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## THE ELABORATION OF PRIVACY IN *THE WINGS OF THE DOVE*

BY MARCIA IAN

As a configuration of more or less “lucid reflectors” helping to illuminate a central, radiant text, critical essays about Henry James’s *The Wings of the Dove* resemble a sketch the author once drew for the editors of *Harper’s Weekly*. To describe his plan for *The Awkard Age*, James

drew on a sheet of paper . . . the neat figure of a circle consisting of a number of small rounds disposed at equal distance about a central object. The central object was my situation, my subject in itself, to which the thing would owe its title, and the small rounds represented so many distinct lamps, as I liked to call them, the function of each of which would be to light with all due intensity one of its aspects. I had divided it, did n’t they see? into aspects.<sup>1</sup>

In the case of our critical writing, the “central object” we illuminate with our “distinct lamps” is, we like to think, not so elusive an entity as James’s “situation,” his “subject in itself.” We try to represent accurately—and, in so doing, inevitably re-represent—the process by which “the text itself” grew from its conception. While the best writers on *The Wings of the Dove* differ enormously—at times, ferociously—in their aesthetic, moral, psychological, and philosophical attitudes toward the book, they are at the same time profoundly compatible with, supportive and repetitive of, each other in a way that attests to the elaborate coherence of this novel.

The purpose of James’s elaborate coherence is the main subject of this essay. But I need to expand my statement about the criticism of *The Wings of the Dove* because it leads directly to, and will demonstrate, what I want to say about the novel itself. In his suggestive study, *Nietzsche, Henry James, and the Artistic Will*, Stephen Donadio writes that James “came to regard his own ‘supersubtle fry’ ” in a way “remarkably similar” to Nietzsche’s view of the “‘highest specimens’ of humanity,” who serve “an ultimate moral function as exemplary embodiments of human values and

potentialities which would otherwise be subject to the pressures of history, determined exclusively by the vagaries of the historical moment."<sup>2</sup> Donadio finds that the Jamesian hero seeks possibilities for his or her life beyond those fixed by historical or social circumstances. He thus characterizes the Jamesian hero as one who struggles to achieve his or her identity "over and against" some opposing force or mass of forces. This characterization should not surprise us; it is what we would expect from an existentialist reading. We may, however, be surprised to discover that, different as their interpretations may at first appear, self-definition through opposition, resignation, or transcendence (I will use the term "negation" to include all these) is the activity nearly all critics find central to *The Wings of the Dove*.

It is often, however, differences in the particular descriptive or evaluative terminologies critics choose, rather than substantive disagreements about what is going on in the novel, which are responsible for the divergence of our "views." Generalizing these differences can help us put them in relation to each other. For example, psychological interpretations of *The Wings of the Dove* tend to describe Milly Theale's triumph over her frightened mortality and her misgivings about intimacy in terms of a decision to experience love. If we translate psychological into moral terms, Milly's triumph over physical death becomes an ethical conquest. She subdues Kate's and Merton's predatory impulses by giving up her desire for personal happiness to "benefit" those she loves. It is not far from here to religious or allegorical readings of the novel that intensify Milly's self-resignation to self-sacrifice and increase the significance of her legacy until it equals spiritual redemption for her survivors. Still other critics use epistemological categories to describe Milly's self-sacrifice as a figure for the transcendence of the merely phenomenal by the metaphysical, or for the resolution of distinctions between life and death, self and other, through the conflation of subject and object, knower and known.

Because each interpretive terminology describes, though in different terms, the same "plot" or implied pattern—the negation by the self of some kind of opposition or otherness—we can imaginatively construct a critical continuum to unite and locate the critics who have written about *The Wings of the Dove*. What gives each interpreter his or her unique position on this continuum is not how right or how good a given interpretation is, but the amount of moral valorization with which it is charged. At the hy-

pothetical center, where “zero” would be on a number line, is the close, careful reading of the text with which every critic begins. This close reading is our “zero” because it is the starting point for a critical movement in any direction and because it is, at least hypothetically, as yet free of personal, social, or moral valorization. Moving away from “zero” in the direction of increasing moral valorization, we may first encounter a structural reading like Georges Poulet’s chapter on James in *The Metamorphoses of the Circle*. Poulet’s geometric idealizations of Jamesian consciousness are symbolic and humanistic, but refer both to psychology and ontology without being either psychoanalytic or religious.<sup>3</sup> Moving in the same direction, toward the implied yet persistent moralism of increasingly psychoanalytic readings, we find, for example, Leo Bersani’s essay, “The Jamesian Lie,” in which he describes literary structure functioning in a “self-revolutionizing psychology” where fictional invention constitutes the self.<sup>4</sup> In “The Narrator as Center in ‘The Wings of the Dove,’” Bersani arrives at a more ardent moral position, concluding that the multiple consciousnesses in *The Wings of the Dove* add up to one authorial self considering its possibilities, finally “renouncing life” and “justifying and consecrating his alienation from everything except his inner vision of an ideal.”<sup>5</sup> If we move away still farther from “zero” in the same direction, from moral representation to religious allegory, we will come upon Laurence Holland’s lucid beatitude in *The Expense of Vision*.<sup>6</sup> From there we may travel to Quentin Anderson’s allegorization of *The Wings of the Dove* in *The American Henry James* and perhaps beyond, to some theoretical infinity of critical passion.<sup>7</sup>

Returning to “zero” along this axis, but continuing past it in the opposite (“negative”) direction, we would find interpretations that engage less and less in moral valorizations, moving ultimately toward their denial in increasingly existentialist assertions. First we come upon close readings like John Goode’s essay on *The Wings of the Dove* in *The Air of Reality*.<sup>8</sup> (Perhaps Anderson has this kind of analysis in mind when he observes in *The Imperial Self* that James’s prose is perfect for the “luxurious romp” of the phenomenological critic.<sup>9</sup>) Goode is interested in the social implications of the epistemological conflicts that he describes in helpful detail, and makes some existentialist observations. But it is Richard Poirier, Quentin Anderson, and Stephen Donadio, in that order, who extend the critical continuum from structural description to

social and then to postsocial or even antisocial concerns, and on to a hypothetical extremity infinitely distant from the moral/religious passions at the other end of the spectrum. Poirier includes James among those authors he sees fashioning in language a world where the individual imagination is temporarily free of prohibitive conventions and social constraints, yet free also to imagine a reality from which escape would not be necessary.<sup>10</sup> In his book *The Imperial Self*, in two chapters that constitute a desacramentalized revision of his earlier work, Anderson describes the Jamesian self as both “pre-genital” and “post-social.” (That Anderson has located himself at both extremes of this continuum is astonishing.<sup>11</sup>) Donadio’s view of James as a Nietzschean artist who wills himself to be a match for the universe is placidly existentialist. Donadio is untroubled by—seemingly unaware of—his own potentially most disturbing suggestions, and thus is the farthest of our examples from both “neutrally” descriptive analyses and intentionally evaluative readings.

But the variety of our critical commitments and the seeming incompatibility of our terminologies do not change the fact that the critics I have mentioned, and others I have not, all read *The Wings of the Dove* and detect therein a drama of self-definition through negation. I do not say this in order to reduce the novel or its criticism to a literary platitude or formula. Instead, I wish to assert that the divergence of our views suggests not a hopelessly relative subjectivity, but the profound constancy of the object we examine, its potential for infinite expressions or representations, and the decorous accuracy of our responses to it. (James “had divided it, did n’t they see? into aspects.”) It will become apparent in the following pages that I resist interpretations of this novel that allegorize or sacramentalize it. And, while I do not therefore claim to stand at “zero” on my hypothetical number line as if offering a reading void of moral valorization, I do hope to show that the acts of negation to which the Jamesian self is committed do not have a moral or religious purpose. On the contrary, these negations are the means by which one Jamesian character cautiously “enters into relations” with another or, more often, withdraws from them into a sometimes gratified, sometimes dismayed consciousness of his or her essentially separate being.

