

Preface

The present paper by Professor J. Hillis Miller was given as a lecture at Aarhus University on September 7, 1999. In his paper J. Hillis Miller gives a profound close reading of the death motive in Henry James's novel *The Wings of the Dove*, and of the obscure relation between speech acts and death.

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J. Hillis Miller:

Lying Against Death: Out of the Loop

. . . death does not consummate existence, one would, rather, have to say that it prevents it from turning into essence. (Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Sense of the World*, 35)

The Wings of the Dove is in "essence" a novel about death. James in the preface says so, and there is no reason to doubt his word. Or, to put this another way, we must believe or not believe what he says, as the characters within the novel believe one another or do not. Or rather, it might be even better to say, *The Wings of the Dove* is a novel about the relation of speech acts to death. Or yet again, refining further, it might be best to say that it is a novel about that peculiar kind of speech act called a lie in its relation to death. Let me try to explain how this is so.

Certainly James himself, if the preface is to be believed, thought of *The Wings of the Dove* as having death as its primary theme, to be specific the death of a young woman who has everything for which to live. As usual, James speaks so eloquently and so forcefully in the preface that it is hard after reading it to see beyond or beneath James's own self-criticism, to think out what he may have, for more or less secret reasons of his own, omitted saying that the novel itself nevertheless says, however indirectly, or that might by another reader be put differently from the way he puts it in the preface. "The idea," says James, writing, or rather dictating, six years after the novel was written, "reduced to its essence, is that of a young person conscious of a great capacity for life, but early stricken and doomed, condemned to die under short respite, while also enamoured of the world; aware moreover of the condemnation and passionately desiring to 'put in'

before extinction as many of the finer vibrations as possible, and so achieve, however briefly, the sense of having lived."¹

James says four things about this "idea" in the preface. First, he tells the reader that he had the theme of *Wings* in his mind for many years before actually writing the novel. The notebook entries for *The Wings of the Dove* precede by many years the writing of the novel.² It seems as if he may have felt some deep resistance toward writing this particular story: "Long had I turned it over, standing off from it, yet coming back to it; convinced of what might be done with it, yet seeing the theme as formidable" (1: v). "It" in this sentence refers here to what he has just called the "idea" of the novel. "Idea" is a key word in the novel itself. James goes on a bit later in the preface to speak of the idea or theme as somehow hiding a secret, an impenetrable mystery: "The expression of her state and that of one's intimate relation to it might therefore well need to be discreet and ingenious; a reflexion that fortunately grew and grew, however, in proportion as I focussed my image-roundabout which, as it persisted, I repeat, the interesting possibilities and the attaching wonderments, not to say the insoluble mysteries, thickened apace" (1: vi). What does he mean by "one's intimate relation" to the heroine's "state"? Is not the heroine an imaginary character? How can one have an intimate relation to a fictitious character? Does "intimate" here mean "secret," "hidden," perhaps shameful or at any rate inexpressible? "Insoluble mysteries"? What could James mean by that? An insoluble mystery is a true secret, if there is such a thing, a secret that can never be found out. What is there about the idea of a young woman doomed to die and fighting death every inch of the way that incorporates an insoluble mystery? I shall return to these questions.

Second, James in the preface recognizes that it is impossible to write a narrative about death, or even about dying, in itself. On the one hand death and dying are too dark as subjects. A work on such a gloomy topic is not likely to be a commercial success. Indeed James was wholly unsuccessful in his attempts to sell *The Wings of the Dove* for serial publication. On the other hand there is not enough to say about death and dying. They resist language. That is what Paul de Man means, in part at least, when he says, in one of his more disturbing or

even scandalous pronouncements, "Death is a displaced name for a linguistic predicament."³ I shall return to this allergy between language and death.

Because of this allergy, James's novel will need to be about his heroine's resistance to death: "the poet essentially *can't* be concerned with the act of dying. Let him deal with the sickest of the sick, it is still by the act of living that they appeal to him, and appeal the more as the conditions plot against them and prescribe the battle" (1: vi). In the case of Milly Theale, the act of living, as James makes clear, takes the form of a passionate resistance to death: "she had been given me from far back as contesting every inch of the road, as catching at every object the grasp of which might make for delay, as clutching these things to the last moment of her strength" (1: vii).

