

The Wings of the Dove: “Across Wide Spaces

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Among many critics of *The Wings of the Dove* the idea prevails that a renewed interest in truths that border on the spiritual would somehow have been intellectually beneath Henry James. The notion that he might in 1902 have written a novel in which a heroine achieves immortality through self-sacrifice strikes them as banal, trivial, sentimental, or lacking in postmodern “complexity”; for critics such as Emily Schiller, for example, the idea “that [Milly] wanted to give Merton the money he tried to swindle from her as a token of her ‘undying love’ . . . is a plot too silly for James” (213).² Other critics argue away the spiri-

¹I would like to extend “a warm handshake” to my friend and colleague Edgar “Mac” Shawen for his encouragement and his careful and patient readings of several drafts of this essay.

²Instead, Schiller prefers to imagine a Milly more cynically motivated by a wish to use her wealth to “buy the relationship” she has never managed to have with Densher and to destroy the one he has with Kate (213). William R. McNaughton likewise suggests that “[Milly’s] seemingly generous Christmas response to treachery” seems “almost frivolous or parodic” (96–97). Similarly, Virginia Llewellyn Smith asks, “Is Milly now the sweet innocent scarcely conscious of her wealth, or is she the inscrutable power through

tual clarity through complexity: writing of an alleged “Abyss of Language in *The Wings of the Dove*,” Sheila Teahan finds that the novel reveals how “[t]he possibility that energy and fallibility, mastery and dupery, or truth and lie are radically entwined or even two faces of the same coin is the law . . . of narrative and language itself” (212). Likewise, Priscilla Walton utilizes deconstructionist principles to demonstrate that the gaps in James’s text “allow the readers to create meaning, to create, in effect, the text of *The Wings of the Dove*” (140). According to her, “the meaning of the text is literally absent” (140).³ The philosophical and religious principles revealed in James’s letters as well as in the late autobiographical essay “Is There a Life after Death?” (1910) suggest, however, that in 1902 the transcendence of love over death did not seem “silly” or “meaningless” to him. On the contrary, the arguments of critics such as Schiller and Walton consign James’s work to the very moral and linguistic abysses which are heroically traversed by his protagonists in *The Wings of the Dove*. Indeed, James’s narrative strategy in the novel calls readers to follow the example of Merton Densher and Milly Theale, characters who so enlarge their capacity for sympathy and love that they must ultimately communicate via sealed envelopes and words unspoken. The readers, too, must extend their own imaginative and sympathetic capacities in order to bridge the novel’s textual gaps. To that extent, yes, readers “create” James’s text, but as James’s late essay

whom that wealth is being deployed to drive the lovers apart forever” (216–17). According to her, only Kate is “not yet spiritually bankrupt” (217). Kenneth Reinhard, too, thinks that Milly’s money curses the couple. Densher, he suggests, “seems to feel himself not so much sheltered as under the shadow of those wings, or as his very name seems to suggest, ‘indentured’ by Milly’s gift” (135).

³Other critics of this stamp include Michiel Heyns, who argues that in the end the novel merely “signifies” the “complex and unstable relations that constitute life,” which also “serve to summarize . . . the process of signification whereby every sign, in ‘working’ with other signs, is in turn ‘worked’ by them” (135). Ilona Treitel comes to a similarly unhelpful conclusion, arguing that questions such as “whether Milly prevails or is defeated, whether her art or that represented by ‘Lancaster Gate’ is diseased . . . are left open for the

and his earlier novel indicate, he believed deeply in the sensitive person's ability to succeed in this project as well as in his or her obligation to try. If his postmodern critics are without faith in any transcendental signifier, James himself was not so despairing, believing as he did in a spiritual dimension of consciousness available to any individual who develops an adequate sensitivity to life. Ultimately, James's novel expresses not his moral skepticism but his most deeply held convictions, not his doubt but his faith in the readers' ability to communicate.

The notion that James's later fiction might have been constructed upon some kind of moral framework or foundation has been so entirely dismissed by recent critics that it seems necessary to turn away from *The Wings of the Dove* long enough to reestablish that moral possibility. In his recent book *Henry James and Modern Moral Life* (2000), Robert B. Pippin has begun the project of setting James once again in a properly modernist, and not a postmodernist, context. Pippin acknowledges that James's fiction reveals his full awareness of the radical moral indeterminacies of the modern age, and yet Pippin also recognizes that "moral claims are real in James" (26). Pippin explains that although "there is everywhere in James a great . . . threat of complete indeterminacy," his protagonists nevertheless "experience a great, intensely felt, indisputably real limitation on such [moral] exploration, . . . some unmistakable 'call of conscience'" (28-29). Ultimately, however, Pippin can be no more specific than to say that the moral explorations of James's protagonists are limited by "something like the claims of others to be and to be treated as free, equally independent, end-setting, end-seeking subjects" (29). Pippin concludes that this argument is "admittedly and deliberately vague" and merely reflects the intentional "vagueness and imprecision of James's treatment" (48-49). The grounds upon which Jamesian protagonists such as Milly Theale and Merton Densher make their moral decisions becomes clearer, however, when we acknowledge the spiritual capacities that James understood the human consciousness to possess. To some, such a claim might seem "un-Jamesian," and this perhaps explains why critics have generally neglected one of the few documents which explicitly out-