In some of his works James seems to sanction acts of negation and fiction-making that preempt relationship; in others, he seems critical of, ironic toward, or even amused by, the shy solipsism

and aggravated innocence they produce. I take issue with James when he sanctions or sanctifies such solipsism. Whether, like Merton Densher, a Jamesian character is ultimately gratified at the solitude he achieves or is dismayed, like Lambert Strether in *The Ambassadors*, to find that he has husbanded relations that do not exist as he imagined them; and whether, like John Marcher in "The Beast in the Jungle," he misses out on passion altogether because he is preoccupied with self or desperately longs, like Milly Theale in *The Wings of the Dove*, to drop the burden of negation and representation and give up the self entirely, self-consciousness is the *sine qua non* in James.

Self-consciousness is the *sine qua non*, and discrimination (the making of distinctions) is the activity by which consciousness knows itself. The plots of James's late fiction consist almost entirely of discriminations and the process of making them. Characters make them all the time, individually and collectively. And they do so not just to resolve the fictive problem set for them by the story in which they find themselves, but to lend a "makeshift duration" to consciousness by mirroring and baffling it with its own bifurcations. Therefore, in the following sections of this essay I argue that coherence is itself James's urgent and constant need; that the purpose of his coherence is to establish, protect, and conceal what he calls the "solitude and security," the "safety and sanctity," of the self; and that, for the Jamesian consciousness, selfhood, coherence, and safety are achieved by means of a specific yet varied pattern of "discrimination." Densher's retaliation against the sexual aggression of Kate Croy and his submission to the mythopoeic pressure of Milly Theale will come to serve as a dynamic model of the epistemological exertions required for the self in James to overcome its ontological uncertainties, to achieve the "still communion" with itself that alone can verify its existence and satisfy its possessor. It is to these epistemological exertions we respond with our various descriptions of negation, and it is to their baffling, often exasperating efficacy we pay tribute when we speak of James's insuperable "taste," technique, and critical finesse.

When I say that "coherence is itself James's urgent and constant need," I do not mean to support a self-referential thesis that when an author fashions a fiction, he literally fashions a coextensive self or, alternatively, that images of a coherent self are mere fictions. According to these assertions, the degree of coherence—of orderly relatedness—a fiction does or does not exhibit mirrors, or even

determines, the degree of coherence of the self it expresses and represents. This idea of coherence, then, practically equates coherency with self, and self with identity, equations that may at first seem eminently applicable to Henry James. James's literary products, however, more than those of perhaps any other author, insist upon the existence of *a self distinct from its representations*. For James, consciousness depends on the *discontinuity* between itself and its objects that makes possession and authority possible; the essential negation performed by the self is the insistence upon this discontinuity. Selfhood flowers inward from the discovery that one is the agent of one's own representation in the world and therefore potentially in control of what others see. The self can create a surface, as gorgeous as one pleases, but the more impenetrable the better, behind which it can remain intact, unrevealed, and, ultimately, unrepresented. Within its purposive self-concealment the Jamesian consciousness is free to contemplate in private the only possible object of its undivided attention: itself.

For James, permitting the self to be known by another makes selfhood impossible, because, he fears, the self known and identified then becomes continuous with, identical to, and indistinguishable from that other (which is then no longer other). To know is to reduce and limit; to be known is to be annihilated or at least violated and imperiled. It is the constant task of the self in James to protect itself—that is, to know without being known. In *The Wings of the Dove*, this task is carried out again and again, especially by Milly Theale and Merton Densher, as a process of discrimination that creates a *contrast*, affords *relief*, and permits *escape*. This threefold process is represented variously, and in varying order, but it occurs repeatedly, as I hope to show. Densher achieves selfhood—in an ontological, not psychological, sense peculiar to James—by “learning” this process from Milly Theale; it is her real legacy. But this achievement and its knotty ontology have problematic implications. Although psychological conjectures and moral evaluations do not fully elucidate *The Wings of the Dove*, the novel nevertheless raises, as we shall see, clamorous and troubling questions about personal relationships.

*Contrast, relief, escape*—James uses these words as an ensemble in book 9, near the end of the novel, to describe the resolution of Densher's climactic crisis of consciousness, a crisis that illustrates the whole book to us. The scene occurs in Venice where, every day for twenty days, Densher has been visiting Milly in her

rented palace. He has, we know, agreed to carry out Kate Croy's plan that he woo and marry the fabulously wealthy but mortally ill Milly, in order to inherit her money and finance a life with Kate, to whom he is secretly engaged. But Kate has returned to London, and in the meantime, in the course of "making nice" to the heiress, Densher finds himself more and more deeply moved by Milly's predicament and her strange grace. Today, as usual, he has called at her palazzo at tea-time, but has been turned away from her door and told "that the signorina padrona was not 'receiving.'" This announcement

met him, in the court, on the lips of one of the gondoliers, met him, he thought, with such a conscious eye as the knowledge of his freedoms of access, hitherto conspicuously shown, could scarce fail to beget. Densher had not been at Palazzo Leporelli among the mere receivable, but had taken his place once for all among the involved and included, so that on being so flagrantly braved he recognised after a moment the propriety of a further appeal.<sup>12</sup>

While at first glance it may seem simply that Densher's social status is at stake here, it would not be going too far to say that his status as a *self* is at stake. Densher has come to enjoy being seen by others as "among the involved and included," a member of the class of Milly's intimate associates. But he has not yet learned (though he has begun learning) how to use this success for any purpose profoundly his own; he does not have a deep enough sense of his own "validity" to withstand the servant's gaze. So this is the crisis: Eugenio "sees through" Densher because he is penetrable. Eugenio's "conscious eye" pierces the identity by which Densher has represented his interest in Milly as benign, but which has in fact not altogether concealed his ambiguous intentions. And by piercing this porous identity, Eugenio painfully exposes Densher. Densher in turn tries to reconstitute his identity by means of a "further appeal" to his "friend" Eugenio.

His appeal fails, however. Eugenio is his "friend" neither out of Densher's purportedly honorable intimacy with Milly nor out of any personal affection for him. Rather, the servant is Densher's friend because of an "intimacy of consciousness" related to the fact that Eugenio "would have put an end to him if he could" (2:257). Both Pasquale and Eugenio take the "vulgar" view of Densher; the vulgar view is the one "that might have been taken of an inferior man" (2:258).<sup>13</sup> Worse still, this strange view is identical, for the moment, to Densher's view of himself: it "happened so



incorrigibly to fit him" (2:258). Therefore Eugenio, possessed of this view, lands an ontological one-two punch squarely on Densher's sense of being and demonstrates exactly how it "would have put an end to him if [it] could."

Eugenio's perspicacity evaporates Densher's sense of selfhood by making it continuous with, identical to, indistinguishable from, an amorphous, engulfing, shaming otherness, here called "another man," an "inferior man," perhaps an oblique reference to the servant whose gaze penetrates him. When Densher's gaze meets Eugenio's there follows a state of extreme ontological vertigo, a "sudden jar to Densher's protected state," "a sudden sharp sense that everything had turned to the dismal" (2:258, 259). In this state he feels as if a person seeing him might as well be seeing another man; to *see* him is not to see *him*. The view taken of Densher "was but the view that might have been taken of another man"; "he apparently wasn't so different from inferior men [another man] as that came to" (2:258).<sup>14</sup> James does not permit us to think, however, that, in this homogenization of consciousnesses, Eugenio's own consciousness would necessarily become equal to, or equally lost in, Densher's. Even though for the two men "a Venice all of evil . . . had broken out for them alike, so that they were together in their anxiety," mutuality of consciousness would only be possible "if they really could have met on it" (2:259). As it is, they are "more united than disjoined," but not "equally weak." In James, the seer/knower inevitably overpowers the known, by conning its identity.

