

**“Community of Collapse”: The Ethics of Choice in
Henry James’s *The Wings of the Dove***

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ABSTRACT

In Henry James’s *The Wings of the Dove* (1902), Mildred (alias Milly) Theale’s travel to Europe is her ultimate journey into the heart of desire. Under the shadow of impending death, Milly’s desire becomes more intensified and more unbearable, engulfing people around her like Merton Densher and Kate Croy and drastically changing their life’s direction and value system. In representing Milly’s desire, James also explores the nature of desire in general--its metamorphosis, camouflage, metaphorical displacement, and metonymic dispersion--as well as its relations to fantasy and to death. Desire, as reconceptualized by James, is not an inherent force with unchangeable nature but is produced in and through the ethical relationship, a relationship which is, in turn, structured by the system of symbolic exchange best represented, in the novel, by Aunt Maud and Sir Luke Strett. By revealing the real both as excess and as lack within that system, Milly brings to head-on confrontation the contradictory subjective attributes, impulses, and positions, and edges the community based it close to collapse. At the final stage of her life, having traversed the fantasy about life and gone through subjective destitution, and yet having not gathered strength enough to die, Milly is caught in between two deaths, that is, the symbolic death and the death in the real. Just as the beauty of *Antigone* is, according to Lacan, the beauty of the image of Antigone being buried alive, so the beauty of *The Wings of the Dove* is the beauty of the image of Milly facing the wall and waiting for her real death heroically and without shrieking.

Keywords: *The Wings of the Dove*; the ethics of choice; two deaths; fantasy; community; desire and drive

Desire, what is called desire, suffices to make life meaningless
if it turns someone into a coward. (Lacan, *Écrits* 660)

On errands of life, these letters speed to death. (Melville 45)

I. Introduction

Henry James never wavers from his conviction that “all life comes back to the question of our relations with each other” (*The Question of Our Speech* 10). In *The Wings of the Dove* (1902), the relations among its characters, especially those between men and women, are very complicated.¹ James does not deal with the triangular relationship among Milly Theale, Kate Croy, and Merton Densher in its “natural” and unmediated form, but as a relationship generated and sustained by the ethical system, which is, in turn, structured by the intricate network of symbolic exchange². In an overtly traditional novel of manners dealing with the theme of love and marriage, James interrogates and critiques the traditional concepts of moral good and happiness, and reveals that those ethical categories carry the elements of the real (both as excess and as lack) that resist the inscription of the symbolic order and, at the same time, make that order possible.³ This radical way of rethinking the ethical in relation to the real⁴ demonstrates that a universal ethics is a contradiction in terms, for, given the excess and the lack within itself, any ethics can hardly achieve the transcendence and closure it originally aimed at. In James’s later novels, especially in *The Wings of the Dove*, ethics is not a pre-given, self-evident signifying system to which the characters refer and by which they are inscribed and valorized. Rather, it is a set of norms marked by contingency and finitude, and is also a series of demands or dictations which may generate different responses from their addressees. The ethics thus defined

¹ Many Jamesian critics have examined these relationships in *The Wings of the Dove*. David Grant notes that Milly takes journey to Europe in order to acquire the “relational identity” which American structure denies her, and in this attempt she also tests her native country’s “power to inscribe itself within history” (386). Sam Halliday argues that “relation” does not merely designate the social—it may also designate “one’s analytic purchase *on* the social, and the capacity to represent it”; in many of James’s late novels, he continues, relations between characters “typically become the object of a further, observing consciousness, whose perceptions of ‘relation’ . . . are themselves ‘relational’” (191; emphases original).

² The concept of symbolic exchange is derived from Goux’s concept of symbolic economy. According to Goux, “*the logic of symbolization* [is] the logic of the successive forms taken by the exchange of vital activities in all spheres of social organizations” and “the accession by gold, the father, and the phallus to normative sovereignty is the same genetic process, the same progressive structuring principle with discrete phases” (24).

³ For a discussion on the Lacanian Real as excess, see Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* 161-164 and *In Defense of Lost Causes* 319-320.

⁴ For a superb discussion on the ethics of the real, see Zupančič 2-5.

can give the freedom of choice to the subject, but this freedom is far from being unlimited and unconditioned. Rather, the subject is free to make choice not because she or he is a free and autonomous subject, but because she or he has to make the “right choice,” that is, the choice for the symbolic community, in order to be a subject.⁵ Accordingly, though by revealing the real as excess and lack within the ethical system, James may temporarily release his characters from the bondage of the traditional precepts of moral good and rectitude, they are not actually elevated into a new realm in which they can enjoy their freedom and gratify their desires without any limitations: What is awaiting them at the end of the road traveled is not rose garden but the nothingness that lies at the core of their life.

In *The Wings of the Dove*, James deals with Milly’s travel to Europe as her ultimate journey into the heart of desire. By representing her desire in relation to fantasy, James explores the nature of desire in general and the various forms it may assume, such as metamorphosis, camouflage, metaphorical displacement, and metonymic dispersion. As reconceptualized by James, desire is not an inherent force with unchangeable nature but is produced in and through the working of fantasy. As popularly defined, fantasy is an imaginary construction that fulfills the individual’s desire in place of her or his real goal. However, according to Lacan,

The phantasy is the support of desire; it is not the object that is the support of desire. The subject sustains himself as desiring in relation to an ever more complex signifying ensemble. This is apparent enough in the form of the scenario it assumes, in which the subject, more or less recognizable, is somewhere, split, divided, generally double, in his relation to the object which usually does not show its true face either. (*The Seminar Book XI* 185)

Desire is constructed in and through the signifying system; it must have the *mise-en-scène* furnished by fantasy in order to enact itself. As Žižek says, “it is precisely the role of fantasy to give the coordinates of the subject’s desire, to specify its object, to locate the position the subject assumes in it. It is only through fantasy that the subject is constituted as desiring: *through fantasy, we learn how to desire*” (*Looking Awry* 6; emphases original). Besides structuring and regulating our desire, fantasy also helps fill up the lack in the symbolic, which may assume the form of antagonism, excess, disagreement, or destructiveness. In *The Wings of the Dove*,

⁵ As Žižek laconically puts it, “The choice of community, the ‘social contact,’ is a paradoxical choice where I maintain the freedom of choice only if I make ‘the right choice’: if I choose the ‘other’ of the community, I stand to lose the very freedom, the very possibility of choice (in clinical terms: I choose psychosis)” (*Enjoy Your Symptom!* 75). See also Žižek, *The Plague of Fantasies* 29.

