based

versus a paper, or credit economy.<sup>2</sup> Literally, of course, London is just as much a mercantile capitalist society as Milly's United States. However, as James's medieval imagery of Kate's London implies, their metaphorical economy and the economy by which people are literally "exchanged" remains decidedly feudal.

Briefly, the difference between the two economies lies in the immediacy of the relation between money and the objects of its purchase. A gold-based economy assumes a direct one-to-one correspondence between the object and payment, that is to say, the payment has its own guaranteed value against which objects can be compared and priced. A gold-based economy is therefore scarcely removed from a barter system where goods with intrinsic value are directly exchanged for one another. With paper money, however, this direct correspondence is mediated. Instead of receiving the equivalent value in gold for an object, sellers receive merely a "promise to pay." These originally took various forms such as "promissory notes," bills of exchange, receipts, IOUs, notes of indemnity etc. that were issued either by banks or by individuals naming a particular merchant. Eventually, however, such "bills" or bank notes ended up simply naming the anonymous "bearer" as entitled to an equivalent amount of specie. What enabled this anonymization of the bearer, which became the defining moment for the wide-spread adoption of paper money in the West, was a change in the late 17th century in English law that allowed a debt to be transferred to another person without the debtor's sanction.<sup>3</sup> With this legal right, paper money becomes divorced from any particular historical individual or transaction and was able to enter into the circulation of goods as a commodity in its own right, hence able to be bought, sold and speculated upon as to its future value.

Thus the difference that paper money makes, and upon whose principle capitalism is founded, is the temporal delay inaugurated between the issue of a note and its subsequent redemption in specie. This delay makes it possible for banks and individuals to lend the "value" of a specified amount of gold (or silver, tobacco, beaver pelts, cattle, whatever it is that serves a society as real value) many times over, at least

---

<sup>2</sup> Julie Rivkin, *False Positions: The Representational Logics of Henry James's Fiction* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1996).

<sup>3</sup> W. Graham, *The One Pound Note in the History of Banking in Great Britain* (Edinburgh: James Thin, 1911), 5, cited in Brian Rotman, *Signifying Nothing: The Semiotics of Zero* (Hampshire: Macmillan, 1987), 48.

within keeping of the range of possibility of redeeming the note should its bearer so demand. But, as banks happily discovered, in the meantime, profiting on the interest gained by the loan, their capital increases so that, barring any unusual “run” on the bank for specie, redeeming any individual request was usually not a problem. Money really did seem to be made (almost) from nothing. With this discovery, which Fernand Braudel has shown was not confined to the West but occurred at various historical periods all over the world, what we know as modern banking was born.<sup>4</sup>

It is worth noting how, in the mid-nineteenth century, presumably during the period when Milly’s father and uncles were making their vast fortunes (possibly in currency speculation themselves<sup>5</sup>), America was engaged in a fierce political debate over the question of paper versus coined money. Paper money was viewed with hostility and suspicion by many precisely because of its ability to create wealth seemingly from nowhere, particularly when, as happened between 1862-79, during and after the American Civil War, paper money became no longer redeemable for specie but, as the “greenback,” was made to guarantee itself. Such self-guaranteeing paper money then becomes a kind of confidence game which lasts only as long as people continue to believe that there is some “real” value for which it can be traded in at the last moment. Such was the role played historically by the Bank of England throughout the past three centuries: as the “lender of last resort,” it became the final guarantor of all the private and public banks of England and its colonies, as well as of government notes. But the history of money is dotted with the boom and bust cycle of this confidence game, from the scandal of the famous Royale Banque of France under the direction of the Scot John Law and his Louisiana gold bubble in the 17th century, its contemporary equivalents in England and the Netherlands in the South Seas and Tulip Bubbles, to the wild speculation in railroads, land, gold and currency that went on in the United States during James’s early childhood. As the financial disasters of the various bubbles confirm, if paper money is not at least perceived to be grounded in some “real” value, it is constantly in danger of flying wildly out of control, in

---

<sup>4</sup> Fernand Braudel, *Capitalism and Material Life, 1400–1800*, trans. Miriam Kochan (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1967), 359.

<sup>5</sup> Recall Milly’s account of her “used-up relatives, parents, clever eager fair slim brothers—these the most loved—all engaged [. . .] in a high extravagance of speculation,” (*WD* 113).

the form of hyper-inflation. If, as was always all too tempting for governments under pressures from war, too much money was printed (financing in this way both the American and French revolutions), its very excess in the market place makes it worth less. Prices begin to rise dramatically, people's wages are unable to keep up, and depression takes over, shrinking the economy, increasing unemployment and, at worst, collapsing the entire currency system.

The important point to be observed in all of this is in the way that paper money, as Slavoj Žižek has pointed out, introduces a new dimension into the previously one-to-one exchange of the gold economy.<sup>6</sup> Paper money's anonymous "bearer" mediates the transaction between the buyer and the seller; the bearer of the bank note now is, as Brian Rotman explains, a "variable subject" by which he means "a subject in meta-lingual relation to any particular named and dated individual (the temporary owner of the note at a particular time) able to instantiate it."<sup>7</sup> As such, the bearer inhabits a paradoxical or contradictory space: it is simultaneously a sign within the system, and a marker for the system itself, comparable, Rotman argues, to the number zero, or to the empty set of set theory. This is because, once money has been divorced from any guarantee as to its intrinsic value in the real world, its ultimate guarantee comes to lie solely in the collective belief of the bearing subjects (a belief which can just as easily collapse, as in the case of hyper-inflation). Hence the bearer occupies a unique place: as the particular, contingent owner of the note, it inhabits the temporal system of exchange. But as final "guarantor" of the exchange, it steps out of the temporal series to become the principle of the exchange itself.

Just as Kate's redoubled gaze of Milly watching Densher resulted in the advent of a third viewing position the strange perception of seeing oneself from the point of view of the (non-reciprocal) other so, too, paper money creates an intermediary subject whose function is identical: it forces a change in the symmetrical or binary logic of exchange by introducing a position which is neither completely inside nor outside the system proper, but rather traces a structural paradox: the case of being at one and the same time both part of the differential formal structure (and play of positives and negatives of the oppositional economy), *and* its founding or guaranteeing principle itself. In each case, a fundamentally

---

<sup>6</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *Tarrying with the Negative: Kant, Hegel, and the Critique of Ideology* (Durham: Duke UP, 1993), 28–29.