The painful fact that Densher and Eugenio cannot really meet in their anxiety delivers the second, and temporarily paralyzing, blow to Densher's selfhood. He cannot retaliate against "the conscious eye" of Eugenio and Pasquale because "refinements of expression in a friend's servant were not a thing a visitor could take action on" (2:258):

. . . the air had made itself felt as a non-conductor of messages. Densher knew of course, as he took his way again, that Eugenio's invitation to return [later to the palazzo] was not what he missed; yet he knew at the same time that what had happened to him was part of his punishment. Out . . . where the wind was higher, he fairly, with the thought of it, pulled his umbrella closer down. It couldn't be, his consciousness, unseen enough by others—the base predicament of having, by a concatenation, just to *take* such things: such things as the fact that one very acute person in the world, whom he couldn't dispose of as an interested scoundrel,

enjoyed an opinion of him that there was no attacking, no dis-  
proving, no (what was worst of all) even noticing.

(2:260)

Unable even to “notice” Eugenio in self-defense, Densher reels from the discovery that his consciousness cannot be “unseen enough by others” and that he is obliged “just to *take* such things.” James describes him wandering “sightlessly” three times about the Piazza San Marco until he stops short in front of Florian’s.

Here in front of Florian’s, Densher recovers his sense of selfhood, of independent being, because he is suddenly able to do unto another as has been done unto him. Through the café window he sees, and sees through, Lord Mark. Densher “sees through” Lord Mark because he is able to penetrate his appearance in Venice to determine (though we never have proof that he is correct) that it is Lord Mark’s sudden arrival in Venice and an unexpected visit that, Merton discerns, he has already paid to Milly, that have upset her. Through the window he at first faces Mark merely “as one of the damp, shuffling crowd”; but through the process of identifying with him and transferring responsibility to him, he emerges distinguished from him and exhilarated, “remarkably blameless,” “washed . . . clean.” Densher is no longer part of the “damp, shuffling crowd,” a grey cat among grey cats in a grey night. He is no longer indistinguishable from any other man because he is distinguishable from Mark.

Seeing Lord Mark is exhilarating because it permits Densher to become again the subject, not the object, of perception, the seer, not the seen. The moment of recognition is described by James repetitively, obsessively, in visual terms, as if, through Densher, James is savoring the triumph of one conscious eye over another: “the exhilaration was heightened fairly . . . by the visible conditions”; Densher’s “eye had caught a face”; “he had spotted an acquaintance”; he “paused long enough to look at twice”; “the *Figaro* was visible—he stared”; he “seized the look” that resulted from Mark’s “sense of being noticed”; Densher’s “wider view showed him all Lord Mark . . . all Lord Mark” (2:261–62). The fact that Densher circles Florian’s six times just to reexperience each time the view of “all Lord Mark” emphasizes the compulsive and profoundly soothing pleasure he takes in seeing the man to whom he instantly transfers blame for Milly’s sudden withdrawal.<sup>15</sup>

Densher hugs his realization to himself, exhilarated that “it wasn’t a bit he who, that day, had touched” Milly, and contem-

plates Lord Mark's nastiness for the rest of the day, for two, for three days. He decides

that the only delicate and honourable way of treating a person in such a state [of ill health] was to treat her as *he*, Merton Densher, did. With time actually—for the impression but deepened—this sense of the *contrast*, to the advantage of Merton Densher, became a sense of *relief*, and that in turn, a sense of *escape*.

(2:265; my emphasis)

Here, named, is the process by which the strangely circulating Densher has repossessed his own existence: contrast, relief, escape. He has used Lord Mark to give form to his own vision and to embody otherness. He has made a moral/psychological/existential "discrimination" between himself and "another man," an "inferior [blameworthy] man," in order to reconsolidate an identity capable of "containing" his own fragile being. He is once more "he, Merton Densher," who can act on behalf of "the advantage of Merton Densher."

But Densher's relief and exhilaration at this accomplishment are not enough because his consciousness is still not "unseen enough by others"; it is still vulnerable to other consciousnesses. Despite the relief and escape that replace his temporary sightlessness, Densher is still "spending days that neither relief nor escape could purge of a smack of the abject":

What was it but sordid for him, shuffling about in the rain, to have to peep into shops and to consider possible meetings? What was it but odious to find himself wondering what, as between him and another man, a possible meeting would produce? There recurred moments when in spite of everything he felt no straighter than another man.

(2:267)

Densher still feels ontologically undefined; he cannot feel secure as a self as long as "there recurred moments when in spite of everything he felt no straighter than another man." By "straighter" James does not mean simply morally right or psychologically guilt-free, though these judgments are invited by what he does mean. The state of being James desires is the "solitude and security" of consciousness that alone puts one "in possession," and enables one to experience "the joy of life."

As do all of James's peculiarly—and, he would be the first to admit, portentously—charged terms, these expressions require

explanation. When James says that a character is “in possession,” he generally means that he feels safe enough to be receptive to the consciousness of another without feeling penetrable by it: “It was as if, being in possession, they could say what they liked; and it was also as if, in consequence of that, each had an apprehension of what the other wanted to say” (2:193). But even this is not so simple as it sounds. As we shall discover, the only way for a Jamesian character to be “in possession” without *becoming* “a possession” is to remain separate from one’s self-representations, all the while producing them as a camouflage for the self. This is how the Jamesian self achieves an identity: by “representing,” without actually presenting, oneself. James’s obsession with this project accounts for his lifelong and self-conscious devotion to the techniques of composition; to questions concerning what characters can know about each other; to the generation of discrimination after discrimination, retreating ever farther from our view even as he represents himself tirelessly. Even on his deathbed we find him writing and composing—from the “point of view” of Napoleon.

If we can accept even for a moment what he says in his outrageous essay “Is There a Life After Death?,” he may be writing still, for here James proposes a kind of social Darwinism of consciousness. Any consciousness, he asserts, as willed and potent as his simply cannot terminate with physical death, although, he adds, less developed consciousnesses are probably as mortal as the bodies that house them.<sup>16</sup> There is something similarly ghostly about the exhilaration Densher experiences when he tucks away his own consciousness out of sight. Yet this seemingly bodiless pleasure is often what James means by “the joy of life.” Repeatedly in *The Wings of the Dove* Densher retreats to his room to cherish this pleasure in private as a luminous aftersense. At such moments of reimagined success, James describes the “solitude and security” of the consciousness unseen by others in language intensified from punctilious analysis to disembodied ardor for self. Take, for example, Densher reliving in his rooms, after the fact, the long desired consummation of his sexual passion for Kate. He is described as obsessed with this “renewed act, almost the hallucination of intimacy,” which lingers like “a conscious, watchful presence, active on its own side” (2:236, 235).

And yet, what he contemplates obsessively is not Kate’s beauty or character, or their mutual tenderness, or even passion fulfilled. Instead, he privately celebrates the potency of his idea—the idea

that she give herself to him in his rooms. "It had simply *worked*, his idea, the idea he had made her accept; and all erect before him, really covering the ground as far as he could see, was the fact of the gained success that this represented" (2:236). Imagining his "gained success" to be "all erect before him," he can adore in private his own solitude and security—now valorized as "safety and sanctity": "It played for him—certainly in this prime after-glow—the part of a treasure kept at home in safety and sanctity, something he was sure of finding in its place when, with each return, he worked his heavy old key in the lock" (2:236). James says of Densher in this condition, in language I find disturbing every time I read it, that "Never was a consciousness more rounded and fastened down over what filled it,"

which is precisely what we have spoken of as, in its degree, the oppression of success, the somewhat chilled state—tending to the solitary—of supreme recognition. . . . The lucid reigned instead of [the mystery], and it was into the lucid that he sat and stared. He shook himself out of it a dozen times a day, tried to break by his own act his constant still communion.