Third, James indicates that even the act of living in defiance of death can only be represented directly up to a certain point. Beyond that point it must be presented indirectly, by way of one or more reflectors of that act of living/dying. After the climactic scene at the end of Book Seventh when Milly's solitary wandering through the rooms of her great palazzo in Venice is interrupted by Lord Mark who has come to propose to her, Milly's consciousness is never again directly presented. The presiding consciousness becomes Densher's for the rest of the novel. In a sense Milly is already dead, for the reader at least, since her consciousness has vanished once and for all from intimate representation, however intimate James's own relation to Milly's state may have been. "Milly's situation," says James, "ceases at a given moment to be 'renderable' in terms closer than those supplied by Kate's intelligence, or, in a richer degree, by Densher's, or, for one fond hour, by poor Mrs. Stringham's" (1: xvii). James in the last reference apparently means the scene in which Susan Stringham comes to Densher's Venice apartment to tell him that Milly has "turned her face to the wall" (2: 270). The non-presentation of Milly's thoughts and feelings toward the end of her life is a striking example of what James calls "the author's instinct everywhere for the *indirect* presentation of his main image" (1: xxii, James's emphasis). Some subjects, the act of dying for example (but it is more than a nominal example), cannot be presented directly.

Fourth, James tells the reader that this death will wreak havoc among the living, even though such a person as Milly Theale, an extremely rich young American woman without any living family, will almost inevitably fall among thieves, so to speak. She will in one way or another be cheated, swindled: "What one had discerned, at all events, from an early stage, was that a young person so devoted and exposed, a creature with her security hanging so by a hair, couldn't but fall somehow into some abysmal trap—this being, dramatically speaking, what such a situation most naturally implied and imposed" (1: ix). By "devoted and exposed" James means devoted to death, as the idiom has it, as a sacrificial animal is devoted, in the sense of sworn by a sacred oath, to be killed, or as a "votary" is a certain kind of religious devotee. Milly is "exposed" not just in the sense of being vulnerable to fraud, but also in the sense that a scapegoat is exposed, left in isolation, outside social confines of reciprocal obligations, to die. This is one significance of the appellation "dove" Kate invents for Milly. Doves were one kind of sacrificial creature, among the Romans for example. In a play on the -pose root James says Milly's "exposure" is "imposed," a matter of inevitable imposition.

Even though Milly is certain to fall into some abysmal trap, as indeed she does, nevertheless she is an extreme danger to all those who have anything to do with her, especially those who try to swindle and exploit her. James uses three striking, and not wholly compatible, figures to name the disaster Milly's death brings others, even though they are bent on "working" her for all she is worth. Milly is like the Lorelei, the Rhine-maiden who lures men to their death. The persons around Milly, those who promote her illusion that she may yet continue to live, are "drawn in as by some pool of a Lorelei-. . . terrified and tempted and charmed; bribed away, it may even be, from more prescribed and natural orbits, inheriting from their connection with her strange difficulties and still stranger opportunities, confronted with rare questions and called upon for new discriminations" (1: viii). It is Densher more than Kate, Aunt Maud, or Susan Stringham who is most drawn out of his orbit, made exorbitant, by his attraction to Milly. Though his prescribed orbit is to remain faithful to the oaths he and Kate have sworn to one another ("prescribed" in the sense of being

written down beforehand as commands to follow), he is forced into ethical discriminations, decisions, and responsibilities that he knew nothing of before. Nevertheless, the other characters too have their lives decisively deflected, by no means necessarily for the better, even by selfish measurements, much less ideal ethical ones, through their association with Milly, however much of a dove, in the sense of gentle and innocent, she may seem to be.

A little later in the preface the figure of the Lorelei is replaced by two overlapping metaphors, one of which (the sinking of a great ship) echoes a trope already used for Milly in the body of the novel. The other picks up the economic imagery in the novel, about which I shall say more later. "I have named the Rhine-maiden," says James, "but our young friend's existence would create rather, all round her, very much that whirlpool movement of the waters produced by the sinking of a big vessel or the failure of a great business; when we figure to ourselves the strong narrowing eddies, the immense force of suction, the general engulfment that, for any neighbouring object, makes immersion inevitable" (1: x). A big ship goes down and everything else in its neighborhood goes down too. A big business fails and all the investors as well as many adjacent businesses may fail too. Having anything to do with Milly is extremely dangerous.