lines his religious views, the late essay “Is There a Life after Death?”⁴ One might naturally be inclined to question the relevance to the 1902 novel of an essay composed in 1909, except that James indicates in the essay that the principles which he describes have long held him in good stead. F. O. Matthiessen rightly notes that although James had largely finished with the writing of fiction by this time, his essay nevertheless “mak[es] articulate the assumptions upon which so many of his characters base their behavior” (595).

Indication that the arguments in “Is There a Life after Death?” were not merely reflective of recent developments in his thought becomes clear in the remarkable passage in which James reviews the entire history of his attitude toward the essay’s title question. He explains that he “began with a distinct sense that the question didn’t appeal to [him]—as it appeals but scantily to the young” (608). As he grew into middle age, however, the evidence of death’s absoluteness seemed overwhelming. He continually heard “the universe . . . proclaiming in a myriad voices that I and my poor form of consciousness were a quantity that it at any moment could do without” (609). Thus, he writes, “I found it long impossible not to succumb . . . to discouragement by the mere pitiless dryness of all the appearances” (609). James explains that this period of depression led to a period of withdrawal into his own consciousness. As he puts it, “I had doubtless thus taken to increased living in it by reaction against so grossly finite a world” (609). In trying so “to take the measure of [his] consciousness,” he discovered that “the abode grew more and more interesting . . . and with this beautiful sign of its character that the more and the more one asked of it the more and the more it appeared to give” (609–10). Slowly, almost involuntarily, James became convinced that the “beautiful and adorable thing . . . is capable of sorts of action for which [he had] not even the wit to call upon it” and which led to “the improved discussability of a life hereafter” (610). James’s concern with improving the “discussability” of “a life hereafter” may surprise those most familiar with his fiction, but his

⁴For the most thoroughgoing analysis of James’s challenging essay to date see my own “‘Is There a Life after Death?’ Henry James’s Response to the New

remarks a few pages later are truly startling in their seemingly transcendental optimism:

[I]t is in a word the artistic consciousness and privilege in itself that thus shines as from immersion in the fountain of being. Into that fountain, to depths immeasurable, our spirit dips—to the effect of feeling itself, *quâ* imagination and aspiration, all scented with universal sources. What is that but an adventure of our personality, and how can we after it hold complete disconnection likely?

I do not so hold it, I profess, for my own part, and above all, I freely concede, do not in the least want to. (612–13)

Although a great deal of ink has been spilled in attempts to define the Jamesian concept of consciousness, few contemporary critics have acknowledged the full extent of the claims that James made on its behalf. The “artistic consciousness,” that is, the highly developed and elevated consciousness, “shines” for him as from infinite and supernatural sources. Most remarkable of all is James’s pronouncement that after having personally experienced such an “adventure of the personality,” he has long believed that his continued connection with his personal consciousness after death seems not only possible but positively likely. As he “freely concedes,” he does not even like to think otherwise. Such a statement does not, James goes on to argue, make him simply another example “of those who are happily and foolishly able to believe what they prefer” (614). Indeed, his view is not so much a “belief” as “a desire so confirmed . . . as to leave belief a comparatively irrelevant affair,” since “[i]f one acts from desire quite as one would from belief, it signifies little what name one would give one’s belief” (614). He speculates that whether there turned out to be an afterlife, his “belief” offered in the meantime “the splendid illusion of doing something myself for my prospect, or at all events for my own possibility, of immortality” (614). In addition, he asks, “who shall say over what fields of experience, past and current, and what immensities of perception and yearning, [one’s consciousness] shall not spread the protection of its wings?” (614).

James understood that the conclusions of science did not indicate such possibilities, but, he reminds the reader, “I reach beyond the laboratory brain” (614).

I would suggest that James’s description of consciousness as “spreading the wings of its protection” is something more than an accidental borrowing of the central metaphor of the earlier novel. Indeed, to anyone familiar with James’s biography, it would seem that in describing a period of depression which prompted his emotional withdrawal and that was followed by a feeling of restored hope and well-being he can only be alluding to the 1890s and early 1900s. The course of James’s depression during this decade is most meticulously presented in the fourth volume of Leon Edel’s biography, appropriately titled *The Treacherous Years*. Fred Kaplan likewise writes that beginning in 1888 James entered “a long season of deaths” (346) and that by 1895 he “felt more than ever his internal alienation, his inner distancing” (391). James’s most recent biographer, Lyndall Gordon, also concludes that in the 1890s James was beset by “a rage of depression” (233). By 1900, however, he seems to have turned a corner. Edel comments in his edition of the *Letters* that “[w]ith the advent of the new century, Henry James entered in-to the most fertile period of his life, a creative surge during which he had a great sense of health and happiness” (James, *Letters* 4:179). Kaplan concurs, claiming that in the years between 1901 and 1904, James “sailed . . . into his own Golden Isles” (464). Looking back from the vantage point of 1907, James wrote to W. E. Norris that he had “for more than four years entered into a state of health so altogether better than any I had ever known that my whole consciousness is transformed by the alleviation of it” (*Letters* 4:483). In his James family biography, R. W. B. Lewis rightly suggests that we “need not press James’s arithmetic too far” (575) to see that in a period of “more than four years,” going back to 1901, he had written *The Wings of the Dove*, *The Ambassadors* (1903), and *The Golden Bowl* (1904).