(2:237–38)

Here, at first reading, James seems frostily to disapprove of "the somewhat chilled state" of Densher's solitary lucidity. But in fact the phrase "still communion" describes the ideal condition of the Jamesian self when it achieves "solitude and security," "safety and sanctity," and can reflect upon its own consciousness even while, thanks to the agency of its identity, it lives "in relation" to others. The scene at Matcham, where Lord Mark shows Milly her likeness in the Bronzino portrait, is emblematic of this ghostly—and doleful—ideal. At the climax of this scene, Mark brings Milly face to face with the portrait "of a young woman, all magnificently drawn, down to the hands," with "a face almost livid in hue." The woman in the painting is "Michaelangelesque," and obviously "a very great personage—only unaccompanied by a joy. And she was dead, dead, dead. Milly recognized her exactly in words that had nothing to do with her. 'I shall never be better than this' " (1:220–21). Aloud Milly claims not to see her likeness to "her pale sister"; she says, " 'I wish I could see the resemblance . . . I don't know— one never knows one's self.' " Other "interested inquirers," however, have been struck by the likeness. Kate Croy clearly sees what Mark does. To Mark, Kate says, " 'You had noticed too?' " To Milly, Kate adds, " 'Yes, there you are, my dear, if you want to

know.’ ” Lady Aldershaw, another visitor to Matcham, “looked at Milly quite as if Milly had been the Bronzino and the Bronzino only Milly” (1:222–23).

But, even though Milly claims not to see what these others see, namely, the identity of Milly with “her pale sister,” James has already told us that she “recognized her exactly in words that had nothing to do with her. ‘I shall never be better than this.’ ” We know Milly recognizes that this image of a woman “dead, dead, dead,” is identical to her precisely *because* she responds by referring to herself, not the painted figure. It is a moment of fusion not only between a painted image and her self-image (she believes herself to be mortally ill even though her doctor says she can live if she so chooses), but also between what others believe her to be (doomed) and what she fears she is (dying). This moment of penetrated identity, unlike the moment in Venice that demoralizes Densher, moves Milly to tears of happiness. For her, it is an epitome, an “apotheosis,” because her deepest sense of herself, of her own being, has been gently exposed and acknowledged, for the moment, to be identical to and indistinguishable from the way others see her. For her,

it was a sort of magnificent maximum, the pink dawn of an apotheosis coming so curiously soon. . . . It was perhaps as good a moment as she should have with anyone, or have in any connexion whatever. “I mean that everything this afternoon has been too beautiful, and that perhaps everything together will never be so right again.”

(2:220–21)

Lord Mark, in his peculiar role as the nefarious emissary of actuality, manages, as if intentionally, to keep Milly suspended for a while in this state of public apotheosis, her selfhood exposed to the presence of others, the “interested inquirers.” Because her “still communion” is achieved not in privacy but in public, it is both especially moving and especially dangerous. Lord Mark may seem considerate of her feelings but is all the while violating what should be the solitude and security, safety and sanctity, of her being: “He simply protected her now from herself, and there was a world of practice in it.” It seems to Milly, as she yields to the moment, that she is surrounded by “kind lingering eyes,” a phrase James repeats at least six ways in this short chapter. Milly is regarded by “lingering eyes,” “kind eyes,” “kind, kind eyes,” by “all the people with the kind eyes.” She is so affected by them that

she longs to trust Lord Mark, Kate, and these others, and wonders, "Couldn't she know for herself, passively, how little harm they meant her?" (1:218–220).

Milly longs so deeply to trust her companions that she now confides the secret of her illness to Kate Croy, whose own reserve Milly already senses, thereby making herself vulnerable to the betrayal that fulfills her own idea that she is doomed. Lord Mark has made possible both Milly's apotheosis and her appropriation. Therefore, this moment of "safe" identity is both an ideal condition of being-in-relation to others and a surrender to her own annihilation. It is easy to see why so many readers of *The Wings of the Dove* have yielded to the impulse to admire Milly as a saint or martyr, or as James's version of human selflessness and divinity. Yet to yield to this impulse is above all to yield to the escalating intensity of James's self-concealing vocabulary whenever he gets near the subject of Milly.<sup>17</sup> Critics have often observed that we see Milly through the views other characters have of her: Densher sees her as the little American girl, Susie Stringham sees her as a fairy tale princess, Kate sees her as a dove. Milly represents herself variously as the tragic heroine of some harrowing romance, a joke of fate, a deeply unaccommodated woman. We know Milly as a proliferation of identities that combine to make her seem both infinitely rich in "aspects" and mystically inaccessible to any ordinary reading of character. The enigmatic Bronzino scene serves both to humble and to deify her.

But such romantic conceptions of Milly can only be maintained if we ignore the ways in which other perhaps stranger descriptions of her support the argument that soothing profound ontological terror by concealing the self is the motive force for this novel. The third chapter of book 7, for example, begins with a gorgeously ironic description of Milly settling into her Palazzo in Venice. We are to understand that she is entombing herself in her rented mausoleum: she is grateful to "sink into possession" of the scoloped and gilded, embossed and beribboned "apartment of state" found for her by Eugenio, who "had entered her service during the last hours of all" (2:132). Here, in her "makeshift duration," Eugenio makes it possible for her to sink into possession because he understands "the ease with which she must be let down" (2:133). He is among "those who were to see her through . . . for the final function" (2:134). The statement that Eugenio is among "those who were to see her through" to the end—and to see the

end through her—is particularly ironic when we remember that for Densher he possesses an “intimacy of consciousness” born of desire to “put an end to him if he could.” To Milly it seems that “he was abysmal, but this intimacy lived on the surface.”

Milly keeps intimacy on the surface and resists penetration by others (most of the time) by means of a mechanism “like a fine steel spring” that keeps her “queer and dissociated,” inviolate:

poor Milly had a treasure to hide. This was not the treasure of a shy, an abject affection—concealment, on that head, belonging to quite another phase of such states; it was much rather a principle of pride relatively bold and hard, a principle that played up like a fine steel spring at the lightest pressure of too near a footfall. Thus insuperably guarded was the truth about the girl’s own conception of her validity.

(2:139)

Milly’s principle of pride enforces the discontinuity between self and identity, between the self and its representations, that is necessary to keep the “footfalls” of others at a safe distance. It is this principle of pride that again and again requires an act of defensive knowing to reestablish its security. The “fine steel spring” by which its solitary domain is reasserted is James’s metaphor for that process of discrimination (contrast, relief, escape) I described earlier. From Milly, Densher learns to assert his own principle of pride in order to keep “insuperably guarded” the truth about his “own conception of [his] validity.” It will be useful, therefore, to look at Milly’s method of negation and dissociation in action.

The scene occurs early in book 4, before the Bronzino scene in which Milly persuades herself that she is unilaterally regarded by kind, kind eyes. Milly and her companion, Mrs. Stringham, are dining for the first time at Lancaster Gate, home of the wealthy, impressive, scheming Maud Manningham, an old friend of Susie Stringham. It is Milly’s first exposure to English society, but already her value as a social acquisition is being eagerly assayed by Maud and her fashionable friends. Lord Mark, sitting next to Milly at dinner, makes explicit the idea that to see Milly is to take her or, at least, to want to take her. He says to Milly, “To be seen, you must recognize, *is*, for you, to be jumped at. . . . Look round the table and you’ll make out, I think, that you’re being, from top to bottom, jumped at’ ” (1:155). Milly does not like his comment because it “made her feel for a moment that, as a matter of course, she was a subject for disclosures.” Her feeling is nevertheless appropriate because Lord Mark’s description is accurate: she *is*



taken up as if a natural subject for disclosures; she *is* being, from top to bottom, jumped at. What she wants from Mark is not, however, revelation, but help in figuring out where she stands in relation to these others; she needs to *make* a relation to these others. But Mark “helped her as yet to no discriminations,” the materials she needs to make such a relation (1:150).