James goes on to say that though he is primarily interested in Milly's own sense of what happens to her through others, nevertheless her extravagant generosity and mild goodness are, paradoxically, what brings disaster to those around her. James needs to adjudicate carefully here the question of who causes the catastrophe. He even needs to do so to some degree against the implication of his figures, which is that Milly as Lorelei, sinking vessel, or failing business causes the disaster of the others. No, James in effect says, the surrounding figures bring their own doom upon themselves. They do this just by trying to capitalize on Milly's goodness and her fortune, as investors are to blame if they think a certain investment is a "sure thing" and try to make money on it. Nevertheless, Milly's best qualities were themselves "provoking" and in that ironic sense caused the catastrophes to the others. It is almost as if James were saying, "Watch out. Bad things will happen to you if you come too close to someone who is extravagantly

generous and good." Or, to put this from Milly's own perspective: "Don't be too generous and good. If you are, you will, by a perverse moral law, cause harm to those around you." Nevertheless, James wants also to exonerate Milly. "I need scarce say, however," he asserts in the sentence after the one just quoted from the preface, "that in spite of these communities of doom [all those taken down by the sinking of the great ship 'The Milly'] I saw the main dramatic complication much more prepared for my vessel of sensibility than by her—the work of other hands (though with her own imbrued too, after all, in the measure of their never not being, in some direction, generous and extravagant, and thereby provoking)" (1: x).

Why is this? Why is Milly's particular form of generosity destructively provoking? The answer lies in the tangle of relations in the novel between death and lies. Society in *The Wings of the Dove* is a reciprocal system of working and being worked. It is, that is, modelled on venture capitalism. London society is economic through and through. Like the capitalist monetary system of which it is a part, this society works only so long as the participants go on believing in the distribution of relative values that makes it up. As Milly observes of these London people, "they appeared all—every one they saw—to think tremendously of money" (1: 195), to which Susie replies, sensibly enough, that Milly has so much money that she does not need to think about it: "it came, as a subject of indifference, money did, easier to some people than to others" (1: 196). Money has value just because it is valued. This is the model for other valuations in the novel. Lord Mark is not really any more valuable just because he is a nobleman, but if everyone believes in his value, he has it. Milly's great success in London is a matter of fashion. Nothing more interesting than Milly happens to be around at the time, and so Milly becomes an instant success. Milly has an "image" of herself as "being, as Lord Mark had declared, a success. This depended more or less of course on his idea of the thing" (1: 160). Precisely. Success is a matter of people's, the right people's, "ideas," and of their faith in those ideas. Lord Mark in this interchange goes on to say of Aunt Maud, who has launched Milly by taking her up as a protégé, "She'll get back . . . her money. . . . Nobody here, you know, does anything for nothing" (1: 160). The whole system

of relative valuations is based on nothing of substantial worth as foundation, at least not on any insight into that, nor on an objectively valid method of measuring value. Another more hyperbolic way to put this is to say that this social system is based on a set of lies that everyone knows are lies and yet agrees to pretend to believe. The whole airy fabric of giving and taking, of exchange, substitution, and appropriation, has no substance and is suspended over nothing.

Yet another way to express this is to say that the social system is sustained by a complex set of constantly renewed speech acts that declare that such and such a person, rank, or thing has such and such a value. The paradigmatic type of such speech acts in the novel is the lie, exemplified in all those dozens of lies the characters tell one another. A lie is a pure example of a way to do things with words, since its truth value is nil, while its effectiveness as a performative utterance depends only on its being believed in or on someone's pretending to believe it. All speech acts are in a sense lies, since they bring about the condition they name, a condition that, as it is being named, does not yet exist as something to which truthful reference can be made. When the minister or Justice of the Peace says, "I pronounce you man and wife," the couple are not man and wife until the last syllable of that sentence echoes in the air. The condition comes into being after the fact, after it has been invoked by the speech act. It only works if everyone believes in it, just as two people are legally married only if everyone has confidence in the authority of the one who says "I pronounce you man and wife."

Speech acts, for example lies, have a complex relation to death. Lies, as Marlow reflects in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, have a flavor of mortality about them.⁴ They are connected in some obscure and not easily identifiable way with death, with the fact that all men, and all women too, will sooner or later die. One way to identify this relation is to see that only creatures that can die can utter speech acts. This is in part because it is a distinctive feature of speech acts that their efficacy is unpredictable. A god cannot utter a performative. This is because a god knows for certain what will happen. Jehovah's "Let there be light" is not a performative, while a human being's "I bet the sun will rise tomorrow" is a genuine performative. The person who says that has no

way of knowing for sure whether the sun will rise or not, just as the one who makes a promise or engages himself or herself to be married, secretly or publicly, has no way of knowing whether or not he or she will remain faithful to the pledge or the promise, for one thing because he or she may die before fulfilling the promise. All promises have an implicit added clause: "I promise to do so and so if I do not die first."