James’s letters to two younger men further suggest that the principles later outlined in “Is There a Life after Death?” played a central role in the recovery of his emotional health between 1898 and 1902.

James seems during these years to have been immensely infatuated with both these younger men: W. Morton Fullerton, then a journalist in Paris, and Hendrik Anderson, a sculptor who settled in Rome. Although he seldom managed to visit them, his letters reveal his attempts to satisfy his longings for them through the expansion of his consciousness, which he imagines in the letters as allowing him to embrace their various affairs as his own. James describes this union of minds most clearly in a previously unpublished letter to Fullerton of September 1899:

I've been unhappy at this brief inevitable delay in thanking you for your so deeply interesting letter. Everything in it moves and ploughs me up—and only one thing with a mere unprofitable pang: you saying, inhuman youth, that you didn't know I could be following your affair or drinking in your accents. As if, insatiate archer, I wasn't living on you from day to day and making you my meat and my drink. . . . You say things of a superior and admirable wisdom, and I take them from you and put them in my breast and I treasure them deep. Soyonsen,⁵ a thousand times yes, together—of the sacred band of the few non-screamers, in this screaming age, the few clear passion-haters, who, across wide spaces and bristling barriers, can find faith in their community and pass about to each other the bottled air of the truth! . . . I do nothing, as I was doing nothing when I wrote you the other day, but think to myself how fagged and finished you must be, so that the sense of it is a constant ache in my own intelligent brain. (HJ1)

Although James missed Fullerton intensely in the long intervals between their meetings, his words emphasize how present he felt in Fullerton's life and how present he felt Fullerton to be in his, suggesting powerfully the almost limitless capacity he recognized in the nurtured and elevated human consciousness. Notably, he employs a metaphor reminiscent of the Last Supper: the extension of his sympa-

thy with Fullerton allows him to drink of his “accents,” and to feed on him as on “meat and drink.” Through this shared consciousness of suffering, James finds “faith in their community,” their “sacred band.” Certainly, the “abyss of language” seems no obstacle here. Without raising their voices, they clear “wide spaces and bristling barriers” and “pass about to each other” the pure “bottled air of the truth.” James’s choice of words here bears a striking resemblance to the transcendental vocabulary he employs in the later essay.

A February 1902 letter to Anderson reveals further just how wide a space and how high a barrier James believed one’s consciousness could traverse. Having just read of the death of Anderson’s beloved brother, he offers Anderson this advice:

Let yourself go and *live*, even as a lacerated, mutilated lover, with your grief, your loss, your sore, unforgettable consciousness. Possess them and let them possess you, and life, so, will still hold you in her arms, and press you to her breast, and keep you, like the great merciless but still most enfolding and never disowning mighty Mother, on and on for things to come. Beautiful and unspeakable your account of relation to Andreas. Sacred and beyond tears. . . . Well, he is *all* yours now: he lives in you and out of all pain. Wait, and you will see; hold fast, sit tight, *stick hard*, and more things than I can tell you now will come back to you. (*Letters* 4:228)

Notably, James does not advise Anderson to immortalize his brother through his sculptures or to harness his grief as an inspiration to new artistic heights. Rather, he encourages Anderson to rely on his own consciousness to retrieve what seems to be irrevocably lost. In allowing himself to be “possessed” by his consciousness, Anderson shall repossess his brother. He has only to “wait” and “see,” and then more will be returned to him than James could venture to describe. If we are to be reborn, James felt, it would happen through our own extraordinary mind and a mystery beyond language. Significantly, when James wrote this letter to Anderson he was in the middle of writing *The Wings of*

the Dove. Although critics of the novel have typically focused on the resemblance between James and Merton Densher, we can, without insisting on too great a biographical specificity, make out the parallel trajectories of what we might call Milly Theale's and James's spiritual biographies. Plagued by a mysterious but apparently terminal illness that shades all of her experiences, Milly finds increasingly that she is, as James had been, reminded at every turn and "in a myriad voices" that her "poor form of consciousness [is] a quantity that [the universe] could at any moment do without." Searching for her salvation in the art and culture of Europe but finding none, she, too, withdraws as "[b]y reaction against so grossly finite a world." And she, too, we might say, "works out her salvation" while "taking the measure of her own consciousness." She then emerges from her self-imposed confinement with a renewed sense of energy and with an expanded capacity for sympathy and love. Transformed, she transforms Merton Densher as well, and like two people "passing the bottled air of the truth" between continents, they appear to communicate via a system that transcends language and even the grave.