To Milly “each other person and thing” she sees seems an “amusing resisting ominous fact” in need of precise identification, precise location on some recognizable scale of value. But Lord Mark, himself “as packed a concretion as either Mrs. Lowder or Kate,” can only explain that today in London “there was no such thing . . . as saying where any one was. Every one was everywhere—nobody was anywhere” (1:150). In this context James uses the term “discrimination” at least superficially to mean just the kind of social distinctions or aesthetic judgments a newcomer might need to make in order to feel comfortable in London society. But James tells us Milly does not wish “to do anything so inane as ‘get into [a] society’ ” that Mark describes as “masses of bewildered people” like “the vague billows of some great greasy sea in mid-Channel” threatening to wash over her as well (1:149, 150). Therefore by the term “discrimination” I mean a primary act of consciousness that makes social distinctions and aesthetic judgments possible and that is fundamental to James’s (implicit) myth of the creation by the self of its own consciousness and its own being. It simultaneously represents the *will-to-consciousness* that, in James, is a generative impulse so dominant we cannot distinguish it from the desire to live. To experience “life” without being annihilated by the vision of others requires making one crucial primary discrimination. Because the tension between exposure and concealment is equivalent to the boundary between death and life, Milly needs to fashion a discontinuity, a barrier against the vision of others behind which she remains inviolate; for Milly—and for James—“to be seen” is “to be jumped at,” and to be in the world is to be seen.

Maud Manningham’s dinner party demonstrates how James dramatizes an individual consciousness protecting itself from being seen by making this discrimination, this discontinuity at once self-protective, self-constitutive, and interpersonal. The act of discrimination requires both willed negation and deliberate representation: the self thereby creates a discontinuity between itself and the world in order to conceal itself, while offering the world a

representation of “itself.” In James, the will-to-consciousness uses language *to conceal by representing*; representation is the weaponry of epistemological warfare waged with critical passion by the self. At Maud’s party, Milly shrewdly chooses to represent herself as others see her in order to deflect their probing vision. At first Milly thrills to be in the presence of such wonderful creatures as “the Bishop of Murrum—a real bishop, such as Milly had never seen,” and Katy Croy, “the handsome girl” (1:146–147). She is glad to be among people and, “with a shade of exhilaration at the way she already fell in,” feels that it isn’t “so difficult to get into the current, or to stand, at any rate on the bank” of life (1:147).

Standing in the current or on the bank, if the current is strong or the waters unruly, is not necessarily a safe position. In fact, as James’s description of Milly’s awareness in this scene develops, we find that Milly feels all but overwhelmed by the rich turbulence of the phenomena she observes. Richest and most overwhelming, however, is her own deeply aroused sensibility:

She thrilled, she consciously flushed, and all to turn pale again, with the certitude—it had never been so present—that she should find herself completely involved: the very air of the place, the pitch of the occasion, had for her both so sharp a ring and so deep an undertone. The smallest things, the faces, the hands, the jewels of the women, the sound of words, especially of names, across the table, the shape of the forks, the arrangement of the flowers, the attitude of the servants, the walls of the room, were all touches in a picture and denotements in a play; and they marked for her moreover her alertness of vision. She had never, she might well believe, been in such a state of vibration; her sensibility was almost too sharp for her comfort: there were for example more indications than she could reduce to order in the manner of the friendly niece.  
(1:148)

Milly’s vibrating sensibility is unable to “reduce to order” all the information she is receiving; she is at this point “wandering and lost.” Lord Mark, we are told, is also “wandering and lost.” In fact, in one sense, all the characters described in the scene are wandering (if not lost): they are intelligences travelling about the dinner table, calling at the intelligences of their neighbors as if they were exotic ports. For Milly, Mrs. Lowder is a “person of whom the mind might in two or three days roughly make the circuit,” while Kate Croy “would indulge in incalculable movements that might interfere with one’s tour” (1:149–50).

James uses this image of a disembodied, travelling intelligence throughout the scene and asks us to take it more seriously each time it appears.<sup>18</sup> It represents social relations as complex movements of aggressive and defensive knowing performed by individuals; it represents art as the creation of a vessel for the intelligence out to establish an imperium in the world. Specifically, Milly and Lord Mark are described in the dinner party scene as two awarenesses hungrily gathering information. But it is when these two intelligences meet in the hyperspace of Jamesian relations that Milly feels threatened. Her exhilaration at having fallen into complete involvement turns to alarm when she discovers that she is not the agent of her own representation. She cannot offer new information about herself to Lord Mark; he seems already to know her secrets. On the subject of her strangeness he has “more to tell her than to learn from her,” as if “she and her like were the chief of his diet” (1:153, 152). Milly, we are warned, will come to know “how much more information about their friend [Maud] he had taken than given.” James makes explicit the association between self-revelation and personal danger by saying that “she had, on the spot, . . . encountered the interesting phenomenon of complicated, of possibly sinister motive” (1:154). Milly feels increasingly pressed by his words. At last,

she accepted almost helplessly—she surrendered so to the inevitable in it—being the sort of thing, as he might have said, that he at least thoroughly believed he had, in going about, seen enough of for all practical purposes. Her submission was naturally more-over not to be impaired.

(1:157)

Lord Mark has “placed” her, and Milly is conscious that she has “—as with the door sharply slammed upon her and the guard’s hand raised in signal to the train—been popped into the compartment in which she was to travel for him” (1:157). She is indeed travelling, and passively, a mere phenomenon for Mark’s hurrying intelligence.

Milly is distinctly afraid for “fifty seconds”; for only fifty seconds she desires to stop Mark’s train. Her alarm ceases, however, when she realizes that she has already chosen to do, and has already done, “nothing at all.” She goes on with Lord Mark: she “gave herself up,” a phrase with particular Jamesian meaning. It means accepting “a use of her that many a girl would have been doubtless

quick to resent” and having “the kind of mind that thus, in our young lady, made for all mere seeing and taking” (1:157). For James, giving up the self means yielding to the intelligence of another and allowing the active vision of another to define one instead of actively conceiving oneself. While Milly is all seeing and taking, Densher, we remember, is infuriated by “the base predicament of having . . . just to take such things” as are dished out by another’s vision. It is Densher’s active, defensive, and retaliatory seeing that makes him the novel’s “survivor”; it also makes him, decidedly, not the “passive male” James’s readers often find him.

But Milly, seeing and taking, sees the way Mark characterizes her, and responds by characterizing herself the same way. She takes as her role what she “had practically just learned from him, had made out, as it were, from her rumbling compartment, that he gave her the highest place among their friend’s actual properties. She was a success, that was what it came to . . . and this was what it was to be a success” (1:157). James describes Milly taking on Mark’s image of her as a success by combining two of the motifs we have already seen operating in this scene. First, phenomena seem to multiply around Milly until they escape the capacity of her own sensibility to order them. Second, Milly’s disembodied intelligence—described now as a winged spirit—goes travelling briefly out of her body, not to return to her body, but to take up residence in Lord Mark’s image of her as a success:

And it was just a part [of the crowded consciousness] likewise that while plates were changed and dishes presented and periods in the banquet marked; while appearances insisted and phenomena multiplied and words reached her from here and there like plashes of a slow thick tide; . . . it was just a part that while this process went forward our young lady alighted, came back, taking up her destiny again as if she had been able by a wave or two of her wings to place herself briefly in sight of an alternative to it. Whatever it was it had showed in this brief interval as better than the alternative; and it now presented itself altogether in the image and in the place in which she had left it. The image was that of her being, as Lord Mark had declared, a success.