This more or less obscure and secret connection of speech acts with death surfaces more overtly in three of the most common performatives: wills, bequests, and mortgages. When I sign a mortgage note, as its name implies, I am offering my death as a gage that guarantees I shall pay so much a month until the loan is paid off, even if I die before that happens. Or you could say that a mortgage is a bet, as the syllable "gage" suggests: "I bet I will die before this is paid off." Or perhaps it is the reverse: "If I do not die I promise to pay this off." In any case the one who signs a mortgage puts his or her death on the line, signs in the name of his or her mortality. A ghost could not sign a mortgage note or be held responsible if it did sign.

A bequest, such as Milly's bequest of her money to Densher, is of course a way of controlling what happens after the death of the person signing the bequest: "On my death, my estate, or such and such a part of it, goes to so and so as my beneficiary." A will is a way of using words to make my will effective after my death, to make what I will or want to happen, happen, even when I am no longer around to make it happen. As Marcel Proust well knew, a person is most likely to invoke death as a guarantee when he or she is lying, to say, for example, as Marcel reports Albertine as doing, "I can swear to you by anything you like, the honour of my aunt, the grave of my poor mother (la tombe de ma pauvre mère)," when she is most blatantly lying. Or at least so Marcel suspects, though he can never find out for sure.⁵ There are no literal mortgages in *The Wings of the Dove*, but in a sense all the speech acts in the novel—pledges, promises, bequests, lies—are mortgages, mort-gages, bets against death or in death's name: "I wish I may die if I am not telling the truth, if I do not fulfill my promise, if I am not faithful to my pledge."

The relation between death and the system of continuously renewed speech acts that keeps society going might be expressed as a

paradox. On the one hand, death has to be constantly invoked as the guarantee of a performative's seriousness and felicity, as in the word "mortgage" or as in "I swear on my mother's grave." On the other hand, death has to be obscured, forgotten, covered over in order for the system to go on working. The social system must go on as if it and all those participating in its round of exchanges and substitutions were immortal. The system depends on remembering and forgetting death at the same time. This forgetting of death, while at the same time remembering it, is made explicit in *The Wings of the Dove* in a reflection Densher makes toward the end of the novel about the way everyone pretends not to know that Milly is dying, while at the same time knowing it perfectly well:

He hadn't only never been near the facts of her condition—which counted so as a blessing for him; he hadn't only, with all the world, hovered outside an impenetrable 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 idea. 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 mere aesthetic instinct of mankind—" our young man had more than once, in the connexion, said to himself; letting the rest of the proposition drop, but touching again thus sufficiently on the outrage even to taste involved in one's having to see. So then it had been—a general conscious fool's paradise, from which the specified had been chased like a dangerous animal. (2: 298-9)

Everyone knows, but everyone pretends, by a "beautiful fiction," not to know, in a conspiracy of silence. That conspiracy assumes that if you do not mention something it does not exist or ceases to exist. You have chased it away, like a dangerous animal. Silence in this case is a paradoxical speech act, akin to Aunt Maud's assumption that she can make Kate stop thinking she loves Densher by saying nothing about it or by asserting the opposite. Silence can be species of effective lie, as in Densher's failure to tell Milly outright that Kate loves him and that they are engaged. Beyond that, however, James implies that mortality

cannot be a fact of consciousness or a fact of speech within the circuit of polite society. That society is like a mirror that reflects many things but does not consent, either because of some tacit decision or because of an innate disability, to reflect it. "The great smudge of mortality across the picture," says James, in a majestic phrase, "the shadow of pain and horror," namely, just what Milly is suffering and confronting, "find[s] in no quarter a surface of spirit or of speech that consent[s] to reflect it." James himself, or rather his narrator, participates in this conspiracy of silence. He (it), as I have said, presents Milly's final pain and horror only indirectly.

Densher is shown reflecting on this silence by calling it "the mere aesthetic instinct of mankind." Mankind generally shares with the artist, for example James in this novel, an unwillingness to consent to represent the great smudge of mortality across the picture. That smudge destroys the aesthetic. The aesthetic, as a system of representation, as the general system of the fine arts in the West since romanticism, for example in Hegel's so-called *Ästhetik*, is allergic to death. The aesthetic, as the making of beautiful artworks, depends on ignoring death.