Milly's desire is built on her fantasy first about Merton and later about Sir Luke Strett, who stands for the paternal metaphor in the signifying system. But like the true hero who, in Lacan's terms, "never gives ground relative to desire" (*The Seminar Book VII* 321), Milly, willfully ignoring the undercurrents of betrayal and conspiracy plotted by Kate and Merton, always tries to go one step further to live up to her desire, and, by traversing the fantasy that has supported her desire, finally reaches its other side—the nothingness that occupies the core of her life. Her turning face to the wall and waiting for her death in a "heroic" manner and "without shrieking" (468)⁶ at the final stage of her life is an ethical event comparable to Antigone's being buried alive, which Lacan finely describes as her being caught in between "two deaths"—namely, the symbolic death and the death in the real (*The Seminar Book VII* 270).

II. Milly's Desire: Too Early or Too Late and/or Too Little or Too Much

Milly takes journey to Europe in order to visit Sir Luke for her unnamed terminal illness, and, presumably, to seek opportunity to meet Merton again. This combined theme of death and desire is finely presented in the famous Brünig scene. As Susan Stringham observes, sitting on a slab of rock hanging over the Alpine abyss, Milly may be mediating on a "jump" (135). However, in a drastic change of thought that shows the economy of difference and identity, Susan turns Milly's "obsession" with death into "a state of uplifted and unlimited possession," and asks herself a question that bears much on Milly's desire: As she is "looking down on the kingdoms of the earth," is she "choosing among them or [does] she want them all?" (135). Susan's perceiving and registering of the scene tells much about the nature of Milly's desire in relation to her death drive: It is only by withholding herself from the seduction of the shattering jouissance via death that Milly can go back to the so-called normal way of life and live her desire to the fullest.

The mixed theme of desire and death is further developed in the conversation between Milly and Susan which occurs immediately after the Brünig scene. Being unable to suppress the whirlwind of excitements caused by her visit to the Alps and anticipating more excitements from the journey ahead, Milly poses to Susan many questions that show the nature of her desire: Can she live her life to the fullest? Or, does life offer nothing but a partial fulfillment? If her life is "unmistakably reserved for some complicated passage" (136), then, as the following snippets of the conversation show, this passage will be twisted by the free flowing of her polymorphous desire that commands her to blow alternately hot and cold.

⁶ All parenthetical page references to *The Wings of the Dove* are based on the Penguin edition (1986), which follows the definitive New York version of the novel.

“But I sometimes wonder--!”
 “Yes”—[Mrs. Stringham] pressed: “wonder what?”
 “Well, if I shall have much of it.”
 Mrs. Stringham stared. “Much of what? Not of pain?”
 “Of everything. Of everything I have.”
 “You ‘have’ everything; so when you say ‘much’ of it—”
 “I only mean,” the girl broke in, ‘shall I have it for long? That is if I
have got it.”
 “If you’ve got an ailment?”
 “If I’ve got everything,” Milly laughed.
 “Ah *that*—like almost nobody else.”
 “Then for how long?”

 “Tell me, for God’s sake, if you’re in distress.”
 “I don’t think I’ve really *everything*”
 “But what on earth can I do for you?”
 “Dear, dear thing—I’m only too happy!”
 “Then what’s the matter?”
 “That’s matter—that I can scarcely bear it.”
 “But what is it you think you haven’t got?”
 Milly waited another moment; then she fount it, and found for it a dim
 show of joy. “The power to resist the bliss of what I *have!*” (139-40;
 emphases original)

On the level of the novel’s plot development, this dialogue retroactively creates meaning for or projects meaning onto the Brűnig episode. As a fine instance of James’s employment of the “central intelligence,”⁷ the Brűnig scene is mainly perceived and registered by Susan’s consciousness, and, therefore, the reader cannot know directly what Milly feels or thinks in the scene. But the conversation that occurs in the wake of the Alpine scene supplements it with possible meanings. Punctuated by ellipses, hesitations, equivocations, and the irruptions of joy and fear, the conversation is smeared with the Lacanian *jouis-sense*, which is “a meaning permeated with enjoyment” (Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* 71), and affirms that Milly’s experience at the Brűnig is one of loss, that is, a missing encounter with the

⁷ The employment of the narrative technique of central intelligence is common in James’s work. But, according to Kurnick, the stylistic indistinction of his characters in the later novels insinuates an effect of “performative universality” into the heart of fiction itself and blurs the boundary between author and character (216). This stylistic convergence can also be detected in the rendering of the Brűnig scene.

unbearable, terrifying jouissance in the form of death.

Moreover, the above-quoted tells much about the essence of Milly's desire. According to Lacan, desire is something that "merely conveys what it maintains of an image of the past towards an ever short and limited future" (*The Seminar Book XI* 31). In *The Wings of the Dove*, desire exists in the gap between the nostalgic longing for the imagined past pleasure and the anticipation for future gratification while entirely ignoring the possible fulfillment at present. Accordingly, it is structured by the principle of "too late or too early" and/or "too little or too much." Time forks and reverses itself in a structure of difference, meaning deferment in satisfaction and differentiation in space, and this "time lag" is finely yet ironically expressed in the Milly's words "Then for how long?" Although she can still taste the remains of the jouissance she has unconsciously experienced at Brünig Pass, her body is now even too weak for it and she is already growing anxious that she has gotten too close to the Thing, i.e., the Alpine abyss, that she loses the object-cause of desire and consequently loses the lack that has so far sustained her desire.⁸ This can help explain why at dinner that evening she tells Susan, "I want to go straight to London" (141). After all, what she wants is "human and personal" "scenery" (141) that can sustain the frame of her fantasy about life and keep her desiring.