<sup>7</sup> Rotman, 49.

non-reciprocal relation to an other is forged. With this creation of a third (reflexive) discursive space, the cycle of reciprocal inversion is broken to make way for new compositional patterns.

\*\*\*

If the action of the first part of the novel is largely dominated by oppositional pairs engaged in what might be considered an Hegelian life or death power struggle (for recognition, power etc.), Milly's addition of a third discursive space has the power to change these relations. The way this is formalized in the novel is through a peculiar propensity of the characters to exchange places with one another. But it is important to note the difference between this movement and the pattern of inversion. If inversion is defined by reciprocity, the endless see-sawing movement between two oppositional poles, exchanging places implies a relation to a third person or position whose ability is to reconfigure the relation of pairs. Previously the only positions available were in the reversal of oppositions. Now, however, relations are possible that can fundamentally change the configuration of the characters. Such a change is registered in the novel's metaphorical economy. In the first Volume, the dominant metaphors are military, of alliances and antagonisms, in the second Volume we enter into the more ambiguous realm of art.

In fact, this shift is already heralded in the famous scene at Matcham in the first Volume where Milly confronts the Bronzino painting whose likeness to herself is marked by all the guests. This scene gives us (and Kate) the first intimation about the state of Milly's health, and it is in contrast to the possibilities of Milly's famous social "success" among the London social elite that Milly's confrontation with her own mortality gains its sharpest relief. In the midst of the "brilliant life" (*WD* 131) of the party, Lord Mark detaches Milly from the rest and invites her to come and see a painting by Bronzino which is thought to resemble her. As is frequently the case in James, the invitation to view works of art becomes a pretext for a more intimate exchange between characters, which Milly understands as Lord Mark's asking her to "let a fellow who isn't a fool take care of you a little" (*WD* 137). This unspoken request – James observes how "it was as if the thing had practically been said by the moment they came in sight of the picture" – is perhaps Milly's first marriage proposal, and it comes over her as if "it was a sort of magnificent maximum, the pink dawn of an apotheosis coming so curiously soon" (*WD* 137). Overcome, Milly collapses into tears and, as



she realizes later, “it was Lord Mark who said nothing in particular, it was she herself who said all. She couldn’t help that it came; and the reason it came was that she found herself, for the first moment, looking at the mysterious portrait through tears”:

Perhaps it was her tears that made it just then so strange and fair as wonderful as he had said: the face of a young woman, all splendidly drawn, down to the hands, and splendidly dressed; a face almost livid in hue, yet handsome in sadness and crowned with a mass of hair, rolled back and high, that must, before fading with time, have had a family resemblance to her own. The lady in question, at all events, with her slightly Michael-angelesque squareness, her eyes of other days, her full lips, her long neck, her recorded jewels, her brocaded and wasted reds, was a very great personage only unaccompanied by a joy. And she was dead, dead, dead. (WD 137)

Milly’s experience of viewing the Bronzino has often been taken as a moment of specular identification comparable, for Lee Clark Mitchell, to the earliest scene in the novel when Kate appears to herself in the mirror.<sup>8</sup> Both Nicola Bradbury and Marcia Ian, for example, assert that this moment is dominated by the “fusion” of subject and object. Milly and the woman in the painting –assumed to be the portrait of 16th century Lucrezia Panciatichi – are found to merge with one another’s identities so that when, minutes later, Lord and Lady Aldershaw arrive with Kate and interrupt her viewing, “Lady Aldershaw [. . .] looked at Milly quite as if Milly had been the Bronzino and the Bronzino only Milly” (WD 139). For Ian, this “fusion” of two young women, one alive, one “dead, dead, dead,” creates a moment of self-transparency when Milly’s fears about herself and others’ beliefs about her (that she is doomed) coincide. Such a moment of “penetrated identity [. . .] moves Milly to tears of happiness” because “her deepest sense of herself [. . .] has been gently exposed and acknowledged [. . .] to be identical to and indistinguishable from the way others see her.”<sup>9</sup>

---

<sup>8</sup> Lee Clark Mitchell, “The Sustaining Duplicities of *The Wings of the Dove*,” *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 29.2 (1987): 187–214, p. 200.

<sup>9</sup> Nicola Bradbury, “‘Nothing that Is Not There and the Nothing that Is’: The Celebration of Absence in *The Wings of the Dove*,” *Henry James: Fiction as History*,

Yet I find it hard to see how she comes to this conclusion. Not only does Milly, minutes later, claim to fail to see the resemblance, but her tears, as I will elaborate, hardly seem the result of an excess of happiness. Milly does, nevertheless recognize something in the portrait: “Milly recognized her exactly in words that had nothing to do with her. ‘I shall never be better than this’” (*WD* 137). What does Milly mean with this statement? Lord Mark interprets her as comparing herself negatively to the woman in the painting. But as James tells us, “He hadn’t understood.” What Milly sees in the painting, as many critics have already observed, is an image of her mortality. What she recognizes, therefore, is not a mimetic likeness “I wish I could see the resemblance” (*WD* 138) she tells Lord Mark but, as Kenneth Reinhard argues, an allegorical one.<sup>10</sup> It is her own death she sees in the face of the “lady in question” who looks back at Milly from beyond the grave.

As her earlier discussion with Susan about whether she will have “everything” suggests, Milly’s life until now has been largely directed towards the future. Now, however, with the image of her death before her, she has an existential understanding of the essential equivalence of all moments in the face of inevitable annihilation: “I shall never be better than this.” Therefore, to interpret Milly’s statement as Ian does as the expression of penultimate happiness and self-transparency completely misunderstands the meaning of Milly’s apotheosis. An apotheosis is not only a supreme moment, or quintessential example of a thing. It is also the elevation to divine status whose concomitant implication is that one is already dead.<sup>11</sup> Milly’s “magnificent maximum,” occurring at the moment of her traumatic discovery of her temporality, is far from the expression of a moment of absolute happiness. Her tears express rather the horrifying realization of the absolute senselessness of comparing time with the end of time: “It was probably as good a moment as she should ever have with him. It was perhaps as good a moment as she should have with any one, or have in any connexion whatever” (*WD* 137). Instead of comparing moments and finding one superlative, Milly’s discovery that

---

ed. Ian F. A. Bell (London: Vision, 1984), 82–97. Marcia Ian, “The Elaboration of Privacy in *The Wings of the Dove*,” *ELH* 51.1 (1984): 107–36, p. 119

<sup>10</sup> Kenneth Reinhard, “The Jamesian Thing: *The Wings of the Dove* and the Ethics of Mourning,” *American Quarterly* 53 (1997): 113–46, p. 127.