The phrase "the great smudge of mortality across the picture" has, however, another reference, namely back to the great scene early in the novel when Milly confronts at Matcham,⁶ Lord Mark's splendid country house, the Bronzino portrait that everyone says closely resembles Milly. The confrontation is Milly's first clear recognition that she is dying. This is figured as her leaving a safe harbor for the dangerous open sea. This episode is Milly's own sinister mirror scene. It also recalls Kate's confrontation of her mirror image in the first sentence of the novel. Milly has her self-recognition of her mortality through seeing herself in the Bronzino. She weeps when she sees this:

Perhaps it was her tears that made it just then so strange and fair—as wonderful as he had said: the face of a young woman, all splendidly drawn, down to the hands, and splendidly dressed; a face almost livid in hue, yet handsome in sadness and crowned with a mass of hair, rolled back and high, that must, before fading with time, have had a family resemblance to her own [Milly has striking red hair]. The lady in question, at all events, with her slightly Michael-angesque squareness, her eyes of other days, her full lips,

her long neck, her recorded jewels, her brocaded and wasted reds, was a very great personage—only unaccompanied by a joy. And she was dead, dead, dead. (1: 220-1)

As in Poe's "The Oval Portrait," or Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, with its associated work, "The Portrait of Mr. W. H.," so in *The Wings of the Dove* Milly is, in a manner of speaking, killed by a portrait. The picture has a great smudge of mortality across it. The lady is "dead, dead, dead." The portrait, in spite of its aesthetic beauty, brings death into Milly's life. It does this by breaking the conspiracy of silence and making her conscious of death. In an analogous way James may have felt he was killing his cousin Minny Temple, the supposed "original" of Milly,⁷ by finally doing a portrait of her and of his intimate relation to her condition, however indirect and discrete a portrait it was. He had kept her alive until then by remaining in love with her memory, as he says in a letter of 1870 to his brother William written after her death. Part of the passage is, oddly, addressed to the dead Minny: "The more I think of her the more perfectly satisfied I am to have her translated from this changing realm of fact to the steady realm of thought. . . . She lives as a steady unfaltering luminary in the mind rather than as a flickering wasting earth-stifled lamp. . . . In exchange, for you, dearest Minny, we'll all keep your future. Don't fancy that your task is done. Twenty years hence we shall be living with your love and longing with your eagerness and suffering with your patience."⁸ It seems as if either the portrait or the person may be alive, not both. All portraits, of whatever ladies or gentlemen, are death-dealing, which may explain why some people resist having their portraits painted or photographs made of them. Bronzino's great lady "was dead, dead, dead." This mortality tells Milly she is mortal too. If Kate sees her vitality, her "talent for life," when she looks at herself in the mirror above her father's mantelpiece, she also unwittingly confronts her death, her mortality, just as does Milly in the later scene that echoes the first. Kate's talent for life is not the opposite of Milly's devotion to death, but its mirror image. All mirrorings, such as the mirrorings in James's portraits of ladies, are deathdealing as well as life-preserving.

Just how does Milly destroy the society of working and being worked, sustained by an endless round of lies, into which she enters?

All the characters in one way or another want to appropriate her for their own purposes. Milly, however, cannot be used in this way. She cannot be incorporated into the economy that says you must "work" others or be yourself "worked." Milly brings the great smudge of mortality into the self-sustaining aesthetic system of London society. Her innocence and her betrothal to death are dovelike weapons that allow her to defeat all the others and bring their projects to shipwreck, including Densher's desire to marry Kate. This is true even though Milly passionately loves Densher, at least so the reader is led to believe. She acts on that love to sacrifice her right to retaliation and to leave Densher a huge fortune so he can marry Kate. This, however, as I shall show, is just what separates Kate and Densher forever. In this Milly is like James's other heroines, Isabel Archer or Maggie Verver. Their cruelty lies in their goodness and self-sacrificing generosity. Milly triumphs over all around her through her dove-like beneficence and her mortal illness, the match for Kate's vitality, her "talent for life." Neither Milly's goodness nor her proximity to death can be worked into their calculations. The whole social system, its reciprocal working and being worked, its exchanges and substitutions, depends on lies against death that are believed, but that depend for their efficacy on forgetting death or on pretending to do so. Milly brings death into this system and thereby ruins it, ruins the possibility Kate worked for, to have Densher and the money too. Milly's act also makes Kate, after all, after the end of the novel (at least so James says in the notes: whether this really happens is another complete secret that we can never know), fulfil Aunt Maud's plans for her and marry Lord Mark.