In "Is There a Life after Death?" James remarks that in his youth "death remained for [him] in a large measure unexhibited and unaggressive" so that "[t]he exhibition, the aggression of life" seemed "to cover the ground and fill the bill" (608-09). Likewise, Milly Theale arrives in Europe seeking an absorbing diversion from her own mortal state, which has lately begun to exhibit itself more aggressively. In the justly famous scene where the reader first meets her, she is perched alone upon a rock on a mountain in Switzerland looking down upon the "kingdoms of the earth . . . in a state of uplifted and unlimited possession" (87). By now it is a critical commonplace to point out the scene's hardly veiled allusion to the temptation of Christ, but Milly does not here represent a Christ figure; rather, she succumbs to the temptation. Indeed, at the beginning of the novel all the wonders of the European capitals seem to her to contain the spirit of life. Sensing the shortness of time left to her, Milly feels with urgency the need to descend from the mountain into "the concrete world" of London, although her idea of this world has only been "inferred so fondly from what one had read and

dreamed” in Boston and New York (93). From the start, however, Milly is surrounded in Europe by those “myriad voices” that continually remind her of her own precarious existence. Shortly after her arrival she finds herself at Maud Lowder’s dinner table seated next to Lord Mark, a cynical aristocrat who offers her a first-rate education in the ways of London when he tells her simply and flatly, “Nobody here, you know, does anything for nothing” (106). Cleaving to her idealistic notions of European culture, Milly cannot immediately accept the truth of this central organizing principle. That the European culture of her dreams might in fact be founded on nothing more magical than a mere economic principle is a possibility she cannot at first afford to accept. Nevertheless, she cannot escape the sense that “there were clearly more dangers roundabout Lancaster Gate than one suspected in New York or could dream of in Boston” (117).

Increasingly, Milly realizes that in traveling to London she has, in effect, only kept her appointment in Samarra. In the much-discussed scene in which she is shown by Lord Mark the portrait of a woman by Bronzino and recognizes the woman’s resemblance to herself, she turns an emotional corner, as she herself later realizes. This recognition, however, does not help her to imagine herself married to Lord Mark and thus immortalized among his other perfectly tasteful items at Matcham, as he had hoped it would; rather, she sees in the painting only her doom. To Milly, the “very great personage” seems only a desperately ill woman “unaccompanied by a joy” and long since dead—“she was dead, dead, dead” (137). The pronoun naturally refers to the woman in the painting but applies equally, Milly knows, to herself. Realizing this, she cannot help breaking down in tears, which, she later acknowledges, “were the sign of her consciously rounding her protective promontory, quitting the blue gulf of comparative ignorance and reaching her view of the troubled sea” (265). Just as James felt for years that his sensibilities were blighted by the seemingly ubiquitous signs of death’s absoluteness, so Milly finds herself adrift in threatening seas after rounding the last “protective promontory” of her denial. From that moment on, she sees in every painting at the National Gallery, in every London scene, and in every face she meets, only the

mounting evidence of her own mortality. She first turns to the physician, Sir Luke Strett, but when his questions delve beyond the medical her worst fears are only confirmed, for “when pity held up its telltale face like a head on a pike, in a French Revolution, bobbing before a window, what was the inference but that the patient was bad?” (148). During her subsequent walk through Regent’s Park her alienation deepens, and she feels as if the “grey immensity” of London has “somehow of a sudden become her element” (152). The degradations of time are abundantly visible in the park. Amidst the empty benches and the “smutty sheep” Milly asks herself “the practical question of life”: How should one live, or how does one know when one is living? As she glances about, she develops an awareness that she and the people around her are all of the same mortal class, and social distinctions melt away. Thinking of “the compassion that [Sir Luke] so signally permitted himself to waste,” she realizes how it had rather suddenly “reduced her to her ultimate state, which was that of a poor girl—with her rent to pay for example—staring before her in a great city” (155). The “practical question of life” presents as much a problem for the rich girl as for the poor girl—they both have their rent to pay, a rent that cannot be paid in the coin of Kate Croy or Maud Lowder. As James notes in “Is There a Life after Death?” there are times when all the appearances seem to conspire to confirm “the grim view, . . . the sense of the rigour of our physical basis” (604). In words that echo his statement about his own depression, Milly finally decides that while “[i]t was perhaps superficially more striking that one could live if one would . . . , it was more appealing, insinuating, irresistible in short, that one would live if one could” (156).