<sup>11</sup> James makes this point even more explicitly in *The Ambassadors* when, using the same metaphor, he has Strether comment how “after a real apotheosis [. . .] there’s nothing but heaven.” Henry James, *The Ambassadors*, ed. S. P. Rosenbaum (New York: Norton, 1964), 265.

the meaning of life is death turns all temporal hierarchies into bitter irony, since everyone, no matter how long they live, will eventually die. Death equalizes everyone and everything, making a mockery of the dead woman's "full lips, her long neck, her recorded jewels, her brocaded and wasted reds."

Coming as it does on the heels of Lord Mark's proposal, Milly's traumatic encounter with her *memento mori* helps to cement the connection she already dimly feels between love and death. Accepting Lord Mark would seem to amount to nothing less than her surrender to the people with the "kind eyes" whose pity shines out ghoulishly as a decapitated head on a pike bobbing before the window. Lord Mark's proposal and, with it, the intimation of death has come as an "apotheosis" much too soon.

The next day Milly and Kate go to see the doctor, Sir Luke Strett, who immediately impresses Milly with his interest which she takes as a sign that there must be something seriously wrong with her. His interest, she feels, goes beyond a normal patient/doctor relation; it makes her feel she has mysteriously moved him to compassion, and he is trying to "let her down" gently, much in the way women do "when they deprecated the addresses of gentlemen they couldn't more intimately go on with" (*WD* 154). He seemed to be "'up to' [. . .] some disguised intention of standing by her as a friend" (*WD* 154). She reports back to Kate, almost gaily, "He knows all about me, and I like it. I don't hate it a bit" (*WD* 143). On her second visit to the doctor, Milly is again struck by the doctor's knowledge: "It was exactly as if, in the forty-eight hours that had passed, her acquaintance with him had somehow increased and his own knowledge in particular had received some mysterious additions" (*WD* 145). Sir Luke's knowledge is derived, however, from no crass action of "finding out" about her: "there was no source of information to his hand, and he had really needed none: he had found out simply by his genius – and found out, she meant, literally everything" (*WD* 145). This, Milly realizes, "was truly what she had come for, and that for the time at least it would give her something firm to stand on" (*WD* 146).

But although Milly has approached the doctor in order to gain knowledge about her condition, she finds afterwards that he "had beautifully got out of it" (*WD* 154). He refuses to name what is wrong with her, contenting himself with merely advising Milly that she should "take the trouble" to live: "What indeed she was really confronted with was the consciousness that he hadn't after all pronounced her anything" (*WD* 154). The effect of her visit to the doctor is to turn the tables on

Milly. She had come wanting something “firm” to stand on; she leaves instead with a heightened sense of the “grey immensity” of life, of the loss of life’s foundations. As she walks back through Regent’s Park, Milly finds that “Grey immensity had somehow of a sudden become her element” (*WD* 152). Arriving with her demand for the doctor to tell her what is wrong with her, Milly leaves with the new question of what it is to “live”: “grey immensity was what her distinguished friend had, for the moment, furnished her world with and the question of ‘living,’ as he put it to her, living by option, by volition, inevitably took on for its immediate face” (*WD* 152). At the same time that this question gives Milly a new and invigorating sense of a “great adventure, a big dim experiment or struggle in which she might more responsibly than ever take a hand,” she is also aware of the loss of her old way of life: “the beauty of the bloom had gone from the small old sense of safety that was distinct: she had left it behind her there forever” (*WD* 152). In its place is the liberating, yet terrifying, open question of how to live without any of the old, usual supports, divested of any familial or social relations. Sir Luke’s advice opens Milly up to an understanding of her existential aloneness that she recognizes as putting her in touch with humanity at large:

No one in the world could have sufficiently entered into her state; no tie would have been close enough to enable a companion to walk beside her without some disparity. She literally felt, in this first flush, that her only company must be the human race at large, present all round her, but inspiringly impersonal. (*WD* 152)

The meeting with Sir Luke had been “directly divesting, denuding, exposing” and this has forced Milly once again to confront the idea of her death. The difference between this and her apotheosis at Matcham, however, is that this time Sir Luke has supplied her with “some queer defensive weapon” (*WD* 152). What is this weapon? Although Milly (like most critics) understands the doctor as referring to the question of volition, of will, Sir Luke’s formula that “she could live if she would” can equally be read as a question about desire, “would” understood in its archaic meaning of to want.<sup>12</sup> In effect, Sir Luke intimates to Milly that,

---

<sup>12</sup> Sir Luke Strett’s advice that she could live if she would is therefore analogous to the Lacanian analyst’s question to the hysteric “*Che vuoi?*,” (What do you want?).

in order to survive her confrontation with death, she must find something or someone to love, thereby transforming her traumatic “apotheosis” into the open question whose Freudian overtones are unmistakable: what, as a woman, does she want?

The mystery surrounding Milly’s illness now begins to clear once we realize that it is precisely in order to be able to keep living in the face of the knowledge of death that Milly becomes “ill.” Rather than “surrender” to Lord Mark and her apotheosis, Milly vows to fight, and the way she does this is by interposing something between herself and her knowledge of her mortality. This “queer defensive weapon” is quite simply, as Strett well knows, the question of her desire. How does desire ward off death? As Scheherazade of the Arabian Nights discovered long ago, desire defers death by substituting dissatisfaction in its place. Desire rearranges a deadlock into a temporal series whose primary characteristic is persistent failure. But this failure is precisely what keeps desire (and the subject) alive: desire’s endless dissatisfactions maintain the fantasy that complete satisfaction (which is of course nothing other than death) will eventually be attained, but just not yet. By becoming ill or, as we might as well now say, becoming “hysterical” (a desiring subject), Milly embarks on the tortuous pathways of desire that, for as long as it remains dissatisfied, defends her against her “apotheosis.”