III. The Matcham Scene: Desire and the Gaze

Performing Europe is one of the recurrent themes in James. In *The Wings of the Dove*, this performing is rendered complex by cultural misunderstanding, free-floating desires, and the ubiquitous presence of the gaze. For instance, in the Matcham scene, in which almost all the main characters of the novel participate, the motifs of gaze, desire, and cultural exchange converge and produce a complex yet subtle cultural poetics of desire. At first, the scene presents the seemingly smooth and splendid course of cultural exchange, but later transforms itself into a scene punctuated by the obsession with death, which is induced by the ubiquity of the gaze. At the climax of this scene, Lord Mark leads Milly to a painting by Bronzino (1503-1572) of a lady who he thinks looks like Milly. While watching and appreciating the portrait of the lady who is "unaccompanied by a joy" and who is "dead, dead, dead" (196), Milly is moved to tears and grows reflective, presumably thinking of her own mortality. Apparently, the lady in the portrait has become an object into which Milly invests her

⁸ Žižek succinctly defines the Lacanian concept of anxiety as follows: "anxiety occurs not when the object-cause of desire is lacking; it is not the lack of the object that gives rise to anxiety but, on the contrary, the danger of our getting too close to the object and thus losing the lack itself. Anxiety is brought on by the disappearance of desire" (*Looking Awry* 8). The Thing, *das Ding*, is defined by Lacan as "the beyond-of-the-signified" (*The Seminar Book VII* 54), and as the "maternal thing" as the sacred place of the impossible jouissance (67).

death drive, the “eyes of other days” (196) that returns Milly’s gaze being like the evil eye, which, in Lacan’s terms, is the “*fascinum*” that has “the effect of arresting movement and, literally, of killing life” (*The Seminar Book XI* 118). To escape from this moment of fixation on death that would mortify her, Milly “recognize[s] her exactly in the words that [have] nothing to do with her: ‘I shall never be better than this’” (196).⁹ Failing to catch the meaning of Milly’s words, Lord Mark tries to comfort her, saying condescendingly, “But you *are* . . . better; because, splendid as she is, one doubts if she was good” (196; emphasis original). Then Milly replies, “I mean that everything in this afternoon has been too beautiful, and that perhaps everything together will never be so right again” (196). This dialogue is emblematic of the misunderstanding induced by cultural exchange. For Milly, the historic house owned by Lord and Lady Aldershaw and its highly refined cultural milieu have composed a perfect picture to divert her from her fixation on death, a death which is, for her, materialized in the portrait of the lady. However, by saying that Milly is *better* than the lady in the portrait, Lord Mark, an inveterate cultural chauvinist, is trying to put Milly as the cultural other in a moral framework in which her likeness and her superiority to the lady are both appropriated in order to rescue the latter from the alleged moral corruption and dissipated life that have been associated with Florentine history.

Lacan defines the gaze as a “privileged object which has emerged from some primal separation, from some self-mutilation induced by the approach of the real, whose name is . . . the *objet a*” (*The Seminar Book XI* 83). Therefore, both as the index to the suppressed over-enjoyment and as a mask for the nothingness left in wake of the withdrawing of the real, the gaze is not the object of desire but the object-cause of desire, an *objet petit a* that sustains the subject’s desire while shielding it from the total, shattering satisfaction. In the Matcham scene, the gaze is the scotoma or the blind spot in the field of the visible¹⁰ that makes, as we discussed earlier, cultural representation and cultural understanding (im-)possible. Yet, what we have in that scene is more than a simple cultural gaze: It also subtly shows how the gaze as partial drive reflects, refracts, redoubles, and always returns into its circuit¹¹ and how the lady’s returning gaze becomes the figure of a doubling, that is, the partial object of

⁹ This passage has attracted much critical attention. Gert Buelens points out that the link between Milly and the Bronzino is not, for Milly, in any metaphorical analogy: The link is in the actual words she utters (410). Jonathan Freedman claims that Milly is constructing her “self” by imitating the “aesthetic icon, an artistic Other” (214). Marcia Ian notes that “Milly recognizes [the portrait as] identical to her precisely because she responds by referring to herself, not the painted figure” (119).

¹⁰ Lacan also defines the gaze as follows: “In our relation to things, in so far as this relation is constituted by the way of vision, and ordered in the figures of representation, something slips, passes, is transmitted, from stage to stage, and is always to some degree eluded in it—that is what we call the gaze” (*The Seminar Book XI* 73).

¹¹ For a discussion of the gaze as partial drive see Lacan, *The Seminar Book XI* 176ff.

the metonymy of Milly's desire for Merton. Under the lady's gaze and basking in the refined cultural milieu of the great historic chamber, Milly finds herself "sunk in something quite intimate and humble" in order to escape from "something else" (199). A moment later, this "something else" turns out to be nothing other than the ubiquitous gaze of Merton. Though temporarily displaced onto the gaze of the lady in the painting, this gaze is "perversely there," and emerges with Milly's "first vision of [Kate's] appearance" at the party (199). Milly then wonders, "Is it [this something] the way she looks to *him*?—the perversity being how she [keeps] in remembrance that Kate [is] known to him" (199; emphasis original). This persistent voyeuristic desire has already asserted itself in a conversation between Milly and Susan in an earlier chapter. In response to Susan's suspicion that they are moving in a "labyrinth" created by the intentionally covered-up relationship between Kate and Merton, Milly claims that she "wants abysses," a remark that definitely shows, for Susan, the "symptoms of an imputed malady" (174), that is, Milly's hysterical disorder. Later in the same chapter, Milly finds herself "seeing Kate, quite fixing her, in the light of the knowledge that it [is] a face on which Mr. Densher's eyes [have] more or less familiarly rest[ed] and which [has] looked, rather beautifully than less, into his own" (176). This obsession with the gaze of the other is what Milly has called her "perversity," and shows that, having no desire of her own, she can only imitate her friends' desire for each other and find vicarious, substitute gratifications in imagining the exchange of their desiring gazes.