As it once had for James, increasing awareness of the “grossly finite” nature of the world prompts Milly’s physical and emotional withdrawal. Having, since Matcham, felt herself floating further and further out into the open seas of chaos and despair, she seeks shelter on the continent in a rented Venetian palace. But even there she cannot escape the feeling of having been painted into a corner by her own inescapable mortality: “She was in it,” James writes, “as in the ark of her deluge,” and “she would ask nothing more than to sit tight in it and

float on and on" (264). The biblical allusion is apt, for the palace becomes the site of the transformative expansion of her consciousness that ultimately delivers her from her crushing despair and through which she becomes herself Noah's dove. At first, however, the palace is only the site of her deepest despair; refusing to leave it or to be seen, she imposes on herself an isolation that violates the pairing concept of the ark and renders it a tomb. When Lord Mark arrives with his cynical proposal of marriage, she finds that, oddly, he is the one person to whom she can express her despair. Noting the pervasive gloom of the palace, he asks, "Should you positively like to live here?" (271), and she responds "I think I should like . . . to die here." As she herself recognizes, her interment in the palace already amounts to little more than a death in life. The palace, she tells him, shall be her "great gilded shell" (272) in which "not quite extinct perhaps, but shrunken, wasted, wizened," she shall spend her remaining hours "rattling about . . . like the dried kernel of a nut (269). While he senses how "the gathering dusk of *her* personal world" has made it "vain for him to pretend that he could find himself at home, since it was charged with depressions and with dooms, with the chill of the losing game" (272), his hopes for a hasty marriage that will make him a wealthy man crumble. Despairing of everyone and of every plan for the future—and having seen through him from the first—she ushers him out with the suggestion that he set his marital sights on Kate Croy, a more viable alternative. While Lord Mark prepares to leave, a servant approaches Milly to announce the arrival of Merton Densher. Thus, as one man with thoughts of exploiting her for a quick fortune exits, another enters. The difference between them is a matter of love.

As has often been noted, the novel's perspective shifts at this point, no longer allowing the reader direct access to Milly Theale's internal state. James thus reveals Milly's spiritual transformation only through the eyes of outsiders, and most often through the perceptions of Densher. Restricting the access to Milly's thought process at this critical juncture does not, however, necessarily plunge James's readers into an impenetrable moral and linguistic abyss, as some have argued. Rather, in forcing them to follow in Densher's footsteps, James challenges his

readers to achieve a parallel moral development, to expand their sympathies and to raise their consciousnesses. Just as James could so focus on Fullerton's experience that "the sense of it" became "a constant ache in [his] own intelligent brain," so Densher and the readers must extend their sympathy to feel Milly's suffering and her joys. James states in "Is There a Life after Death?" that his explorations of his own consciousness had led him boldly to "establish speculative and imaginative connections, to take up conceived presumptions and pledges, that have . . . all the air of not being decently able to escape redeeming themselves" (611). Indeed, he writes, if he "were not constantly, in his commonest processes, carrying the field of consciousness further and further, making it lose itself in the ineffable, he shouldn't in the least feel himself an artist" (611). Such artistic explorations had convinced him of "sources to which [he] owe[d] the apprehension of far more and far other combinations than observation and experience in their ordinary sense, ha[d] given [him] the pattern of" (611). Through the design of *The Wings of the Dove* James forces his readers "to take up" the text's "conceived presumptions and pledges" and "carr[y] the field of their consciousness further." For "who shall say over what fields of experience . . . it shall not spread the protection of its wings?" Through this expansion of consciousness, readers might even come to understand James's authorial intentions more or less rightly, thus joining the "sacred band" of those who, "across wide spaces and bristling barriers, can find faith in their community and pass about to each other the bottled air of the truth." James put his own faith in such a possibility, and that is where Merton Densher ultimately puts his. As with James, Milly takes to living more within her consciousness "by reaction against so grossly finite a world," and she, too, discovers that "the more and the more one asked of it the more and the more it appeared to give." Ultimately she is saved by her realization that the dimensions of her ark are such that it can house a pair, that her consciousness can expand to accommodate the needs and desires of another as though they were her own. Through this discovery of an enlarged capacity for love, she transforms her tomblike palace into the ark of her salvation.