(1:160)

As Milly gives up her self to the general social concupiscence, she feels herself “sinking” into a relation; and as she sinks she feels that she and Kate Croy are “somehow together in what they represented.”

But lest we begin prematurely to sacramentalize our winged

young lady, it must be said that Milly and Kate are not just “somehow” together in what they represent; they are so because their intelligences are engaged in mutual psychic study, competing for psychic ascendance in a contest of representation. Milly gives herself up more and more aggressively and expertly until she disappears altogether (leaving Densher more or less as her earthly representative). Milly’s submission, “not to be impaired,” constitutes a choice she makes, a choice of style (and the wrong choice, if one prefers living to dying).<sup>19</sup> For example, Milly wishes to get “away from herself so far as she was present to [Lord Mark]” because “there would be a good deal more of him to come for her, and . . . the special sign of their intercourse would be to keep herself out of the question. Everything else might come in—only never that” (1:163). Further, “If she was to keep herself out she could naturally best do so by putting in somebody else. She accordingly put in Kate Croy” (1:163). James next demonstrates Milly’s recharacterization of herself as Kate Croy by means of a strangely fervent conversation between Milly and Mark about Kate, who is, among other things, “beautiful in character.” Milly’s self-annihilating identification with the images and roles conceived by others continues when she accepts “like an inspiration,” like “the revealed truth,” Kate’s description of her as a dove. Almost immediately she begins behaving in the manner intentionally “the most dovelike,” and gets “straightway the measure of the *success* she could have as a *dove*” (my emphasis; the phrase combines Mark’s image of Milly as a “success” with Kate’s image of her as a “dove”); now, “she should have to be clear as to how a dove *would* act” (1:282–85). Milly loves the “luscious innuendo” of Maud’s response to her dovelike performance, but finally, we know, her success at representing others’ conceptions of her proves abjectly ironic.

The process of disembodiment I describe in this scene, which Milly uses to “keep herself out of the question” and put somebody else in, is another example of the contrast-relief pattern and has similar motivation. In order to stop being a subject for disclosures, Milly creates a discontinuity between herself and the phenomena around her (as Densher does in the Piazza scene) and avoids Mark’s perspicacity by substituting another character for herself (as Densher substitutes Lord Mark for himself). The difference between Milly and Densher is that Milly fulfills the roles suggested by the images generated by others, while Densher generates his

own “idea” and works to ensure its success, its actualization by others.

It is probably clear by now that I resist sacramentalizing Milly’s submission to the mythopoeic pressure others exert on her. The reason I resist has to do with James’s motivation in creating her character. Ultimately, I think, the lesson James constructs for us in *The Wings of the Dove* (and I am critical of its emotional parsimony) is that we need not only to deflect the mythopoeic pressure others exert on us in order to have a self, even in order to survive, but we need further to exert on others a mythopoeic pressure stronger than theirs by means of which we gain both control over our worldly situations and the privacy of an unviolated, impregnable, unreadable self. For James, authority and personality are the survival instincts of the self; they arise inevitably from the willed discrimination by which the self lays claim to consciousness and then libidinally nourishes itself by “knowing” otherness.

The sympathy we feel for Milly is not just sadness at her early death, but assent to the mythopoeic pressure exerted on us by James’s art of fiction. Milly’s character tends to elicit reverent interpretations from readers—some of whom read her as a Christ figure—by at least two means. First, James uses religious-sounding terms to describe her behavior: “divinations,” for example, is the name James continually gives her insights and hunches about others. Second, in characterizing Milly as he does, James experimentally embodies the Christian moral dilemma which insists that in order to live, love, and give the most one can, one must not allow oneself to become attached to life. Milly accordingly finds that her decision to experience life arouses an equivalent need to lose herself, to leave the pressing “personal question” “outside” (outside what?) as she tries literally to do before entering the National Gallery to escape the personal and become “at once impersonal and firm” (1:288). We need, however, to resist sacramentalizing Milly’s conflation of life, death, and selflessness because it is not religious in impulse but, on the contrary, shy, antisocial, and anarchistic. The character of Milly Theale is a romantic fantasy of self-annihilation, of escape from (James’s) rigidly formalized consciousness, and an emblem for James’s discomfort at being in the world. His motive is simply to palliate the fear of what he elsewhere names “the terrible fluidity of self-revelation.”<sup>20</sup> We may well be surprised at the utterly elaborate, al-

most impregnable fictions this fear produces, fictions which, like a precious pearl produced in the inflamed gut of an oyster, belie the fear that gives rise to them. James himself might sense this incongruity, judging from words like Densher's when he says, " 'What a brute then I must be! . . . to have pleased so many people' " (2:331).

And yet at the same time this fantasy gives permission to, infuses passion into, the quest of the Jamesian self for solitude and security, safety and sanctity. Densher's need for a consciousness "unseen enough by others" and Milly's mixed exhilaration and dread at finding herself a subject for disclosures are hypersensitive responses to the felt interest of others. James's characters experience the attentions of others as (to use Georges Poulet's perfect expression) "convergent covetousnesses," and decorously withdraw from them.<sup>21</sup>

James's plots always set against each other competing, convergent covetousnesses. In *The Wings of the Dove*, Merton Densher is the triumphant embodiment of the self learning to resist penetration by others. James places Densher in a predicament that can be summed up this way: he must learn how to act and not act at the same time. As the novel develops, Densher finds it increasingly difficult to function: "his question . . . was the interesting question of whether he had really no will left" (2:177). In his relationship with Kate he is torn between commitment to her "idea" of securing Milly's fortune for their own use and his desire to believe that Kate wants only to be kind to Milly. In his relationship with Milly, on the other hand, he is torn between his impulse to give her love, or at least friendship, and his fear of unintentionally hurting or killing her by some blundering faux pas. Further, in a more general and restrictive way, he is being pressed from two sides by Kate and Milly to behave in two mutually exclusive ways at once. Loyalty to them demands that his actions bear meanings that are contradictory and mutually exclusive, meanings, therefore, that come to seem to him more and more like two competing, if imposing, fictions or scenarios designed to tax his will and to include and need him for their enactment. To act for Kate means, among other things, to act on the assumptions that Kate Croy loves Merton Densher and that Milly Theale will die. To act for Milly means the opposite; it means among other things, to act on the assumptions that Kate Croy doesn't give a fig for Merton Densher

(Maud, Susie, and Kate tell Milly this is so) and that Milly can live if she chooses (Sir Luke Strett says this is so).

Densher feels increasingly caught, and James describes this feeling in several different ways. Densher discovers, for example, that “his interest had been invoked in the name of compassion, and the name of compassion was exactly what he felt himself at the end of two minutes forbidden so much as to whisper” (2:74). His predicament, in fact, constitutes in his mind a tribunal before which he finds himself accountable. “The whole thing [was] as pretty a case of conscience as he could have desired, and one at the prospect of which he was already wincing” (2:75). Although James’s tone here is wry, the image of Densher wincing before the case his conscience presents him symbolizes his awakening, discriminate and discriminating, self-consciousness. He begins to recoil from his submissiveness to Kate, to resist her influence over him, and to disentangle his consciousness from hers. He starts by recognizing that, while making up to Milly, he just might “find himself liking in a way quite at odds with straightness the good faith of Milly’s benevolence.” As he observes his conscience rearrange itself, he thinks, “*There* was the place for scruples; there the need, absolutely, to mind what he was about” (2:76). He comforts himself by thinking that as yet he has done nothing deceptive since *he* has not denied to Milly that Kate loves him:

It was Kate’s description of him, his defeated state, it was none of his own; his responsibility would begin, as he might say, only with acting it out. The sharp point was, however, in the difference between acting and not acting; this difference in fact it was that made the case of conscience. He saw it with a certain alarm rise before him that everything was acting that was not speaking the particular word. “If you like me because you think *she* does n’t, it is n’t a bit true: she *does* like me awfully!”—that would have been the particular word.