Milly knows all too well that it is neither Kate's nor Merton's fault that they know each other, but she has a "horror" of treating them as if it had been theirs (199). One cannot be guilty of the thing one has never done, unless one wishes it to have been done. Thus, it can be inferred that Milly unconsciously blames Kate for pampering with her enjoyment and attempts to recuperate what she believes to be unjustly in her possession, namely, Merton's desiring gaze. What she adopts is a strategy that can be called hysterical, that is, a strategy of putting herself in the place of the object where she operates by slipping away in order to maintain Kate's desire. This strategy means two things: to keep the other desiring oneself and to maintain oneself in a state of perpetual dissatisfaction in order to keep desiring and arousing the other's desire (Lacan, *Écrits* 698; Vincente Palomera 394). This helps explain why, towards the end of the party at Matcham, Milly suddenly asks Kate to accompany her in a visit to Sir Luke without any explanation about the nature of her illness, which would be, Milly thinks, associated by Kate with the "imagined ailments" and the "easy complaints" of "ignorant youth" (200). This request is actually a part of the "hysterical intrigue" (Palomera 384) Milly uses to arouse her friend's desire without ever satisfying it. Thus, both in exchange for *and* in place of the secret of intimate

relation which she imagines exists between her friends, she offers to share with Kate the secret of her illness. But in fact she does not know what has really happened between them, and she does not even know the nature of her own illness. Therefore, this exchange of fabricated secrets subtly shows how Milly's desire enacts itself by way of metaphorical displacement and metonymic dispersion and how urgently she wants to put her desire—a desire which is not the desire for the real object but the desire for a desire—within the framework of her fantasy in order to keep on desiring by arousing the desire of the other.

IV. The Paternal Metaphor and the Show of Life

Milly's illness has drawn much critical attention. Some critics argue that she shows symptoms of anemia, pneumonia, or leukemia, while others maintain that she suffers tuberculosis, heart disease, chlorosis, or inoperable cancer (Mercer and Wangensteen 259; Tintner and Janowitz 73). Since the fatal disease is never named in the novel, it will forever remain a puzzle that invites yet frustrates interpretive efforts. However, if we see Milly's visit to Europe as an exploration into the heart of desire, then we can consider her illness as a mental disorder and Sir Luke as a practitioner of modern psychoanalysis. This interpretation may produce two benefits. First, it can help us bypass the interpretive quagmire that an approach solely based on the physical cause of Milly's death would lead us to and return us to a discussion on the ethical problems posed by her desire and her death. Second, by resisting to valorizing and classifying her death according to medical science¹², we can reveal the limits and limitations that scientific discourse may have in its representation of death, and show that death is not something beyond life but is its central fact that reveals its finitude and immanence.

According to Michael Moon, in her first visit to Sir Luke, Milly goes through the rite of castration or circumcision (432). Expanding on Moon's Freudian reading, we may see Milly's first two visits to Sir Luke, a physician of "fifty thousand knives" as Merton calls him (285), as her initiation into patriarchal system, a ritual which ends in her acceptance of his demand to be happy at all costs. Before visiting Sir Luke, Milly "the real thing" (123, 124, 125) is an "unheralded and unexplained" "apparition" (122) who "exceed[s], escape[s] measure" (130) and who has to "ask nobody for anything, to refer nothing to any one" (167). At this stage, she can only obtain, as discussed earlier, the vicarious satisfaction from over-identifying with other people's desire and from the spending sprees she has occasionally experienced with

¹² The incurability of Milly's illness and her "perverse" insistence on dying without smelling of drugs and medicine (284, 459) would make an ethical interpretation of her illness and death more appropriate than a medical one.

Kate. After her first visit to Sir Luke, she feels she has established a “relation” (203) with him and thinks she can live the so-called normal life.

In her second visit to Sir Luke, Milly finds that her knowledge receives “mysterious addition” (206), that is, the addition of the phallic principle to her knowledge. Like a practitioner of psychoanalysis who is also, to use Lacan’s terms, the “subject supposed to know” the meaning of the patient’s symptoms (Fink, *A Critical Introduction to Lacanian Psychoanalysis* 63, 232), Sir Luke has no direct source of information about Milly, and neither does he need any, for he has “found out simply by his genius—and found out . . . literally everything” (206). The analogy strikes home when his diagnostic process becomes similar to modern “talk cure”: The process of mere “loosely rattling” and “sitting there,” as Milly perceives, has the effect of letting her “see her life put into scales” and of having her taste “orderly living” (206). She then imagines that “she should be as one of the circle of eminent contemporaries, photographed, engraved, signed . . . framed and glazed” in “brawny Victorian bronzes” (207) which Sir Luke’s patients have presented to him to decorate his office. Here, the words “photographed,” “engraved,” “signed,” and “framed” imply that, as “the highest type of scientific mind” and the “direct source of light” (209), Sir Luke collects and classifies human souls in his archive, and inscribes them within his representational system.

Towards the end of *The Seminar Book XI*, Lacan says, “any shelter in which may be established a viable, temperate relation of one sex to the other necessitates the intervention . . . of that medium known as the paternal metaphor” (276). But what does Sir Luke, as a phallic figure, prescribe to Milly in order to cure her alleged illness? As Lambert Strether admonishes Little Bilham to live all he can in *The Ambassadors* (215), Sir Luke says to Milly, “You’ve the right to be happy. You must make up your mind to it. You must accept any form in which happiness may come” (210). Offered with a “kind dim smile” blending with the “brightness” of “sharp steel” (209)—an expression unmistakably implying the paternal metaphor, this advice seems to provide a principle for Milly’s life. Yet, further examination shows that this admonition, though earnest, sounds tautological and rather vacuous. For happiness or wellbeing is, as Sir Luke himself admits, only an abstract, empty “form” in need of specific contents. As a father figure, he wants Milly to live her life to the fullest. But what does he really want to say in all what he has said when demanding that Milly should be happy? What is the happiness defined in the name of the father? Actually, his demand discloses what Lacan has called the gap between locution and the illocutionary force, and weirdly places him in the position of the hysterical subject, in response to whose demand Milly can sustain desire in fantasy only by the lack of

satisfaction that the hysterical subject brings desire by slipping away as its object.¹³