The problem remains, however, that Milly no more knows the answer to Sir Luke’s question of her desire than did any of Freud’s patients. What does she do then? Like any good hysteric, she turns to another woman to learn the truth about her desire. In a stroke of inspiration, Milly decides to copy someone who really does seem to know what she wants, Kate Croy, the “handsome girl” with the enviable “talent for life.” In this, Milly is simply taking her own advice to herself at the National Gallery when she muses how she ought to have been a lady-copyist. Kate will show her what and how a woman desires. But first she must find out what it is that Kate wants.

A word of caution here. It is important not to mistake the three-way relation between our main characters for René Girard’s triangular structure of desire in his well-known study *Deceit, Desire and the Novel*.<sup>13</sup> Briefly, Girard observes how the modern condition is characterized by a fundamental lack of foundation. But instead of looking

---

<sup>13</sup> René Girard, *Desire, Deceit and the Novel: Self and Other in Literary Structure*, trans. Yvonne Freccero (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1965).

“freedom in the face,” people are horrified by the loss of guarantee previously provided by God and fall back on “substitute gods” in compensation. They turn to each other and gain self-definition through imitating what they perceive as another’s desire. All desire is thus mimetic for Girard, filtered through a mediator who is the only one to desire spontaneously. Therefore, if we were to translate James’s novel into Girardian terms, Kate should play the role of mediator for Milly: Milly will copy Kate’s desire because she doesn’t know what she wants for herself. This mimetic dimension is certainly at play in the novel but it is important to note how this pattern does not tell the whole story. Although, on one level, Milly does identify mimetically with Kate, taking Densher as her object, it is crucial to remember, as the scene in the National Gallery makes clear, that Milly also simultaneously identifies with Densher. The structure is therefore re-doubled just at the point where the two women’s looks cross one another, overlaying the dual exchange of looks with a third viewing position that is structurally in excess of both of them.

In contrast, Girardian triangular desire simply replicates the pattern of antagonism that we saw operating at the beginning of the novel. In the Girardian triangle, the third position, the object, is nothing more than a simple token which shuttles between rivaling subjects, intersecting the competing desires. As such, it has no power of reconfiguring the relation between the two subjects. Although various permutations of this structure are possible, which Girard traces in terms of the mediator’s increasing proximity to the subject, the basic pattern remains the same one of imaginary rivalry that we saw dominating the social world of James’s novel before Milly’s arrival on the scene. In other words, and counter-intuitively, the Girardian triangle remains a duality of reflective antagonisms as the desiring subject competes furiously with its mimetic double for an essentially irrelevant and replaceable object. James on the other hand, introduces something completely different into the equation.

What is this difference? The difference is that, whereas the Girardian subject imitates the other by copying its desire, James’s subject, Milly, does not know what the other (Kate) wants. Until her traumatic illumination by Lord Mark, Milly remains to some extent ignorant of the truth of Kate’s desire. And it is this question, this lack of knowledge as to what Kate wants (which is also the question of what her, Milly’s, own value is for Kate, that is, what it is that Kate wants from Milly) that can be said to sustain Milly’s life. Once her question has been answered, once she discovers the truth about Kate’s relationship with

Densher, her entire fantasmatic structure dissolves. What keeps her alive, in other words, is not Densher's love, as the sentimental reading of the novel would have it. It seems clear that on this score Densher's overtures towards Milly were less than convincing, and it would take a character with considerably less of the "wisdom of the serpent" (*WD* 141) not to see through the impression he makes which Kate describes as "a clever cousin calling on a cousin afflicted, and bored for his pains" (*WD* 280). What keeps Milly alive, rather, is the open question of Kate's desire which, so long as it remains unanswered, maintains Milly on the path of desire, that is, on the path toward answering Sir Luke's question of what it is that she, as a woman, wants.

Another way of understanding this is to put it into linguistic terms: what sustains Milly is her constant failure to find a name that would completely describe her. This failure transforms her experience of something that is permanently unrepresentable, namely, her essential identity in death, into the much more manageable, because temporally displaced, idea of the unnameable whose crucial difference lies in the promise this formulation holds out that there might be a word which could adequate to her, if one could only find the right name. It implies, in other words, a subtle shift from the certain, metaphysical impossibility of representing something that lies beyond the limits of our representational capacities to the deferred possibility implied by reducing the problem to a linguistic question of naming.

How does this transformation of the unrepresentable into the unnameable occur? The next time Milly sees Kate after her visit to the doctor and the crisis in Regent's Park, she once again discovers that strange otherness that comes from seeing her friend as if through Densher's eyes: "Just so was how she looked to him, and just so was how Milly was held by her held as by the strange sense of seeing through that distant person's eyes" (*WD* 157). The meaning of Kate's look comes to Milly suddenly in a flash: "it struck our young woman as absurd to say that a girl's looking so to a man could possibly be without connexions; and the second [effect] was that by the time Kate had got into the room Milly was in mental possession of the main connexion it must have for herself" (*WD* 158). Identifying with Densher, Milly discovers in a flash who it is that Kate desires. The immediate result of this knowledge is to hold back from Kate the details of her visit to the doctor: "'You mean you've been absurd?' 'Absurd.' It was a simple word to say, but the consequence of it, for our young woman, was that she felt it, as soon as spoken, to have done something for her safety" (*WD* 158).

Two points need to be made at this juncture. The first is that, although at this moment Milly intuits the meaning of Kate's look as signifying her desire for Densher, she spends the rest of the novel trying to test this, shall we say, unconscious, knowledge against what Kate and everyone else tell her. The difference can be described as that between knowledge and belief. Although she "knows" from this point on that Kate and Densher are lovers (a knowledge upon which she constructs her own mimetic desire for Densher), Milly believes Kate's denials insofar as they give her the freedom to embark upon her own path of unsatisfied desire in her romance with Densher. Secondly, this flash of insight provides her with an understanding of how desire organizes itself around a prohibition. Comprehending, finally, the meaning of their joint refusal to mention Densher's name to each other, Milly intuits how prohibition has the power to transform impossibility into deferred possibility. Applying this discovery to herself, Milly immediately refuses anyone any knowledge about her own condition, forbidding anyone as much as to mention the possibility of her being ill. In doing so, Milly creates the conditions to uphold the fantasy that there really is a word which would adequately describe her that language really can say everything if one could only find the right name. It is, as Kate astutely gleans, the "conspiracy of silence" itself, then, which subsequently sustains Milly's life:

[Kate] grasped with her keen intelligence the logic of their common duplicity, [. . .] easily saw that for the girl to be explicit was to betray divinations, gratitudes, glimpses of the felt contrast between her fortune and her fear [. . .]. That was it, Kate wonderingly saw: to recognise was to bring down the avalanche the avalanche Milly lived so in watch for and that might be started by the lightest of breaths. (*WD* 262-63)

So whatever else one might want to charge Kate with, she at least must be credited with showing Milly a way out of the fatal deadlock of her apotheosis, and of presenting an alternative approach to the question of the limits of representation. For Kate shows Milly how to rearrange a representational impossibility into the productive, because temporal, series that is desire. Milly's strict prohibition forbidding anyone to refer to her "illness" must be understood, then, as having no other function than to carve out a space in which she can try on the different names she



manages to draw out of everyone around her (except of course Sir Luke who responds, proto-analytically, to her demands merely with the “crystal-clean [. . .] empty cup of attention” (*WD* 142)). But because none of the names will ever be adequate for the hysterical subject whose dissatisfaction is constitutive, because there is always something more which escapes every one of the attempts to name her, Milly avoids becoming trapped by them, at least for as long as something remains outside the representational system that cannot be said. Until that moment, when Lord Mark’s avowal effectively closes the circuit of representation and fixes her as an object, what does Milly do in her short life? She does nothing but generate names from everyone around her in response to her constant demand, “Why do you say such things to me?” (*WD* 171) who am I? What do you take me for?

The constant production of new names sustains not only Milly’s life, but in the process contributes to increasing the possibilities for language’s signification. For the names Milly receives from her friends are not medical diagnoses but metaphors – the dove, the princess – or the antomasia, the ‘American girl.’ But these tropes strike me as strange in comparison to the images with which James saturates the rest of the novel’s prose. Compare, for example, how effortlessly James inserts his metaphor of embroidery into the scene at Matcham where Milly gets a first good look at the way Aunt Maud “works” everyone into her system: “[Lord Mark] seemed slowly to pass and repass and conveniently to linger before them; he was personally the note of the blue like a suspended skein of silk within reach of the broiderer’s hand. Aunt Maud’s free-moving shuttle took a length of him at rhythmic intervals; and one of the accessory truths that flickered across to Milly was that he ever so consentingly knew he was being worked in” (*WD* 133). In contrast, the figures surrounding Milly seem almost too forced and contrived. Why does James make Milly’s metaphors so anomalous? The answer can only be because these are not simply metaphors but are themselves the forms of Milly’s symptoms; these names are the peculiar products of her perpetually failed attempt to put herself wholly into language. As such, they demand attention and interpretation, much in the way the hysteric’s symptom presents itself for decoding to hear its hidden message about desire. For as we know, the hysterical symptom is the attempt to communicate an idea that has been unable to gain representation through the usual channels due to repression. The conversion symptom therefore makes use of what it has to hand, namely, fragments, parts of the body which can be mobilized to represent the

content of the repressed idea without its being noticed by the censoring agency. Symptoms are, thus, themselves forms of metaphor, as Gilbert Chaitin notes, insofar as they join previously unconnected ideas together to form a meaningful unit.<sup>14</sup> Like Milly's metaphors, they, too, are strange and disruptive, disturbing the regular functioning of the body, sticking out and requiring further interpretation.

Thus one understands the proliferating metaphors surrounding Milly as the products of her attempt to find names to substitute for the unspeakable, names which, while they help to plug the gap left by the unrepresentable, nevertheless always fall short of filling it in. But this falling short is the very gap, it turns out, that sustains Milly, it is what keeps her alive.

Shortly afterwards Milly shifts her entourage to Venice and sets up her "court" in the Palazzo Leporelli. Early twentieth-century readers would have been alerted to the specifically aesthetic meaning of Milly's choice of Venice as the place she will stage her hysterical fantasy. Following the mid-century publication of Ruskin's influential account of the Byzantine and Gothic architecture in *The Stones of Venice*, Venice had by the late nineteenth century become a privileged signifier for art and for aestheticism generally. It was *The Stones of Venice* that Walter Pater (one of Susan Stringham's favorite authors) implicitly revised in his history of *The Renaissance*; it was to Venice that Whistler retreated after his disastrous libel case against Ruskin. Venice, by the time of James's novel, had become symbolic of the central tenets of aestheticism whose association of excessive beauty with fatal decay found its penultimate expression in this city, "most beautiful of tombs."<sup>15</sup> By choosing Venice, Milly cannot fail to have had some of this in mind. What does Milly do there? In keeping with the pervasive aestheticism of the place, she holds a party which she stages, or at least so Susan imagines, as a living Veronese painting. In fact, two paintings by Paolo Caliari detto Veronese are usually nominated as the ones James had in mind when Susan whimsically explains the composition to Densher: "it's a Veronese painting, as near as can be with me as the inevitable dwarf, the small blackamoor, put into a corner of the foreground for effect" (*WD* 297), and Densher, "the grand young man who surpasses the others and holds up his head and the winecup" (*WD* 298). The first painting,

---

<sup>14</sup> Gilbert Chaitin, *Rhetoric and Culture in Lacan* (Cambridge: CUP, 1996), 209.