(2:76)

Leaving aside, for the moment, the apparent theatrical connotations of “acting” and “not acting,” we see that in the above passage Densher is trying to figure out what constitutes the difference between doing (acting) and not doing (not acting) and where he is in relation to both: what, in fact, is “of his own.” Densher decides, by means of a double dialectic whose terms negate each other, that neither acting nor not acting is “of his own.” Discriminating



between them is “of his own”; the space between alternatives constituted by his “case of conscience” makes the sensation of self possible. Kant has said that “the form of sensibility” antedates in the mind all the actual impressions through which we are affected by objects.<sup>22</sup> In James’s epistemology, it is as if the form of *responsibility* (a neutral potential) antedates all the actual impressions through which we are affected by the world.<sup>23</sup> James’s shifting emphasis on conscience as both progenitor of and accomplice to self-consciousness make the terms “acting” and “not acting” especially appropriate to Densher’s dilemma: because of their association with “pretending” and “not pretending” they charge with moral valorization any act of doing or not doing and leave only the space between them—that occupied by the self—as neutral territory. It is toward this neutral territory, and toward the willed formation of such a place, that Densher is headed.

For the moment, in the passage last quoted, “not speaking the particular word,” which means not telling Milly the truth, equals “acting” or doing, because silence enacts “Kate’s description of him.” At the same time, in this passage, speaking the particular word equals doing nothing, not acting, because it would not support Kate’s description. These elusive equations add up to the characterization of Merton Densher by Kate Croy, whose description of him threatens that he must be true to its terms or not be at all, must act out her fiction or not act at all. And yet, as he must come to recognize, this characterization, to which he tries his best to conform, is ultimately debilitating because, according to its dictates, not contradicting Kate’s description is doing nothing. According to the fiction Kate wants Densher to perform, to do something is to do what Kate wants. Densher feels that not to do what Kate wants would be to betray her, and that “Kate’s design was something so extraordinarily special to Kate that he felt himself shrink from the complications involved in judging it” (2:77).

But on the next page, when Densher begins to consider the difference between acting and not acting from Milly’s point of view rather than from Kate’s, what was “doing nothing” becomes transformed into “doing something.” Kate has convinced Milly that she doesn’t care for Densher, and this fiction takes on the status, for now, of actuality for Milly. Unless Kate “should revise her plan,” Milly can rely on it as on “a simple, a beautiful ground, a ground that already supplied her with the pretext she required. The ground was there, that is, in the impression she had received,

retained, cherished; the pretext, over and above it, was the pretext for acting on it" (2:77, 78). As Kate's fiction takes root and constitutes itself, Densher realizes that for Milly's sake he is committed to continuing to enact it by not speaking against it: "he asked himself what, failing this [revising Kate's plan], *he* could do that wouldn't be after all, more gross than doing nothing" (2:77). To strike at the root of the fiction that made it permissible for Milly to like Densher "would have struck at . . . the root, in her soul, of a pure pleasure."

According to *this* passage, which considers Densher's alternatives from *Milly's* imagined point of view, "doing *nothing*" means *not* speaking the particular word, *not* contradicting Kate's description of him—the opposite of what it meant to him but a moment ago when his consciousness was "trying on" Kate's point of view. Now, acting and doing mean speaking the truth, not hiding it. If the sense of this is elusive, it may at least be clear that, in the course of this transforming and fictive logic, doing nothing can equal doing something, speaking can equal not speaking, and moral distinctions become shifting and relative. Truth and duplicity become pretexts for each other, but as they constitute each other and propagate their fictions, they leave the self between their oscillating terms. They leave the self to discover its own validity in the still space between acting and not acting, between one fiction and the next. The self is left to discover itself as the maker of identities, the giver of meanings, the determiner of values: pretexts for action that return, as if to the sonar of self-consciousness, images of the "world."

Densher experiences this particular validity the more he seeks the "still communion" within himself I described earlier as James's ideal of the solitude and security, safety and sanctity of the self. Now we can understand the motivation behind this intense need: escape from the convergent covetousnesses that seek to possess by characterizing; relief from the guilty, self-defensive necessity of possessing others. When Densher finds himself without curiosity or concern about Milly's health one morning when she fails to appear, he congratulates himself that his lack of interest proves that his feelings are all for Kate: "He was acting for Kate, and not, by the deviation of an inch, for her friend." This, however, is simply not true. Not feeling curious and not asking about Milly's health reveals how deeply Densher has responded to her demand that he enact her fiction of vitality by not alluding to her illness.

For a while he is so well trained to act and not act at once that he can do it, at least here, without knowing it.

His still-living will, however, goads him to act more and more on his own impulse to discriminate. Densher begins to challenge his own surrender to duplicitous loyalties and decides that, between being “the ass the whole thing involved” and “trying not to be and yet keeping in it,” the latter “was of the two things the more asinine” (2:209). He begins to shore up the boundaries of self against the pressures of others. By the end of the novel, he will have successfully negated the mythopoeic influence of both Kate and Milly. He redefines, this time from his own point of view, the notion of “doing something” to mean doing “anything he himself had conceived,” imposing his own “idea” as a “counterweight” against the “confounding extension of surface” produced by the otherness of others’ ideas (2:174). His victory over Kate is easy to reiterate; we recall all too clearly how he persuades her to go to bed with him, and the self-satisfied pleasure with which, after she leaves, he contemplates the gained success of his “idea all erect before him.” At last, “he had done something; not only caused her perfect intelligence to act in his interest, but left her unable to get away, by any mere private effort, from his unattackable logic” (2:215).

The way he negates Milly’s influence is more subtle. He enters its sphere by deciding that he has not stayed in Venice, “not *there*, not just as he was in so doing it, through Kate and Kate’s idea, but through Milly and Milly’s own, and through himself and *his* own, unmistakably” (2:186). But he inadvertently cancels out the effects of her idea, leaving only his. Milly, after some hesitation, we feel, tells Densher she would like to visit him for tea in his rooms. Densher recoils from the thought of having her there, where he had Kate, and clumsily demurs: “casting about him in his anxiety for a middle way to meet her, he put his foot, with unhappy effect, just in the wrong place” (2:245). He forgets Milly’s injunction against speaking of her as ill and blurts out, “‘Will it be safe for you to break into your custom of not leaving the house?’” Milly is angry with him for a moment, while Densher feels terribly sorry for having “touched all alone with her here the supersensitive nerve of which she had warned him.” He is so sorry that his “great scruple” against admitting anyone to his rooms, where he keeps locked up his “hallucination of intimacy” with Kate, suddenly breaks. He invites her to visit: “‘You can come,’

he said, 'when you like.' ” It is too late, however; Milly cannot recover her pride fast enough from the blow dealt it by Densher's allusion to her ill health. Milly says that she will not come to Densher—“ ‘No—never now. It's over' ” (2:247).