This gap between locution and the illocutionary force can be further detected in Sir Luke's "final push" to Milly: "You're active, luckily, by nature—it's beautiful: therefore rejoice in it. *Be* active, without folly—for you're not foolish: be as active as you can and as you like" (213; emphasis original). These remarks can mean both that Milly should be happy for it is a folly not to be happy *and* that she should be happy but should do nothing foolish. In the first sense, she can be as happy as much as she likes; in the second, she should be happy, though this happiness is narrowly restricted by the moral laws and moral prohibitions enforced in the name of the father.¹⁴ These two meanings contradict with each other and show that the father's demand of "Enjoy more" ("*plus-de-jouir*")—a demand which means both "surplus of enjoyment" and "no more enjoyment" (Lacan, *Écrits* 696; Žižek, *The Plague of Fantasy* 47)—is actually a demand that cannot be carried out. Being entirely confused by his demand to be happy, Milly asks Sir Luke again to clarify it before she leaves for Venice, saying "When you talk of 'life' I suppose you mean mainly gentlemen." To this he replies, "when I talk of life I mean more than anything else the *beautiful show* of it, in its freshness, made by young persons of your age" (332; emphases added). Previously defined as an empty "form" in need of contents and as a term closely associated with human follies, happiness now merely becomes a show of youthful life which would provide Milly a dose of enfeebled pleasure in place of *jouissance* and temporarily furnish her with a vision or even an illusion of life. Later in the novel, in her rented palace in Venice, Milly performs this show of life before the very eyes of Sir Luke. Though it climaxes in a series of events she is to go through at the heart of the city of desire called Venice¹⁵, it also marks, as shall be discussed later, the beginning of her separation from the symbolic mandate, a separation that brings about her "subjective destitution" and eventually her death—a death truly worthy of the name of the ethical.¹⁶

Obviously, Milly's romantic vision of Sir Luke associates him with the

¹³ According to Lacan, the logic of the hysterical demand is: "I'm demanding this of you, but what I'm demanding of you is to refute my demand because this is not it!" (Žižek, *The Sublime Object* 111-112). For a discussion on the Lacanian "*Che vuoi?*" ("You're telling me that, but what do you want with it, what are you aiming at?"), see Lacan, *Écrits* 696-698.

¹⁴ Lacan plays with the similar sound of *le nom du père* (the name of the father) and *le non du père* (the no of the father). See Fink, *The Lacanian Subject* 147.

¹⁵ *Venice Desired* is the title of a book by Tony Tanner.

¹⁶ Sir Luke demand can also be elaborated in relation to the Lacanian choice between "the Father or worse" ("*le père ou pire*"). In his reading of Lacan's formulation of the forced choice, Žižek writes, "the choice is not between good and bad but between bad and worse. The forced choice of community, i.e., the subordination to the authority of the Name of the Father, is 'bad' since, by means of it, the subject 'gives way as to his desire,' thus contracts an indelible guilt" (*Enjoy Your Symptom!* 75). The other choice for the subject is the "worse" and hence the impossible and unattainable choice of "separation from the symbolic community"; this "choice of psychosis" is to be "located within the register of ethics: psychosis is a mode 'not to give way as to our desire,' it signals our refusal to exchange enjoyment for the Name of the Father" (77).

Enlightenment tradition. However, in midst of her silent admiration of him, she starts to wonder why his diagnosis focuses on her life rather than on her illness, and infers that her illness is incurable: “When that was the case the reason, in turn, could only be, too manifestly, pity; and 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”¹⁷ (209). On the one hand, this lurking, lurid image of decapitation discloses the underside of the French Revolution: As heir to the Enlightenment, the revolution ended in violence, bloodshed, anarchy, and ultimately the return of the old regime. On the other, this image connotes the underside of the father’s demand, that is, the obscene father’s superego jouissance¹⁸ and the compulsive reenactment of the trauma derived from the missing encounter with the real. In Lacan’s definition, the real is “that which always comes back to the same place—to the place where the subject in so far as he thinks, where the *res cogitans*, does not meet it” (*The Seminar Book XI* 49). Hence, there appears a gap between thought and the real which is to be fulfilled by ideas, images, or hallucinations, the latter of which are defined by Lacan as the “manifestation of the perpetual regression of arrested desire” and as implying “the subversion of the subject” in the signifying chain (*The Seminar Book XI* 48). At Sir Luke’s clinic, having been traumatized by the cut of his scalpel yet unable to memorize life’s fullness and plenitude before the cutting, Milly unconsciously attempts to fill this double absence with the image of decapitation derived from historical narrative, which already belongs to the order of representation. Thus, this image suggests Milly’s subversion in the system of the signifier, and can be further related to Lacan’s concept of “the manifestation of the drive” as “the mode of a headless subject” (*The Seminar Book XI* 181). As a constant force aiming at “the return into circuit” and the endless continuation of circulation (*The Seminar Book XI* 179), drive is, in Žižek’s concise definition, an “anonymous/acephalous immortal insistence-to-repeat of an ‘organ without body’ which precedes the Oedipal triangulation and its dialectic of prohibitory Law and its transgression” (*Organs without Bodies* xi). Accordingly, though, under Sir Luke’s guidance and surveillance, Milly may temporarily suppress her death drive and try to live up to her desire, the drive returns in the guise of a headless subject and acquires an enfeebled sadomasochistic pleasure by reenacting the trauma originating from the missing encounter with the real as impossible jouissance.

¹⁷ In *The Ambassadors*, James uses a similar image to show Strether’s strong desire for punishing Madame de Vionnet for her excessive sexuality (475).