<sup>15</sup> Henry James, "The Grand Canal" (1892), *Italian Hours* (New York: Grove P, n.d.), 32.

identified by Laurence B. Holland,<sup>16</sup> still hangs in the Venice Academy where James first saw it during his visit to Venice in 1870.<sup>17</sup> It is called “The Supper in the House of Levi” and it depicts an episode from the Book of Luke where Christ dines with his disciple Matthew, along with a group of publicans and sinners. The contrast in this painting between a serene, pensive Christ quietly radiating from the center of the painting, and the riotous publicans around him is frequently taken to reflect back on the image of a saintly Milly surrounded by ‘sinners.’ The second painting is “The Marriage Feast at Cana” hanging in the Louvre in Paris. In this painting, Christ again attends a banquet, this time a wedding feast where the host ran out of wine. This episode from John (11, 1-11) is Christ’s first miracle when he changes the water into wine. As Holland notes, this event prefigures the later Christian sacrament where, during the last supper, Christ invites his disciples to eat of his body and drink of his blood. It is this painting, with its sacramental implications, that lends itself particularly well to the Christian allegorical reading of Milly’s “sacrifice”: forgiving her false friends, Milly, like Christ, willingly sacrifices herself and in the process redeems Densher’s moral consciousness, resulting in a wholesale transformation of their social world, founded this time on love rather than exchange. Both paintings thus lend credence to the influential “moral” reading of the novel, identifying Milly with Christ who, lustrously radiating out from the center of the paintings, and surrounded by “enemies” masquerading as friends, is cruelly betrayed and sacrificed.<sup>18</sup>

To my mind there is no question that in this novel James was as concerned as ever with exploring moral and ethical questions. The problem with the allegorical Christian/moral reading, however, is that in pitting Kate and Milly against one another in a moral drama of betrayal and redemption, it fails to take account of the insistent triangulation that I have been arguing plays such an important role in this novel. The allegorical reading remains bound up in the oppositional paradigm that characterized the early part of the novel, whose dominating trope, as we saw, was reciprocity. It neglects to account for the new discursive space opened up by Milly’s arrival on the scene. This was the space I identified as opening up the possibility of desire. And it is only from this

---

<sup>16</sup> Laurence B. Holland, *The Expense of Vision* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1964).

<sup>17</sup> Leon Edel, *Henry James: The Untried Years, 1843–1870* (London: Hart-Davis, 1953), 306.

<sup>18</sup> F. O. Matthiessen, *Henry James: The Major Phase* (London: OUP, 1944).

perspective, from the place of desire, I assert, that we can begin to understand the fully ethical dimension of *The Wings of the Dove*.

As Milly's retreat toward the aesthetic realm implies, the importance of the role of art is crucial here, as Holland has observed. But, because of his insistence on reading the novel as a tragedy, Holland misses a very important point: the aesthetic works here in the service of Milly's desire; the aesthetic becomes one of the very last barriers that she erects against the unrepresentable. By putting herself "into" a Veronese painting, Milly enlists the aesthetic as the means for staging her commitment to desire, which is nothing other than her commitment to maintaining the gap between unconscious knowledge and belief or, to put it slightly differently, to keeping the question of what it is that Kate (woman) really wants unanswered.

So let us, in closing, take a deeper look at this scene. By this point in the novel, Milly's direct consciousness has long been lost to the reader and the scene is related from Densher's point of view, through whose eyes we see the entire Venetian episode. Densher, accordingly, sees Milly through his habitual metaphorical lens as the American girl, but he notices how Milly seems this night to be "acquitting herself [. . .] as hostess [. . .] under some supreme idea, an inspiration which was half her nerves and half an inevitable harmony" (*WD* 302). Densher recognizes that Milly's performance this night is put on almost entirely for the benefit of Sir Luke Strett who has arrived in Venice for his vacation. It was for Sir Luke that she finally sheds her little black dress and appears "for the first time in white" (*WD* 301):

Milly came down after dinner, half a dozen friends [. . .] having by that time arrived; and with this call on her attention, the further call of her musicians ushered by Eugenio, but personally and separately welcomed, and the supreme opportunity offered in the arrival of the great doctor, who came last of all, he felt her diffuse in wide warm waves the spell of a general, a beatific mildness. There was a deeper depth of it, doubtless, for some than for others; what he in particular knew of it was that he seemed to stand in it up to his neck. He moved about in it and it made no splash; he floated, he noiselessly swam about in it, and they were all together, for that matter, like fishes in a crystal pool. (*WD* 301)

It is Kate, however, who draws Densher out of his reverie and points his particular attention to the pearl be-jewelled Milly. For once, Milly strikes him as outshining Kate. Her sudden, unexpected gloss diminishes the “handsome girl” who Densher finds suddenly “wanting in lustre” (*WD* 303); comparing the two women, Densher sees Milly as surprisingly supplanting Kate, who seems to have mysteriously changed places with her, as if “she might fairly have been dressed tonight in the little black frock, superficially invisible, that Milly had laid aside” (*WD* 303). But Milly’s valiant effort to “deceive” the doctor as to the state of her health – her sudden radiance – is unmasked by Kate who sees through the performance, telling Densher “she isn’t better. She’s worse.” Milly’s effort, in other words, her “supreme idea,” derives from her losing battle with her apotheosis. Her improvisation on a theme by Veronese represents her last-ditch effort to hold death at bay.

The question is, in what sense can the aesthetic be enlisted for Milly’s cause? James’s (or Milly’s) choice of Veronese gives us a clue. The first of the Veronese paintings Holland identifies, “The Supper in the House of Levi,” is also known as the Last Supper. Both paintings therefore carry an implied reference to Christ’s final meal with his disciples, one of whom, Judas, has of course betrayed him for silver, resulting in Christ’s sacrifice on the Cross (and the identification of Kate with Judas is now a commonplace in *The Wings of the Dove* criticism<sup>19</sup>). Christ’s enjoining of his followers in the Last Supper to partake of his body is the precursor to the later Christian Eucharist, symbolic of Christ’s continuing presence on earth following his sacrificial death. In this ritual, the transubstantiation of the bread and wine into Christ’s flesh and blood is taken as the guarantee of the miracle through which Christ’s death on the cross has the effect of “killing” death, by promising an afterlife together with him and God in heaven.

But in *Totem and Taboo*, Freud famously offers another reading of the Christian myth.<sup>20</sup> Freud sees the Christian Eucharist as a version of the ancient totemic sacrificial meal, developed in reaction to what he hypothesizes was the founding act of the earliest civilization, the killing of the primal father. The totemic meal symbolizes a repetition of that earliest crime, but with a difference. By repeating, in the cannibalistic

---

<sup>19</sup> See for example Peter Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama, and the Mode of Excess* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1976), 184.