Milly can give but never take or bargain in the sense of entering into the calculated give and take that characterizes London society and that is often named by the narrator in economic metaphors. Milly belongs to a separate realm where she is fighting a moment to moment losing battle against death. As she says, it would kill her if she were to turn away even for a minute from that battle and enter the ordinary social world. This is said in an extraordinary speech Milly makes to Lord Mark when refusing his proposal:

"No, I mustn't listen to you-that's just what I mustn't do. The reason is, please, that it simply kills me. I must be as attached to you as you will, since you give that lovely account of yourselves. I give you in return the fullest possible belief of what it would be-" And here she pulled up a little. "I give and give and give-there you are; stick to me as close as you like and see if I don't. Only I can't listen or receive or accept-I can't agree. I can't make a bargain. You must believe that from me. It's all I've wanted to say to you, and why should it spoil anything?" (2: 160-1)

To make a bargain in this case would be to accept Lord Mark's proposal, to promise in response to his proffer of himself, to utter a speech act in response to his speech act. Milly remains alive, paradoxically, only so long as she stays sequestered from life, just as she survives in Venice by remaining immured like a Maeterlinckian princess in the Palazzo Leporelli.⁹ As devoted to death, Milly can enter life only by pretending not to be dying, as she consistently does until the scene when she refuses Lord Mark's proposal and tells him the truth, that she is "very badly ill" (2:155), even though, as Milly feels, "nothing-nothing to make a deadly difference for him-ever could happen" (2: 159). Milly is the personage who does, in spite of the mere aesthetic instinct of mankind, make a deadly difference for every one of the major characters. She does this by her extravagant generosity, giving and giving and giving, but taking nothing in return. Such a gift, however, is a gift of death, a monstrous donation that puts the one who receives it infinitely and unrepayably in debt.

Gift giving and receiving in the ordinary sense belongs to the everyday economic social round. If I give something to you, that puts you under an obligation to return the gift, and so on, in an endless benign circle of gift giving and receiving in which the balance always comes right or is always on the brink of coming right. Milly's giving is outside that circuit of exchange and recompense. She represents the secret ground of the circuit that destroys the whole system when it is brought into the open. To listen to Lord Mark, to entertain his offer, would, paradoxically, simply kill Milly. It would kill her because she goes on living only by way of her relation to death and her insulation from life on her Maeterlinckian island. She is like one of those tomb artifacts or mummies that remains intact for thousands of years as long

as it is sealed but crumbles to dust the moment it is exposed to the air. For her, belief in what Lord Mark implores her to believe, namely that he and everyone else truly loves her ("We're all in love with you" [2: 160]), can only be borne witness to in an incomplete and incomplete sentence: "I give you in return the fullest possible belief in what it would be-' And here she pulled up a little." Presumably the sentence would be completed with something like "what it would be like if I were not dying," but that is what she cannot say, just as she is placed by her proximity to death beyond the possibility of uttering a felicitous speech act, even though death is the hidden ground of all speech acts.

Milly cannot take, cannot "listen or receive or accept." She can only give. This means that she cannot "agree" or "make a bargain." To agree or enter into a bargain are speech acts in the strictest sense. They are a reciprocal response in which someone says, "Yes, I agree to accept this as a quid pro quo for that," or "I accept the bargain you offer in which I take so and so and give you so and so in return." Milly cannot do that. Milly is out of the loop, but she brings the ground of the loop into the loop, with disastrous results. She can give but not take. That giving makes her a kind of black hole in reverse, not a place that absorbs everything and from which nothing ever returns but a place from which things are emitted but into which nothing can enter. What is emitted, however, disastrously imposes on those who receive it an infinite obligation.

The devastating effects of Milly's inability to agree or bargain, to utter these most essential of speech acts, "I agree" and "I accept," on the economy of relations among the main characters in the novel, Kate, Densher, Aunt Maud, Susan Stringham, Lord Mark, can best be seen in what happens to Densher. The bargain Kate makes with Densher (she will sleep with him if he will pretend to make love to Milly and so get her money) backfires when Densher's fulfilment of his side of the agreement brings about what it mendaciously asserts. It does come about that Densher falls in love with Milly, against his every wish and intention, or rather, as Kate says in the final scene of the novel, he comes to be "in love with her memory" after her death (2: 404). To be in love with someone's memory—it is an odd and striking locution. To be in love with someone's memory, that is, more or less, loving him or her

after he or she is dead, is radically different from loving that person while he or she is alive.