¹⁸ According to Žižek, though the father’s demand is the demand of the superego, still it is smeared with the residuals of over-enjoyment it attempts to suppress at all costs (*Enjoy Your Symptom!* 124-125.)

V. Milly's Performance at Palazzo Leporelli Versus Merton's Solo Drama in His Rented Rooms

Towards the end of *The Seminar Book VII*, Lacan summarizes four propositions about desire. First, the only thing one can be guilty of is giving ground relative to one's desire. Second, the definition of a hero is someone who may be betrayed with impunity. Third, betrayal to one's desire sends one back to the service of goods with the proviso that one will never again find that factor which restores a sense of direction to that service. Fourth, the only good is the one that may serve to pay the price for access to desire (321). In many ways, Milly fits well Lacan's definition of the true hero. Firstly, she has been hopelessly and helplessly victimized by Kate and Merton's marriage conspiracy, but she bequests them a large sum of money; so, as a true heroine, she is betrayed with impunity. Secondly, she never cedes on her desire, and, through traversing the fantasy that has supported her desire, reveals the nothingness that occupies the core of life. Thirdly, by refusing to serve the goods as defined by commodity culture and utilitarian ethics, she brings to light the original and originary groundlessness upon which that ethics is built.

Milly's unbound imagination, generosity, and hospitality, and her indulgence in conspicuous consumption are highlighted in the novel, Yet, these qualities are not merely personal eccentricities that can be appraised in terms of the conventional ethics which values utilitarian purposes and the service of goods; neither do they create another ethics to replace that ethics. Rather, they are abnormalities or aberrations within that ethics which bring to light the excess it attempts to suppress at all costs in order to build itself. Milly's generosity is best summed up in the words she says to Lord Mark: "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" (353-354; emphasis original). When practiced within the limits of an ethics that is structured by exchange economy, generosity is certainly a virtue. But Milly's excessive generosity and her saintly benevolence cannot be defined in terms of exchange economy, and neither can her act of pure giving without expecting or receiving returns be explained as act "in conformity and only in conformity with duty" as Kantian ethics would have it¹⁹. Rather, she acts *ethically*, that is, she acts in conformity *and* only in conformity with her desire.

In *The Wings of the Dove*, almost all the main characters are plagued the anxiety originating from by their lack of the sense of belonging. If Milly sees a "community of collapse" (240) in the exhausted, aimlessly wandering American

¹⁹ Kant's third formulation of the categorical imperative states that we have a duty not only to act in conformity with duty but also to do our duty "for the sake of duty," or "for the sake of the law," or "to do our duty from duty" (Allen W. Wood, *Kantian Ethics* 33).

tourists in the National Gallery, what she sees in the London society is also a community at the loose ends. At Aunt Maud's dinner party, Lord Mark explains to her that "there [is] no such thing today in London as saying where any one [is]. Everyone [is] everywhere—nobody [is] anywhere" (150). And, he doubts if there is such thing as a "set" in place any more, for what he sees in the society is nothing but the "groping and pawing, that of the vague billows of some great greasy sea in mid-Channel, of masses of bewildered people trying to 'get' they [don't] know what or where?" (150). Milly also shows signs of disorientation at the initial stage of her visit to London, for she can only have a few glimpses of "the various signs of a relation" into which she is "sinking" (156-157). But later, through Sir Luke's intervention, her life undergoes tremendous changes: She transforms from a confused, passive spectator of the performance of Europe into a performer of her own desire that is to draw the intense gaze of people around her. At the party in Palazzo Leporelli²⁰, instead of the "hitherto inveterate black" dress of mourning, she wears a white dress and a string of big white pearls, diffusing "in wide warm waves the spells of a general, beatific mildness" (386). This blissful tide rises, spreads, and so wonderfully "floats" all people around her that they are "all together" "like fishes in a crystal pool" (386)—an analogy that is in sharp contrast to Lord Mark's earlier one. Even the American tourists who were earlier labeled the members of the "community of collapse" are brought into "relation with something that [makes] them more finely genial" (386). This highly aestheticized vision of Milly climaxes in Kate's exquisite comparison of her to a "bejeweled dove" under whose wings all people around her nestle to a "great increase of immediate ease" (389). Thus, by force of sheer will Milly temporarily yet miraculously transforms her life as a being-towards-death into a spectacle of unsurpassable beauty and saintly beneficence. And, in a rare moment in the novel, all the characters are relieved of their sense of groundlessness and acquire, however fleetingly, a sense of being together by means of projecting their collective fantasy about love and beauty onto the saintly image of Milly. Yet, this dewy-eyed vision of life cannot truly suture the gap that has generated the desires of the novel's characters as well as the antagonisms and conflicts that lie in their way to fulfilling them. For instance, Kate knows all too well that Milly's "beautiful show of life" is an act of making believe that cannot hide the fact that she is dying from Sir Luke (390-391), and is ready to take the advantage of the situation by asking Merton to stay in Venice in order to propose to the dying girl. However, as she is trying to persuade him to stay, they also feel that he can no longer resist Milly's temptation, and, feeling losing grip on the situation, Merton wants her to "come to [him]" (397) in order to

²⁰ James's description of Milly's Venetian residence is based on the Palazzo Barbaro, where he had resided as a frequent guest of the Daniel Curtis family, a fact James helped to confirm by selecting a photograph of the Palazzo Barbaro for the frontispiece of the novel's second volume (Maine 151).

reconfirm the pledge incumbent on her.