That a change *does* take place in Milly with the coming of Den-sher

is apparent even to those who fail—or refuse—to understand her transformation, and it is signaled by her new willingness to venture outside the palace. Only a few days after Densher's arrival, she who "had expressed as yet . . . no such clear desire to go anywhere, not even to make an effort for a parish feast, or an autumn sunset, nor to descend her staircase for Titian or Gianbellini," suddenly "declare[s] it his plain duty to invite her on some near day to tea" (282). By the eighth day of his visit, Milly's love for Densher is so apparent to Kate that when he suggests quitting Venice, she snaps back, "Do you want to kill her?" (293). Susan Stringham, too, recognizes the difference that Densher has made, telling him on the same day that "She's ever so much better . . . she is marvelous," even though Milly's physical condition has worsened (297). Susan thus pleads with him to stay on in Venice, assuring him that he "can do everything you know" (300). What "everything" amounts to becomes clear a short time later as Milly plays host to a small party. For the first time she wears white instead of "her almost monastic, her hitherto inveterate black" (301-02). She seems to Densher "different, younger, fairer" (301). Again the difference in Milly is not the result of any improvement in her physical health, for Kate remarks to Densher, "She's worse" (305). Nevertheless, as Milly greets her guests, Densher feels her "diffuse in wide warm waves the spell of a general 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" (301). Although she neglects Densher for her other visitors, he realizes that her neglect is only a proof of her confidence in him, "for nothing really of so close a communion had up to this time passed between them as the single bright look and the three gay words with which her confessed consciousness brushed by him" (302). The moment is indicative of the discovery that Milly has made, the difference it makes to her, and the difference it will make for Densher. Without words or physical caresses she nevertheless takes possession of him "up to his neck" through the almost wordless "brush of consciousness," foreshadowing the way in which after death she will become more than ever a felt and living presence in his life. The difference in Milly is not

simply, as Kate believes, that her desire for Densher has made her want to live longer; rather, she has happened upon a new definition of living. During her walk through the Regent's Park, Milly had felt only the doom implicated by Sir Luke's advice that "one could live if one would," but during her last interview with Densher to which the reader is privy she tells him with bright confidence that she now feels "capable of life": "If I want to live," she announces, "I *can*" (318). Naturally, Densher misreads Milly's words as a flat statement of her improving health, but when Milly tells him "I'm splendid," it's not to her physical condition that she refers. When, thinking of her fortune and her apparent health, Densher tells her that she's "got everything," and she concurs, "Call it so, I don't complain" (319), her "everything" reaches far beyond the "everything" of Densher's or Kate's imagination as well as beyond the limits of her own diseased body. Although Densher readily assents that Milly has never complained, she reminds him, "It isn't a merit, when one sees one's way" (319).

The ultimate miracle of Milly's spiritual growth is the way in which it inspires a parallel transformation in her beloved. On first arriving in Venice, Densher continues "to see her as he had first seen her" and finds visiting with her as "simple as sitting with his sister might have been, and not . . . very much more thrilling" (279), an attitude toward Milly that reminds Kate of "a clever cousin calling on a cousin afflicted, and bored for his pains" (279-80). The hours that he spends with Milly, however, have their effect, and after Kate returns to London, Densher can no longer say "whether it were loyal to Kate or disloyal" when he tells Milly, "I stay because I've got to" (320). The real turning point in Densher's understanding, however, comes in a passage that has not been adequately highlighted in previous criticism. Having been reminded by the arrival of Sir Luke Strett in Venice of the seriousness of Milly's condition, Densher suddenly sees, as James puts it, "the truth that was the truest about Milly" (347). Like the person who has been walking through a dense forest and suddenly finds himself at the edge of a cliff, he jumps back with a start and sees a whole new vista spreading out before him:

He hadn't only, with all the world, hovered outside an impenetra-

ble ring fence, within which there reigned a kind of expensive vagueness made up of smiles and silences and beautiful fictions and priceless arrangements, all strained to breaking; but he had also, with every one else, as he now felt, actively fostered suppressions which were in the direct interest of every one's good manner, every one's pity, every one's really quite generous ideal. It was a conspiracy of silence, as the cliché went, to which no one had made an exception, the great smudge of mortality across the picture, the shadow of pain and horror, finding in no quarter a surface of spirit or of speech that consented to reflect it. . . .

The facts of physical suffering, of incurable pain, of the chance grimly narrowed, had been made, at a stroke, intense, and this was to be the way he was now to feel them. The clearance of the air, in short, making vision not only possible but inevitable . . . (347)

The view to which Densher had blinded himself, to which they had all blinded themselves, was the view from Milly's perspective, the view of the lonely and isolated dying person. By virtue of the leap she has taken in moving beyond her self-destructive desire to find the wonders of life in a decaying palace, Milly reveals wonders to Densher as well. He becomes aware finally of her full humanity, of "physical suffering, of incurable pain," and of "the chance grimly narrowed," all of which Milly has endured without the support of a single, solitary soul. In restoring Milly to her full humanity he restores himself as well. As it does for Milly, and as it had for James, the awareness of the near proximity of death and physical suffering reconnects Densher to his own humanity by reminding him that all people share a common fate.