<sup>20</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Totem and Taboo*, trans. and ed. James Strachey, intro. Peter Gay (New York: Norton 1989). Subsequent citations as *TT*.

totemic meal, the death of the primal father, the community of brothers celebrate the rule of law that emerged after the father's death. How did the rule of law take over? In the Freudian myth the brothers kill the father in the expectation of having access to the women of the tribe themselves. But instead, after his death, they discover that what had been previously prevented by the father their enjoyment of the women was now impossible; each of the brothers represented an equal match for the others so that, failing an utterly destructive struggle of all against all, they were obliged to make all of the women of their tribe off limits, with the result that the first law, the law against incest was instituted. Freud hypothesizes that the earliest societies were thus founded upon the collective guilt following the crime against the father. In the sacrificial meal, this guilt is atoned for by the killing of one of their own, according to the ancient rule of "talion." Freud notes how the totemic meal therefore symbolizes both a repetition of the guilty deed, at the same time as it represents a guarantee among the brothers that such a deed will never be repeated toward any of them. The totemic sacrifice is thus an ambivalent or contradictory event. Why should the crime be repeated in the sacrifice? Freud claims that its supplementary function is to remind the father that he is dead, that is, to guarantee that the rule of the brothers has supplanted him. This is also one of the central meanings that Freud discovers in the Christian sacrifice. The Christian sacrifice is the staging of the installation of a son in the Father's place. As Freud puts it, a "son-religion displaced the father-religion" (*TT* 191); "The Christian communion [. . .] is essentially a fresh elimination of the father, a repetition of the guilty deed" (*TT* 192).

In Freud's interpretation, then, the Christian sacrifice portrays the symbolic staging of the ascension of the rule of law that puts one of the brothers into the place where the Father used to be. The Christian sacrifice replaces the primal "Father of enjoyment" with his representative, the symbolic Father, the one whose sacrificial death guarantees that the primal Father will remain dead, replaced by the law of prohibition. Christ thus figures as an ambiguous sign: his sacrifice points to the Father's absence, to the founding negation, the original crime, that constituted the community of brothers. But because this negation cannot be represented, because lack is constitutively unrepresentable, it can only take positive form in the shape of a signifier whose presence paradoxically signifies absence. This signifier, Christ, has the function of marking within the community of brothers the place of the absent Father whose death founded that community.

Readers familiar with Lacan will readily recognize the “paternal metaphor” in this description which denominates the way the *Nom du Père* (the No/Name of the Father) comes to substitute for the missing signifier for woman’s desire (the desire of the mOther).<sup>21</sup> What is striking is the way a structure very similar to this substitution is played out in the James novel. Where the scene in the National Gallery gave us a geometrical space that exceeded the play of identifications between Kate, Milly and Densher, opening up the static circle of reciprocity into the triangle of desire, the Christian sacrificial narrative depicts the way this excessive or impossible space is filled out, given body, in the shape of a signifier whose sole function, it turns out, is to erect a barrier against that space. If, in the National Gallery scene, a space was opened up which, we might as well say, heralded the lack of a signifier for Kate’s (woman’s) desire insofar as it opens up for Milly the riddling question as to what it is that Kate wants from her, and subsequently sending her off on her life-prolonging desiring path in search of its answer, the Christian sacrifice demonstrates how one signifier, Christ, can take on the burden of marking the place where that missing signifier should be. But, as Freud emphasizes, this place-marking is also, simultaneously, the guarantee that the missing signifier will never be filled in; the Christian sacrifice is also the guarantee against the return of the primal Father. Marking his absent place, the Christ signifier also functions to remind the Father that he is dead.

So when Milly stages her party as an imitation of a Veronese painting, and puts herself into Christ’s place as the sacrificial object, we can say that, in so doing, she assumes the burden of Christ’s substituting principle. Imitating Christ, Milly puts herself into the space where the absent signifier for Kate’s desire should be, not in order to fill it (that is, to answer it definitively), but to guarantee that it will never be filled in completely. Assuming the Christ function, Milly commits herself to defending the empty space of the question of woman’s (Kate’s) desire. The question remains how this is different from Milly’s previous generation of metaphoric symptoms? This time, faced with her losing battle against her apotheosis, Milly cuts right to the heart of the structure and installs herself as the very principle of substitution itself. What is this

---

<sup>21</sup> See Lacan’s explication of the “paternal metaphor” in *Écrits*, the substitutive procedure where the Name of the Father stands in for the unrepresentable “desire of the mOther.” Jacques Lacan, *Écrits: A Selection*, trans. Bruce Fink in collaboration with Héloïse Fink and Russell Grigg (New York: Norton, 2002), 190.

principle? Freud would call it primary repression, *Ur-Verdrängung*, the principle of the founding negation that originally divided the subject. If, previously, Milly generated metonymies of metaphoric names as a defensive strategy of deferral against the unrepresentable, now she throws herself into the breach of language itself in a final attempt to hold open the question of woman's desire. In her imitation of Christ, Milly assumes the signifier that marks the place of the founding negation, which is nothing other than the bar of metaphor in its other register, the principle of substitution, the originary crime that inaugurated the differential system of deferral that is (metonymic) desire.<sup>22</sup>

We can say that Milly's retreat toward the aesthetic in the final months of her life, far from representing a retreat into a delusory, self-absorbed monism, engages the most vital form of resistance to the threat of her apotheosis that she knows. Milly's "aesthetic" solution is nothing but her cleaving to representation's enabling principle, the limit that prevents us from ever reaching total satisfaction. Moreover, this is why Lord Mark's avowal of Kate's and Densher's engagement was so damaging to Milly. Lord Mark didn't tell Milly anything she didn't already "know," but he collapsed the distance between her knowledge and her belief, the crucial distance that enabled her until that moment to uphold the fantasy that satisfaction really could be reached. Lord Mark's avowal cuts through the sustaining barrier that prevented Milly from learning the truth of her value for Kate; his avowal, in effect, halts the generation of new names by confirming her identity as one thing, as an object. Hence it is this, rather than any romantic disappointment with Densher, or a belated discovery of the evil in the world, that results in Milly's decline: Milly's collapse comes about from having the last barrier between her and the truth of Kate's desire removed. This cuts her off from the chain linking her to Kate and, as Paul Verhaeghe would say,

---

<sup>22</sup> It is in this sense that the hysteric "wants to be the phallus," as Colette Soler asserts. But we must be careful not to make the mistake of thinking this means that the hysteric wants to assume the "fullness" of the phallus in the face of the lack of guarantees presented by the man's failure. The phallus, in Lacan, is the signifier that signifies lack. Thus the hysteric's aim is not to fill in the gap posed by the missing phallus, but to ensure that the gap remains open. By "becoming" the phallus, the hysteric guarantees that the field of representation remains incomplete, that is, that the question of woman's desire will never be satisfactorily answered. See Colette Soler, "Hysteria and Obsession," *Reading Seminars I and II: Lacan's Return to Freud*, ed. Richard Feldstein, Bruce Fink, and Maire Janus (Albany: SUNY P, 1996), 248–82.



to a possible sexual identity.<sup>23</sup> Now, instead of generating new and sustaining failures linguistic symptoms, Milly suddenly finds herself trapped within the very language that had originally given her the power to resist her apotheosis. With the collapse of the barrier between her and the truth of Kate's desire, language clangs shut on her, like the door of a birdcage, trapping and reifying her.