Of all James's novels, *The Wings of the Dove* is the only one in which love is consummated, but since the bed is too indecent and too touchy a subject matter for James and his characters to deal with directly²¹, they often employ the method of "circumsexualocution" (Davidson 353) to re-present it. When employed by Merton in an effort to aestheticize and to sublimate his sexual liaison with Kate, this method produces a great variety of metaphors, metonymies, camouflages, and distortions, and consequently converts his long-cherished desire for her into a partial drive which is in constant quest for the hallucinated intimacy with her enticing image.²² Left alone in his old rooms after the sexual liaison, Merton comes to realize that his experience with Kate is a total disaster, a disaster implied by the words James uses to record his silent musing: "there might be . . . almost a shade of the *awful* in so *unqualified* a consequence of his act" (399; emphases added) of coercing Kate into coming him. Yet, still gloating sadomasochistically over her recognition of him as the master of the situation, he manages to transform his "awful" encounter with the real of sexuality into a "gained success" which "represents" the conversion of his "luminous conception" into a "historic truth" (399). Then, he looks into Kate's pledge, which is reconfirmed by her "coming to him," as an "inestimable value" which keeps him "thinking of it and waiting on it, turning round and round it and making sure of it again from this side and that" (400). This representational indirectness and belatedness converts his desire into a drive whose aim is not to seize the *goal* of his desire²³, namely, Kate's erotic body, but to put the residual images of that body within the frame of his fantasy and to find gratifications in the repeated act of fantasizing. Accordingly, every time he returns home and "work[s] his heavy old key in the lock"—an act impregnated with sexual implications²⁴-- the door opens, and there is no other act possible except the "renewed act, almost the hallucination, of intimacy" with Kate, which is compared to "a play on the stage," forever ready "in view" and repeated "night after night" (400). Thus, as the actor who is also the watcher, Merton acquires double visual gratification from the solo drama piece he stages in "his own theatre," and temporarily relieves himself of the anxiety caused by the traumatic encounter with the real of sexuality. Both in spite of *and* for his efforts to sublimate

²¹ In "The Future of the Novel," James writes, "I cannot so much as imagine Dickens and Scott without the 'love-making' left [out]. In all their work it is, in spite of the number of pleasant sketches of affection gratified or crossed, the element that matters least. Why not therefore assume . . . that discriminations which have served their purpose so well in the past will continue not less successfully to meet the case? What will you have better than Scott and Dickens?" (*Literary Criticism* 1: 108).

²² For more discussion on the distinction between drive and desire, see Zupančič 135-136.

²³ For a discussion on the distinction between the aim and the goal of the drive, see Lacan, *The Seminar Book XI* 179.

²⁴ James uses the metaphor of the lock and key in many of his novels. In his short novel *Watch and Ward*, this metaphor carries strong sexual implications. See Audré Marshall 37.

his lust, what is repressed in that process returns in the form of specular drive and finds gratification in the fetishized image of Kate.

VI. The Ethics of Choice: “We shall never be again as we were!”

Wickedness and callousness are the terms often associated with the moral character of Kate, who manipulates her dying friend into believing herself loved and so giving away her fortune. But a narrowly moralist judgment cannot really carry us far in our reading and interpretation of Kate’s character for several reasons. First, by placing the reunion scene of Kate and Lionel Croy in the beginning pages of the novel (55-69) in order to emphasize the role the father plays in orienting the daughter towards the symbolic exchange system, James seems to suggest that we judge Kate’s personality from the ethical perspective provided by that system rather than according to the inadequate, oversimplifying moral categories of good and bad. Second, the accusation of betrayal often placed on Kate can also be applied to Milly, who, being immensely wealthy, courts in a roundabout way her best friend’s boyfriend while willfully ignoring their all-too-obvious intimate relation. Third, a narrowly moralist evaluation of Kate’s personality would certainly lead us to a kind of vulgar economic determinism which holds that only the rich can afford the luxury of realizing their passions and desires.

If Kate is guilty of something, she is certainly guilty not of cheating on and betraying Milly but of ceding on her own desire and returning to the service of the conventional good. Compared with Milly’s insistent, “perverse” desire for Merton, Kate’s is marked by hesitation and the lack of faith in its realization. At many crucial moments in the novel, she shows moral qualms about her marriage conspiracy and has to find excuses for and rationalize her act of cheating and betraying. This act of rationalization is aptly shown in the words she uses while trying to persuade Merton into proposing marriage to Milly. At the Palazzo Leporelli party, she suggests Merton to stay with Milly after she and other people leave Venice the next day. Seeing him hesitating, she pursues to add, “Didn’t we long ago agree that what she believes is the principal thing for us?” To this Merton answers elliptically and hesitatingly, “So that if I stay--,” and then promptly she helps him finish off the remark with the words he is too guilt-ridden to utter, saying “It won’t . . . be our *fault*” (396; emphasis added). Here, Kate *makes believe* that the marriage proposal is nothing more than the make-believe that would help Milly sustain her illusion about life, so that it won’t be their fault if Merton is to stay. But from what place is the word “fault” enunciated if not from the place of the superego which demands them to return to the service of the

conventional good?²⁵ By cheating herself into believing that she has performed an altruistic act to Milly, Kate is obviously trying to wash hands of the marriage conspiracy she has masterminded. Therefore, she is guilty of *double crossing*, namely, guilty both of betraying Milly and of betraying her own desire. This lack of faith in realizing their desire in spite of all difficulties is also shown in the words they choose to use in an earlier conversation in which Kate tells Merton of her plan for a moneyed marriage. In response to her remarks that he will soon marry Milly before she dies, Merton says, “So that when her death has taken place I shall be in the *natural* course have money.” To this Kate answers, “You’ll in the *natural* course have money. We shall in *natural* course be free” (394; emphases added). When used by Merton, “natural” carries strong ironical overtones, but Kate, willfully ignoring the irony, repeats the word twice in order to cover all the “unnaturalness” involved in the sly maneuvering by which she attempts to redeem her situation with a moneyed marriage.

A new relationship is established between Milly and Merton after their friends left Venice. Marked by mutual caring and tender joy, this relationship is radically different from that between Merton and Kate, which has been dominated alternately by the system of economic exchange, by the desire for recognition, and by sexual drive. After a few weeks of staying with Milly at Palazzo Leporelli, Merton gradually comes to realize that it is neither Kate nor he but Milly herself who has made their “strange relation” “innocent,” that is, “practically purged” (402) of all worldly considerations, and that her palace and her “generosity,” “hospitality,” and “imagination” work out everything. In an effort to deify her, he even compares her to “something incalculable . . . something outside, beyond, above themselves, and doubtless ever so much better than they” (402). Therefore, with a “spirit of generosity” (402) newly inspired by her “divine” “trust” and her “inscrutable” “mercy” (404), he decides “to go *with* her, so far as she [can] herself go” (402; emphasis original).