From this point on, what Martha Banta refers to as Merton Densher's "ESP" grows by leaps and bounds (193).⁶ He understands Milly's actions and can analyze them long after he has had his last conversa-

⁶Banta rightly notes that by the novel's end Densher has "developed his own ESP about Milly's hovering presence" (193), although Banta's equating his clairvoyance with "some of the powers of women in love" (193) trivializes the empathy, the intimacy, and the community which Densher and Milly achieve through the expansion of their consciousnesses.

tion with her, and he knows what her letters contain without having to read them. This union with Milly survives even after her death. In his description to Kate of his final days in Venice, for example, Densher describes his last conversation with Milly (by then, of course, Lord Mark has revealed to her Kate and Densher's sinister plot) as one during which few words were spoken but through which they communicated with each other more surely than ever before. Densher explains to Kate that he went to Milly for the last time, guessing that she had sent for him in order to hear the truth from his own lips. Upon arriving, however, he had intuited a different motive altogether; she had called him, he realized, only when she discovered that he had remained in Venice even after his treachery had been revealed. She had, with the clairvoyance of her compassion, understood that he had stayed on for *her*; as Densher explains, "If it was somehow for *her* I was still staying, she wished that to end, she wished me to know how little there was need of it. And as a manner of farewell she wished herself to tell me so. . . . That was really all—and in perfect kindness" (361). Kate then asks, "And it took twenty minutes to make [her point]?" Densher thinks a little, and then responds coolly, "I didn't time it to a second. I paid her the visit—just like another" (361). For Densher, Milly's true gift to him had been granted then and there; she had understood that he had remained out of a genuine sense of his responsibility and not merely out of a cheap sense of guilt. Then, in a gesture of "perfect kindness" staggering in its generosity, she had forgiven him, had released him; somehow she had found within herself the ability to love him without regard for her self-interest. At the first shock of betrayal, Milly had at first retreated, "turned her face to the wall" (333), to the walls, that is, of her Venetian tomb, but then with a tremendous leap of her consciousness she once and for all escaped them. Whereas earlier in the novel Kate always seems two steps ahead of Densher in her analyses of Milly, her interpretive abilities utterly fail her when Densher's are at their most acute. He now understands Milly through and through, and yet she can only wonder why he had not made more economical use of their last moments together. Holding rigidly to her materialistic and dehumanizing stan-

dards of value, Kate cannot conceive of why Densher might have stayed with Milly after all words had been spoken. She cannot imagine how the needs of a dying person might be met by the simple presence of another or how the two of them may have continued to communicate after all had been said. Densher attempts to convey to Kate the significance of Milly's illness and the full extent of her selflessness in having freed him to return to Kate without demanding even so much as an explanation for his betrayal, but Kate can only, in essence, look at her watch. She ends by telling him, "We've succeeded. . . . She won't have loved you for nothing" (364). Her words are so obviously inappropriate that they "made him wince" (364), for he knows that if she is still taking comfort in Milly's fortune, Kate has misunderstood the significance of everything he has told her.

Milly dies on Christmas Eve, and, appropriately, Densher learns of her death the next day. Her death is her final gift to him and to Kate; Milly absents herself in order to make their happiness possible. Here again, as he does throughout the novel, James uses Christian symbolism. Always the improviser and the appropriator of other people's plots, he had in this novel truths to tell that were reinforced by the mythos of Christian redemption. Naturally, those critics who imagine more cynical motivations in Milly and Densher have little to say about the timing of her death, interpreting it, perhaps, as merely ironic. On the day of her death Densher receives the letter that will doubtlessly inform him that she has bequeathed him a fortune. Understanding that her real gift was her forgiveness and not her money, he offers the envelope to Kate unopened. She throws it in the fire still sealed, not because she shares Densher's indifference to the money but, I would suggest, because she knows that a more businesslike letter will come later from Milly's lawyers, one which will not contain any bothersome declarations of Milly's affections. In the novel's final scene the vast gulf that now separates Densher and Kate only widens. The letter from the lawyers has arrived, and as with the first letter, he sends it to Kate unopened. When she returns it with the seal broken and knows exactly how much has been left to Densher, he asks her not to reveal the amount. Surprised, she asks, "And do you need no more definite

sense of what it is you ask me to help you renounce?" Densher responds, "I'm willing to believe that the amount of money's not small" (402). Even then Kate cannot make the imaginative leap to Densher's position, cannot see that the money has become completely irrelevant to him. The depth of her misunderstanding is revealed when she still attempts to convince Densher that Milly has saved them. Kate tells him, "[S]he did it *for* us. . . . I used to call her, in my stupidity—for want of anything better—a dove. Well she stretched out her wings, and it was to that they reached. They cover us." Densher agrees, "They cover us" (403). Each of them concludes that they have indeed been saved by Milly's miraculous gift, but when Kate speaks of Milly's wings she speaks merely of her wealth. Densher agrees that the wings "cover" them, but by that he means only that Milly has saved them through her forgiveness and through the stupendous example of her death. To the last line of the novel, Kate fails to understand the change that has taken place in Densher; she believes that he has fallen in love with Milly, telling him, "your memory's your love. You *want* no other." However, Densher immediately replies, "I'll marry you, mind you, in an hour" (403). Kate then asks if he is suggesting that they should be again as they were, and Densher answers, "As we were" (403). With that Kate drops the envelope on the table and turns to the door saying, "We shall never be again as we were!" To Densher, the words "As we were" refer to the time when without a penny they had pledged themselves to one another. To Kate, however, the words refer to the time when they had been as one in their willingness to pilfer the pockets of a dead woman, while the real reason they cannot be "as they were" is beyond Kate's moral vision and indicates her inability or unwillingness to grow as Densher has grown. Densher's offer to marry Kate if she refuses the money is not a cynical test, nor is it even unkind; he knows that the gap between them can only be closed through Kate's moral maturity. Without that, their marriage would be torturous, and so he releases her from their engagement because he finds it the most caring thing he can do for her.