A love for a living person may be fulfilled or not fulfilled. Pledges, promises, made to the living, like Kate's pledge to Densher, may be kept or betrayed, as her pledge to him is in the end not kept. This may happen by an intricate balance of competing obligations that may in a certain sense justify the betrayal. To put this another way, new performative utterances may cancel and annul the old, but only so long as both parties remain alive. An unfulfilled promise made to someone who then dies, however, even if it is a lying promise, imposes an infinite obligation that devastates competing obligations to the living. This is what happens with Densher, Kate, and Milly, as it does in the analogous short story of 1896, "The Way it Came" (reprinted as "The Friends of the Friends").¹⁰ Densher fulfills his part of the bargain by allowing Milly, as much through his silence as through anything he says or does, to believe he is free to love her because Kate does not love him. After Milly's death Densher comes to Kate proposing that he will refuse Milly's bequest and that they should marry immediately. If not, he will make over every penny of Milly's money to Kate but will not marry her. Kate, with her lucidity and "high grasp," sees these as alternatives between which she must choose: "You'll marry me without the money; you won't marry me with it. If I don't consent *you* don't. . . . -so that I must choose" (2: 404). Kate's choice, the ultimate determining event of the novel, takes the form of saying she will choose to marry him if he can give "[his] word of honor that [he's] not in love with her memory" (ibid.). Densher's reply is the climactic "Oh" of the novel. I have elsewhere discussed the progression of "Oh's" and their significance. Densher here says, "'Oh-her memory!," neither confirming nor denying her imputation, which means confirming it, upon which Kate lucidly asserts "Her memory's your love. You *want* no other." His reply is to say he'll marry her in an hour, to which she replies with another question, "As we were?" His answer is to say, yes, "As we were," upon which she turns to the door to leave him for good with a final headshake: "We shall never again be as we were!," thereby using the last ironically altered form of the phrase "There you are" that has echoed through the novel and about which there would be much

more to say (2: 405). They can never again be as they were because Densher's lie to Milly has now become a solemn obligation to repay her love with his own love. You cannot bargain with the dead, but your relation to them may make it wholly impossible for you to keep bargains made with the living.

The lesson of *The Wings of the Dove* might be expressed as the command, "Don't tell lies. They have a way of coming true, of their own accord, through the power of words, through the power of words in their secret relation to death, against all your wishes and intentions." This, it may be, is that "insoluble mystery" about which James speaks in the preface. Marcel Proust has the narrator of *À la recherche du temps perdu* express elegantly this disastrous law that makes lies truth. He makes his formulation apropos of the lies he has told Albertine: "Time passes, and little by little everything we have spoken in falsehood becomes true (tout ce qu'on disait par mensonge devient vrai)" (F4:44; E3:470). If this is the novel's ironic "lesson," this lesson must not be misunderstood as an ethical command not to lie, since it is perhaps impossible not to lie and certainly impossible to control the effects lies or any other speech acts will have.

This is one reason why it is also impossible to judge whether Densher or Kate acted in ways that are ethically admirable or vicious, impossible therefore to draw moral lessons from this novel, for example by saying, in Kantian fashion: "Everyone ought to act as Densher acted. It is possible to establish a universal moral law on the basis of his behavior." The actions of the characters are ultimately determined by forces entirely beyond their control, namely by the power of death. Milly is the personification of death's power. She is the one who brings death's devastation into the circle of giving and taking within which Densher and Kate have lived.

Moreover, since death is wholly unintelligible, its effects on the living are unintelligible also. *The Wings of the Dove* is a novel about the blank unknowability of death as it disastrously effects the living, including our ability to pass ethical judgment on the acts of the living in response to death. This happens according to that figure of Milly as like the Lorelei or like a sinking ship that draws all around into its dark vortex, including even the reader of the novel. The latter's power to

draw moral lessons from the novel is disabled as much as are the projects of the characters.

Milly's lies about her illness are efficacious only up to a point, as is her performative assertion that she "will live." In the end death wins the game, though only when she, Bartleby-like, turns her face to the wall, that is away not only from Densher but from all others, and wills not to go on willing to live. Death always wins in the end. It is, in this novel, the one power that is not subject to the performative power of words, since it is the ground of all performatives. You can know nothing about death, nor can you coerce or bind it with performative oaths, even though all speech acts are in one way or another made in death's name, as when one swears on his or her mother's grave. This is the significance of the reader's ignorance of a series of facts that it would be important to know: what it was that Kate's father did that ostracized him from polite society; the precise nature of the illness that kills Milly; the contents of the letter Milly writes Densher on her deathbed, timing its arrival for Christmas eve; the exact amount of her bequest to him; what happens after the last scene and last sentence of the novel. Does Kate take the money and marry Lord Mark, as James notes of 1894 indicate?¹¹ The reader can never know any of these secrets. They remain impenetrable enigmas.

