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Staging the Drama, Framing the Beholder: Milly Theale and the Paintings in *The Wings of the Dove*[*]

In 1905, Henry James wrote:

> All life [. . .] comes back to the question of our speech, the medium through which we communicate with each other; for all life comes back to the question of our relations with each other.[1]

While James was highly sensitive to the role of language in human relations—Theodora Bosanquet recounts that "[t]o be 'inarticulate' was for him the cardinal social sin"[2]—he was equally perceptive as to how the exchange of different looks (or the absence of such exchange) can sometimes displace words as a powerful means of communication. James J. Kirschke points out:

> James supremely recognized, for instance, that the way a woman looks at you across a room can provide far more adventure than a lifetime of wars and political revolutions. "It is an incident," James remarked, "for a woman to stand up with her hand resting on a table and look out at you in a certain way; or if it be not an incident I think it will be hard to say what it is."[3]

In his fiction, James details the transactions of different looks that unfold among his characters to illustrate the nature of their interrelationships.

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[*] This paper was read at the 2002 International Henry James Conference in Paris.

[1] Henry James, *The Question of Our Speech, The Lesson of Balzac: Two Lectures* (Boston and New York: Houghton, Mifflin and Co., 1905) 10. The quotation is from "The Questions of Our Speech," originally presented as the Commencement Address at Bryn Mawr College.

[2] Theodora Bosanquet, *Henry James at Work* (London: The Hogarth Press, 1924) 24.

[3] James. J. Kirschke, *Henry James and Impressionism* (Troy, NY: The Whitston Publishing Company, 1981) 198. Kirschke's citation is from "The Art of Fiction," *Henry James: The Future of the Novel*, ed. Leon Edel (New York: Vintage Books, 1956) 16.

The ways in which he makes references to paintings in his novels often highlight these interrelationships. In *The Wings of the Dove*, James alludes to two paintings in connection with the character of Milly Theale: a Bronzino portrait, whose sitter closely resembles Milly, and a Veronese painting, which Susan Stringham recalls as she describes the party at Milly's Venetian palace. The Bronzino in the novel has been identified as *Portrait of Lucrezia Panciatichi*,[4] and the Veronese as *The Marriage Feast at Cana* (or a conflation of this painting with another Veronese, *The Feast in the House of Levi*).[5] Past studies that discuss the significance of these two paintings in James's novel have often based their readings on these identifications, finding parallels between the plot of the story or the portrayal of the characters involved with the pictures and the visual elements in the actual works of art or the anecdotes behind their creation.[6]

In this paper, I would like to suggest an alternative reading by considering the distinct ways in which James incorporates these pictures into the narrative. While the Bronzino portrait is a *material* object that exists in the world of the novel, the Veronese painting is an *imaginary* picture that is invoked by Susan Stringham's comment. Unlike the Bronzino, it has no physical substance and exists only in the minds of the characters and the readers. Also, whereas Milly remains outside the Bronzino as its viewer, she stands, figuratively speaking, *inside* the Veronese as one of the elements that make up the entire picture. In these two aspects, Milly's Veronese is reminiscent of the Lambinet painting that appears in *The Ambassadors*, which also exists only in Strether's imagination, and features Strether inside the picture frame as he thinks of himself entering his Lambinet.

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[4] The painting was first identified by Miriam Allott, "The Bronzino Portrait in Henry James's *The Wings of the Dove*", *Modern Language Notes* LXVIII (Jan. 1953) 23-25.

[5] Regarding the Veronese painting, the attribution has varied among scholars. Jeffrey Meyers and Adeline Tintner write that Susan Stringham's comment points to *The Marriage Feast at Cana* alone. Laurence B. Holland and Viola Hopkins Winner write that it refers to both *The Marriage Feast at Cana* and *The Feast in the House of Levi*. Jeffrey Meyers, *Painting and the Novel* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1975) 25; Adeline Tintner, *Henry James and the Lust of the Eyes: Thirteen Artists in His Work* (Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University Press, 1993) 101; Laurence B. Holland, *The Expense of Vision: Essays on the Craft of Henry James* (1964; Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press; Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982) 313; Viola Hopkins Winner, *Henry James and the Visual Arts* (Charlottesville: The University Press of Virginia, 1970) 85.