Although those who defend the heroism of Milly Theale and

Merton Densher have often been attacked on the grounds of sentimentality, one of the most remarkable aspects of James's novel is the unsparing and unsentimental way in which he details the self-sacrifices and rewards of these protagonists. Milly dies for Densher and for Kate, and yet, as Densher knows, there is in this not a hint of the romantic, the saccharine, nor the artificial. Her gift is of another order, a kind beautifully described by the contemporary ethicist Zygmunt Bauman: "There is but one way of rendering love. . . . and that is [t]o prise asunder love from the possession; not to ask the object of love to prove worthy of the loving emotion; not to expect the object of admiration to provide the certificate of admirable qualities; and above all, not to demand this humility to be reciprocated" (205). While Kate accepts Densher only provisionally throughout the novel, Milly loves him without regard even for his moral condition, loves him, that is, without expecting him to "provide" his "certificate of admirable qualities." She does not die from heartbreak like some heroine from the romance novels that James so often disparaged but out of her understanding of the basic human responsibility that Bauman refers to as "the starting point of all morality":

That responsibility for the Other . . . is not a conditional responsibility, not a contractual responsibility, not a responsibility "from here to there," "from this moment to that." It is a total responsibility, a no-excuse and no limits responsibility, which at no point of space or time can rest and celebrate itself as done and fulfilled. The care for the Other lives as long as the Other lives. . . . Death may be the price of caring life, but it is a price which caring life, being caring life, cannot and would not refuse to pay. Such death comes not as an outcome of a decision—heroic or romantic, carefully calculated or off the cuff, rational or foolish. It comes uninvited and unwelcome. . . . It comes because one cannot go on caring while trying to escape it. (208)

Milly's choice is just such a choice, neither "calculated," as so many

critics would have us believe,⁷ nor “off the cuff.” In fact, she has not even a real choice but merely accepts what she now feels to be a moral imperative: to continue to care for another person, a person whom she believes does not love her. According to Densher’s description, their last meeting is solemn and quiet; words are hardly necessary. Milly “decides” then, but her decision cannot be avoided; it comes to her “uninvited and unwelcome.” Had it come any other way, it would have cheapened her gift.

Those who find the possibility of Milly’s “perfect kindness” too “soft” to be believable coming from a writer of the hard-boiled intellectual powers of Henry James, might look again to the passage in Edel’s biography describing the visit James’s twenty-year-old nephew, Billy, made to Lamb House just a few months after his uncle had finished *The Wings of the Dove*. He wrote home to his father: “Uncle Henry’s welcome to me, and his treatment of me in general, is kinder than that of a mother” (457). As he would remember years later, his uncle told him then, “three things, in human life, are important. The first is to be kind. The second is to be kind. And the third is to be kind” (457). In *The Wings of the Dove*, James asserts that no promise, no contract, no fortune, no portrait, no palace, and no city is more important than kindness; where everything else evaporates, “caring life” survives. That had been the great lesson of James’s internal explorations, his discovery that “caring life” was the only kind of life that mattered. Through

⁷See Schiller, for example, who contends that “[t]he money that made [Milly] a potential victim is offered, not entirely out of love and certainly not out of generosity, but to degrade those who had sought it” (199). Likewise, Michael Moon contends that Milly “is not the beatific creature, passive and manipulated, that idealizing readers have tried to make her,” but “an active participant, if not an adept, in the psychosexual power games that characterize life in her milieu” (431). Nicholas Buchele compliments Moon for pointing out that “Milly—by virtue of her money and the fact that she goes on about it . . . in a coy sort of way—is seen from one angle as being just as monstrous as everyone else” (142). McNaughton suggests that “Milly may, at the end, be purposely playing a Christ-like role—or more accurately a Christ-like identity, the last one of a series . . . that she has been trying on” (96). See also Smith (216) and

his explorations of his own consciousness James discovered a way to expand so as to feel present in lives that were being lived whole continents away. He had always been interested in the human consciousness, but this “adventure of personality” increasingly suggested to him that greater leaps were possible than he had previously imagined. In *The Wings of the Dove*, James developed a narrative structure that demands that its reader attempt similar leaps. James had come to accept by then that his readership would be limited; those of the “sacred band” willing to make the required effort would necessarily be “few.” With them, however, who could say that real communication might not just be possible, and that they, too, might not be transformed by their “brush” with the consciousness of another?

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