These secrets stand figuratively, as what can be called allegorical catachreses, for the relation of the whole novel, as a virtual reality the reader can enter through the words, to the unwritten and unwritable ideal novel for which the actual novel is, as James's preface laments and celebrates, a poor but successful substitute: "the artist's energy fairly depends on his fallibility" (1: xiii). The critic's or reader's access to the hidden and unspeakable motivation for the entire action is, in turn, subject to the same limitations. What he or she can know and say circles around an unknowable and unsayable center for which "death," Milly's particular death as standing for all human mortality, the great smudge of mortality across the picture, is a displaced name. The endpoint of the reader's understanding of *The Wings of the Dove*, or rather the frontier where non-understanding begins, is a recognition of a congruence between the novel itself in its relation to its "origin," what James in the preface to *The Golden Bowl*, calls the "clear matter" of the

tale,¹² on the one hand, and, on the other hand, the characters in their relation to death. Each is so to speak the allegory of the other. The story told is in this case a figure for James's act of storytelling, as well as for the reader's relation to both.

Notes:

¹Henry James, *The Wings of the Dove*, reprint of New York Edition of 1907-9 (Fairfield: New Jersey: Augustus M. Kelley, 1976), 1: v, henceforth identified by volume and page number. *The Wings of the Dove* makes up volumes 19 and 20 of this edition, but they are identified on the title pages as volumes 1 and 2 of the novel proper, and I shall use the latter designations.

²The fullest are dated November 3, 1894 and November 7, 1894. See Henry James, *The Complete Notebooks*, ed. Leon Edel and Lyall H. Powers (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 102-107, henceforth *Notebooks*, followed by the page number. Another briefer entry is dated February 14, 1895, *ibid.*, 114-5. These notebook entries show how far James's first ideas for the characters and the action were from the final "idea," the "virtual reality" that he ultimately, years later, transformed into words.

³Paul de Man, "Autobiography as De-Facement," *The Rhetoric of Romanticism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), 81.

⁴Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness* (London: Dent, 1956), 82. Marlow says: "You know I hate, detest, and can't bear a lie," he says, "not because I am straighter than the rest of us, but simply because it appals me. There is a taint of death, a flavor of mortality in lies--which is exactly what I hate and detest in the world--what I want to forget. It makes me miserable and sick, like biting something rotten would do."

⁵Marcel Proust, *À la recherche du temps perdu*, ed. Jean-Yves Tadié, éd de la Pléiade (Paris: Gallimard, 1989), 4: 191; *Remembrance of Things Past*, trans. C. K. Scott-Moncrieff, Terence Kilmartin, and Andreas Mayor (New York: Vintage, 1982), 3: 625, henceforth "F" and "E," followed by the volume and page numbers.

⁶"Matcham" is perhaps an echo of "Matching," Plantaganet Palliser's country house in Anthony Trollope's *Can You Forgive Her?* and the other Palliser novels. If so, it is graceful homage to the elder novelist about whom James wrote a substantial essay. See Henry James, "Anthony Trollope," *Literary Criticism: Essays on Literature; American Writers; English Writers*, ed. Leon Edel and Mark Wilson (New York: The Library of America, 1984), 0000-0000.

⁷ James writes eloquently of the death of Minny Temple in the concluding section of his second autobiographical volume, *Notes of a Son and Brother* (New York: Scribner, 1914).

⁸ *The James Family*, ed. F. O. Matthiessen (New York: Knopf, 1947), 61-3. See also the discussion of this letter and the section in *Notes of a Son and Brother* about Minny Temple in Sharon Cameron's admirable essay on *The Wings of the Dove* in her *Thinking in Henry James* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1989), 154-5.

⁹ James uses the latter figure to describe Milly's relation to Kate during their private talks in Venice:

Thus insuperably guarded was the truth about the girl's own conception of her validity; thus was a wondering pitying sister condemned wistfully to look at her from the far side of the moat she had dug round her tower. Certain aspects of the connexion of these young women show for us, such is the twilight that gathers about them, in the likeness of some dim scene in a Maeterlinck play; we have positively the image, in the delicate dusk, of the figures so associated and yet so opposed, so mutually watchful: that of the angular pale princess, ostrich-plumed, black-robed, hung about with amulets, reminders, relics, mainly seated, mainly still, and that of the upright restless slow-circling lady of her court who exchanges with her, across the black water streaked with evening gleams, fitful questions and answers. (2: 139)

¹⁰ Henry James, *Complete Stories: 1892-1898* (New York: The Library of America, 1996), 609-34.

¹¹ *Notebooks*, 115.

¹² Henry James, *The Golden Bowl*, reprint of New York Edition of 1907-9 (Fairfield: New Jersey: Augustus M. Kelley, 1976), 1: xiii. (This is vol. 23 in the set.)

CV

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