I read this comment of Milly's as the moment when she yields completely to the way others see her, abandons the will to live, and privately decides instead to “turn her face to the wall.” It is the moment when Densher becomes free of the epistemological pressures exerted by Milly. He has negated her advance toward him by reminding her that he thinks of her as gravely ill; she in turn negates his submission to her by declining his tardy invitation. The result is that Densher is suddenly free to achieve “the real, the right stillness,” achieved by continuing to be still (neither acting nor not acting) and then by internalizing that stillness (2:304). He tells Kate that, to preserve a “daily decency,” he “had been patient and above all . . . he had been still. ‘As still as a mouse—you'll have seen it for yourself. Stiller, for three days together, than I've ever been in my life. It has seemed to me the only thing’ ” (2:270–71). To Kate his stillness is understandable as “a policy or a remedy.” To Densher, it means remaining true to “his original idea, which didn't leave him, of waiting for the deepest depth his predicament could sink him to” (2:301). He seeks always to save his conscience, to cleanse it, to exhilarate it, to feel, as he says to Kate triumphantly, “ ‘how right I was not to commit myself.’ ”

In order to justify his behavior he welcomes “suppressed explanations” and “commendable fictions. Thus it was absolutely that he *was* at his ease . . . he had taken himself on leaving Venice the resolution to regard Milly as already dead to him” (2:339). He is at his ease because “His scheme was accordingly to convince himself—and by some art about which he was vague—that the sense of waiting had passed” (2:339–40). Earlier he wanted to wait, to be still as a mouse, in order to avoid the Scylla and Charybdis of acting and not acting. Now he wants to have done with waiting so that he need not face a different source of “tortured consciousness,” namely, “*the* horrible thing to know, the fact of their young friend's unapproachable terror of the end” (2:341). I have been saying that acting and not acting, speaking and not speaking, are *per se* not essential to the self, while the space between alternatives, and the responsibility for discriminating between them, are. At the end of the novel, Densher discovers, again and more lucidly, that it is

neither waiting nor not waiting that matters absolutely, but the ability of the conscience to be still and at ease thanks to the commendable fictions by which it can enact its own ideas. Knowing this about himself amounts to the attainment of selfhood and self-consciousness for Densher. It is a restatement of the distinction I feel James insists upon between the self and the representations it generates for its own protection and pleasure. For Densher “something had happened to him too beautiful and too sacred to describe.” He “had the sense of the presence within” and “felt the charged stillness” (2:343).

We have been noticing James’s habits of interweaving characters so that they come to represent and characterize each other. Therefore we should not be surprised to find that, when Densher moves to act on the basis of his “own” charged stillness, James renders his experience of internal presence as if it were Milly’s transmigrated soul now glowing within Densher. In a climax of negation, Densher dramatizes his triumphant noncommitment and forces Kate to choose between two alternatives: either to accept from Densher the fortune Milly probably left him and thus lose Densher; or to accept Densher as he is and reject the inheritance she has schemed to get. Densher is asking Kate—pressuring her—to join him in “not taking up the bequest,” to consent to his “giving up.” James describes the telegram bearing news of the bequest as if it were a holy mystery representing the essence of Milly’s spirit, “the sacred script,” “the unrevealed work of her hand.” Densher contemplates its unknown turns of phrase alone in his rooms just as he used to cherish there the hallucinations of intimacy with Kate embodied in the ghostly, erect form of his luminous and successful idea. About the sacred telegram, too,

The thought was all his own. . . . He kept it back like a favourite pang; left it behind him, so to say, when he went out, but came home again the sooner for the certainty of finding it there. Then he took it out of its sacred corner and its soft wrappings; he undid them one by one, handling them, handling *it*, as a father, baffled and tender, might handle a maimed child. But so it was before him—in his dread of who else might see it.

(2:395–96)

Sacrificing knowledge of precisely what was in the telegram was “like the sacrifice of something sentient and throbbing, something that for the spiritual ear, might have been audible as a faint far

wail. This was the sound that he cherished when alone in the stillness of his rooms. He sought and guarded the stillness" (2:396).

The imagery in these passages has a voluptuous metaphysical concreteness more characteristic of *The Golden Bowl* than *The Wings of the Dove*. But the task of this novel has been to teach Densher that his sense of his own validity is to be found inside himself in a sacred corner no one can see, a corner where his own ineffable gifts and successes may be privately handled. It is inevitable, though, for the Jamesian self that the more proficient one becomes at seeking and guarding the stillness, the more one must dread "who else might see it." The more one is consecrated to the generation of masterful fictions, the more one is beset, as Densher is, by "a strange consciousness of exposure." In *The Golden Bowl*, this is precisely the predicament of Maggie Verver: how, by means of a "consecrated diplomacy," her toiling consciousness can disengage itself from her father's and fashion relationships with those she loves without being seen as separate. I would argue that this is not possible because the sturdier the boundary is between the self and the world, the harder it becomes to know anything on the other side of it. The more seduced one is by one's own concealing fictions, the less one can know anything other than one's own fictions of distinction.

Many would say that we can know nothing outside of our own fictions or constructions. Most of us would agree, however, that human relationships, even intimacies, are possible and desirable nevertheless. I am not in a position to make judgments about Henry James's personal life, nor do I want to do so. But I find that the circularities deeply persistent in his fiction preclude the possibility for intimacy between characters so conceived; nor do I see how intimacy can be welcome to any person dedicated to impregnability and invisibility. In *The Wings of the Dove*, intimacy can be enjoyed at best as the "hallucination of intimacy," unreal because it is not the appreciation of otherness, but only its denial and fetishistic replacement. Making the self one's only other makes true otherness unknowable, unthinkable. The beast lurking in James's jungle waits to attack the wary, not the unsuspecting; the "thing" ever monstrously "behind" the brilliant, perfect surface is not wasted life or suppressed sexuality or unconscious guilt or desire. It is the self lurking suspiciously behind its "own" representations.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> *The Art of the Novel*, ed. Richard P. Blackmur (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1934), 110.

<sup>2</sup> (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1978), 100.

<sup>3</sup> (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1966), 306–20.

<sup>4</sup> *Partisan Review* 36 (1969), 57, 58.

<sup>5</sup> *Modern Fiction Studies* 6 (1960), 144.

<sup>6</sup> (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1964).

<sup>7</sup> (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers Univ. Press, 1957).

<sup>8</sup> *The Air of Reality*, ed. John Goode (London: Methuen, 1972), 244–301.

<sup>9</sup> (New York: Knopf, 1971), 169.

<sup>10</sup> *A World Elsewhere* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1966).

<sup>11</sup> I agree with Anderson's statement in *The Imperial Self* that for James a plural world is "replaced by internalized antinomies" lacking "a recognition that life is actually open-ended" (202), but find his characterization of James as both "post-social" and "pre-genital" incoherent.

<sup>12</sup> (2:256). All references to *The Wings of the Dove* are to the New York Edition unless otherwise noted (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1937), volumes 19, 20. Citations in the text are to volume 1 or 2 of the novel followed by the page number.

<sup>13</sup> In James's first edition, the "vulgar view" is "the view that, clever and not rich, the young man from London was—by the obvious way—after Miss Theale's fortune" ([Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1980], 361). The two editions are quite similar; in this section, however, the tone of the New York Edition is more arch in the instances where "another man" is replaced by "inferior man."

<sup>14</sup> Here terms from the first edition are in brackets.

<sup>15</sup> Quentin Anderson describes this moment as a "Jamesian crossroad of impulse" wherein Densher is afraid of himself "as *Lord Mark*" (275, 277).

<sup>16</sup> See *The James Family*, ed. F. O. Matthiessen (New York: Vintage, 1980), 602–14.

<sup>17</sup> In the Preface to the New York Edition of *The Wings of the Dove*, James discusses the portentousness of his subject: the "quarters so cramped" it affords, the "communities of doom it depicts," the "makeshift duration" of his "offered victim," his approach by "narrowing circumvallations" (xviii, x, xi). These quite terrifying aspects of his feelings about Milly are conspicuously absent from his romantic treatment of her in the novel.

<sup>18</sup> Philip Sicker takes imagery like this so literally that he transforms James's characters into Lawrentian combatants of passion. See *Love and the Quest for Identity in the Fiction of Henry James* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1980).

<sup>19</sup> John Goode discusses choice of style in *The Wings of the Dove* as "Lifestyles and eyestyles" (244).

<sup>20</sup> Preface to *The Ambassadors*, New York Edition, 21:xix.

<sup>21</sup> Poulet, 315.

<sup>22</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1980), 30.

<sup>23</sup> The form of responsibility corresponds to the "zero" on the critical continuum. It is prior to all moral valorization but characterized by the way it engages in making discriminations and choosing descriptive terminologies.