What happens next? Milly famously "turn[s] her face to the wall" and dies. How do we interpret this act? The obvious, sentimental, answer (Densher's) is of course to say that once Milly discovers the truth of Kate and Densher's relationship, she loses her will to live. Still utterly failing to comprehend what has happened, Densher tells Kate "One can see now that she was living by will" (*WD* 357). What Densher fails to realize is that it is Milly's death, rather, that represents her final act of will. Turning her face to the wall, Milly deliberately enacts the sacrifice whose function, as Freud tells us, is nothing other than to ensure that the limit remains untransgressed. Dying, Milly puts herself into the breach of language, not to complete the field of representation, but to guarantee that representation remains "not-whole." Milly's sacrifice is thus far from being the final collapse of a disappointed woman; by sacrificing herself, Milly acts in accordance with her desire.

It might seem paradoxical to fight death, as Milly does, with death. For was not her entire desiring structure inaugurated against the threat of death represented by her apotheosis? But a willing death, it seems for James, is quite different from the death that lies in wait for Milly in the collapse of all oppositions, the death by totality. By willing death, in this way, Milly in effect dies in order to "keep dreaming," to maintain the fantasy that has sustained her as a desiring subject, and which, in preserving an area of indeterminacy, prevents her from becoming wholly trapped by language. Milly's death thus recalls, albeit inversely, the dream Freud recounts of the father whose child cries out that he is burning. In the Freudian dream, the father wakes up, in order to continue dreaming, that is, in order to avoid the "real" of his dream (where the child's burning reproaches him, as Lacan suggests, for the "sins of the father"). Milly, in reverse, dies to avoid waking up; she dies in order to maintain the fantasy, whose promise of complete satisfaction is, paradoxically, the guarantee against completing the field of

---

<sup>23</sup> Paul Verhaeghe, *Does The Woman Exist? From Freud's Hysteric to Lacan's Feminine*, trans. Mark du Ry (London: Rebus, 1997, rev. ed. 1999).

representation. Milly's death is thus, in a very precise sense, a desiring death, a death died in accordance with desire.

As it turns out, Milly's death does indeed have the effect that she willed. For in addition to persuading a skeptical Lord Mark during those brief moments before the crisis in Venice that there is nothing between Kate and Densher, Milly's final act ultimately keeps open the question of Kate's desire. By the end of the novel, as we know, Kate's and Densher's relationship has so far deteriorated that, as Kate departs from Densher's lodgings, we are left, famously, with the question of what Kate is going to do. From this perspective, Milly's act has been a resounding success: we no longer know what it is that Kate wants.

## **BIBLIOGRAPHY**

BRADBURY, Nicola. "‘Nothing that Is Not There and the Nothing that Is’: The Celebration of Absence in *The Wings of the Dove*." *Henry James: Fiction as History*. Ed. Ian F. A. Bell. London: Vision, 1984, 82–97.

BROOKS, Peter. *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama, and the Mode of Excess*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1976.

BRAUDEL, Fernand. *Capitalism and Material Life, 1400–1800*. Trans. Miriam Kochan. London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1967.

CHAITIN, Gilbert. *Rhetoric and Culture in Lacan*. Cambridge: CUP, 1996.

EDEL, Leon. *Henry James: The Untried Years, 1843–1870*. London: Hart-Davis, 1953.

FREUD, Sigmund. *Totem and Taboo*. Trans. and ed. James Strachey. Intro. Peter Gay. New York: Norton 1989.

GIRARD, René. *Desire, Deceit and the Novel: Self and Other in Literary Structure*. Trans. Yvonne Freccero. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1965.

HOLLAND, Laurence, B. *The Expense of Vision*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1964.

IAN, Marcia. "The Elaboration of Privacy in *The Wings of the Dove*." *ELH* 51.1 (1984): 107–36.

JAMES, Henry. *The Ambassadors*. Ed. S. P. Rosenbaum (New York: Norton, 1964).

JAMES, Henry. "The Grand Canal" (1892). In *Italian Hours*. New York: Grove P, n.d.

JAMES, Henry. *The Wings of the Dove*. Ed. J. Donald Crowley and Richard A. Hocks. New York: Norton, 1978.

LACAN, Jacques. *Écrits: A Selection*. Trans. Bruce Fink in collaboration with Héloïse Fink and Russell Grigg. New York: Norton, 2002.

MATTHIESSEN, F. O. *Henry James: The Major Phase*. London: OUP, 1944.

MITCHELL, Lee Clark. "The Sustaining Duplicities of *The Wings of the Dove*." *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 29.2 (1987): 187–214.

REINHARD, Kenneth. "The Jamesian Thing: *The Wings of the Dove* and the Ethics of Mourning." *American Quarterly* 53 (1997): 113–46.

RIVKIN, Julie. *False Positions: The Representational Logics of Henry James's Fiction*. Stanford: Stanford UP, 1996.

ROTMAN, Brian. *Signifying Nothing: The Semiotics of Zero*. Hampshire: Macmillan, 1987.

SOLER, Colette. "Hysteria and Obsession." *Reading Seminars I and II: Lacan's Return to Freud*. Ed. Richard Feldstein, Bruce Fink, and Maire Janus. Albany: SUNY P, 1996, 248–82.

VERHAEGHE, Paul. *Does The Woman Exist? From Freud's Hysteric to Lacan's Feminine*. Trans. Mark du Ry. London: Rebus, 1997, rev. ed. 1999.

ŽIŽEK, Slavoj. *Tarrying with the Negative: Kant, Hegel, and the Critique of Ideology*. Durham: Duke UP, 1993.