Built on extremely loving care not unlike the intensive care administered to the dying in the ward, this new relationship and the refined ambience it creates are delicately tinted with the relentless intensification and ever-growing expansion of Merton’s fearful consciousness. Knowing Milly’s deep dependence on him for life, Merton says to himself that “[a]nything he should do or shouldn’t would have close reference to her life . . . and ought never to have reference to anything else” (410). Furthermore, finding that he is “mixed up in her fate, or her fate [is] mixed up in him, so that a single false motion might either way snap the coil,” he decides to do nothing but simply be “kind” to her (410) and to keep “everything in place by not hesitating or

²⁵ For more discussion on the use of the word “fault” in relation to the act of ceding on desire, see Zupančič 118-121.

fearing [and] to let himself go—go in the direction, that is to say, of staying” (411). This direction of staying with and being kind to Milly is actually not a direction at all, for “direction” in common usage would mean orientation, passage, and destination. However, it shows a kind of intentionality that does not have any intended or utilitarian purposes, and, quite paradoxically, while this choice of directionality without direction agrees with Merton’s inveterate penchant for hesitation and procrastination, it also implies that he has come to terms and finally feels at home with his non-action. As regards Milly, this being together has also radically changed her attitude toward other people--an attitude characterized by non-agreement and non-acceptance as discussed earlier--and achieves for her a kind of singular community which is, given her impending death, finely marked by finitude and immanence. Though finally ruined by Lord Mark’s disclosure of the secret engagement between Kate and Merton, this singular community marks the apex of the working of fantasy in a novel dealing with the protean forms of desire.

Lord Mark’s disclosure destroys Milly and Merton’s shared fantasy, leaving the former to “face the wall” all alone (421, 454, 456) while sending the latter back to the beaten track of life for the service of goods. Merton’s ceding on his desire is shown first by his giving Kate Milly’s “sacred script,” which has remained sealed, and later by his half-hearted attempt to stop her from throwing it into the fireplace (497). By the first act he wants Kate to know that he has remained faithful to him, while by the second he wants to convince himself that he has remained faithful to Milly, or at least, to her memory. Moreover, both acts show his desperate attempt to overcome the guilty sense he has felt towards them both. Generated in wake of *and* in place of the things done, guilty sense creates an illusion about the freedom of choice that can be summarized as “I should have done that, but I didn’t.”²⁶ Consequently, it helps Merton wash his hands of the situation and sustain his illusion about the freedom to make choice even though he has already made the wrong one. As for Kate, the fear that the letter might reveal the mutual attachment between her friends leads her to burn the letter, and this ostrich’s policy shows again her lack of faith in her desire and its realization. This fear is also evidenced by her excuse that that they will “have it all . . . from New York [lawyers]” (497), a lame excuse that shows her final, desperate effort to contain Milly’s legacy within legal discourse and to subject it to exchange economy. However, when later Merton hands her the letter from New York and asks her to give up the money Milly has presumably willed to them, she finally realizes that he cannot face the fact that he has been in love with Milly and tells him, “you’re afraid of *all* the truth. If you’re in love with her without it [the bequest], what indeed

²⁶ For more discussion on the dialectical relation between freedom and guilty sense, see Zupančič 26-27.

can you be more? And you're afraid—it's wonderful—to be in love with her." To this he answers, "I never *was* in love with her" (508; emphasis added). Even though near the end of their conversation he proposes to marry her "in an hour," Kate knows all too well that it is too late to do anything now for, as she says, "We shall never be again as we were" (509). As their dialogue finely shows, the only form of love Merton is capable of is being in love with Milly's memory, just as the only form of sex he is capable of is the "constant still communion" (401) he has conducted with Kate night after night and in her absence.

VII. Conclusion

As a famous Lacanian dictum has it, "the letter always arrives at its destination" (*Écrits* 30). Yet, the moment the letter reaches its destination is also a moment which, Žižek writes, "marks the intrusion of a radical openness in which the symbolic support of life is suspended—a moment of death and sublimation" (*Enjoy Your Symptom!* 8). In *The Wings of the Dove*, Milly's letter reaches its destination in the sense that it opens the gap within the ethical system that has so far structured and sustained the desires and passions of the novel's main characters, and eventually brings about their separation. Moreover, as it remains sealed and its message unknown, this letter also connotes that, having gone through subjective destitution, Milly is already dead as a member of the symbolic community before finally meeting her death in the real. Even though Kate, in an effort to suture the gap opened by Milly's death, may speculate that, at the final stage of her life, she "enjoyed the peace of having *been* loved. . . . She wanted nothing more. She has had *all* she wanted" (462; emphasizes original), these words only sound meaningless, for they cannot actually conceal the unnamable, unbearable horror the "grimly, awfully silent" Milly has to confront while waiting for her real death in a "heroic" manner and without "shrieking" (468).

The Wings of the Dove begins with the triangular relationship among Milly, Kate, and Merton, and ends with its breakdown. On the way to realize their individual desires, they have revealed their different aspects and shown different degrees of consistency and insistency in living up to them. Towards the end of the novel, each of them is left alone to face her or his own unique fate. Merton and Kate go separate ways: Kate returns to live with her widowed sister and her impoverished, defamed father in their dreary house in Chelsea, and Merton has to eke out a living as a journalist and, in all possibility, keeps on holding "constant still communion" with Milly's and Kate's memory "night after night." Compared with them, Milly has gone one step further for the fulfillment of her desire and its renunciation. At the final stage

of her life, having traversed the fantasy about love and life and reached its other side, she “turn[s] her face to the wall” (421, 454, 456) and with a suicidal “No!” to the world dies a death truly worthy of the name of the ethical.

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