[6] For example, critics have noted that Lucrezia Panciatichi in the portrait wears a chain that carries the inscription *Amour dure sans fin*. Meyers writes that this inscription becomes Milly's "motto" which enables her to endure her fatal disease "and this loyal love lasts beyond the 'end' and is sufficiently strong to dominate Densher and Kate *after* Milly's death." Meyers also notes that "Lucrezia Pucci, the wife of Bartolomeo Panciatichi, poet, *littérateur*, ambassador and patron of Bronzino, was later forced to test her motto, for she and her husband (who wrote amorous *canzone* in the form of penitential psalms) were accused of heresy, 'flung into prison in Florence and compelled to make a public recantation'" (Meyers 24). Meyers's citation is from Michael Levey, "Prince of Court Painters: Bronzino", *Apollo* LXXVI (May 1962) 169. Tintner has pointed out that Vernon Lee was the first to use this portrait in her story "Amour Dure", the first story in a collection of four tales entitled *Hauntings*. She argues that James used Lee's rendition of the portrait in his own depiction of the same portrait in *The Wings of the Dove* (Tintner, *Henry James and the Lust of the Eyes* 96).

In associating Milly with the Bronzino and the Veronese, James dramatizes the transactions that take place among his characters, particularly through the different ways in which they observe each other. How they participate in these visual transactions plays a crucial role in determining their place among other characters. In her discussion of *The Golden Bowl*, Susan Griffin has written: "When the identity of the self is a function of the social environment, when knowledge is both visually acquired and displayed, seeing and being seen become strategies in the struggle to survive."[7] In the struggle to survive in her social milieu, Milly comes to understand how other people see her and to use this understanding in formulating and presenting her self, particularly in the eyes of Kate Croy and Merton Densher.

Milly starts off as the object of the Londoners' spectacle, and while remaining so throughout the novel, she eventually learns to incorporate this status into her mode of being and to adapt it as her "role" to perform in her society. As Ross Posnock remarks, "Theatricality is the condition of public behavior, in the sense that all relations in public require strategies of self-representation responsive to the constraints and expectations of social norms."[8] Milly comes to recognise her "probable description"—"the awfully rich young American who was so queer to behold, but nice, by all accounts, to know."[9] She begins to employ this description as the "script" for her part, as one of her "strategies of self-representation."[10] The Bronzino and the Veronese paintings are crucial in highlighting these initial and final stages of Milly's development.

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[7] Susan M. Griffin, *The Historical Eye: The Texture of the Visual in Late James* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1991) 20. The quote is from her discussion on *The Golden Bowl*.

[8] Ross Posnock, *The Trial of Curiosity: Henry James, William James, and the Challenge of Modernity* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991) 166.

[9] Henry James, *The Wings of the Dove* (1902; New York: Oxford University Press, 1998) 156. Subsequently referred to in the text as *WD*.

[10] While I will be using the terms "self-presentation" and "self-representation" more or less interchangeably, I would like to note the distinction between the two that Norman Bryson

Milly's immediate identification with the inanimate sitter in the Bronzino portrait is often read as the moment at which she comes to confirm her imminent death and to accept her mortality.[11] This reading accords with the traditional reception of Milly as a spiritual or martyr-like figure, who makes her ultimate sacrifice by bestowing her money on Densher despite her deception and betrayal by the couple.[12] But what James does by connecting Milly with the Bronzino, I think, is to accentuate her position as the object of Londoners' curious stares. In the passage that immediately follows Milly's first encounter with the painting, James sets up a highly charged exchange among the characters, when Kate and the Aldershaws join Milly and Lord Mark in the drawing-room:

> She [Milly] had her back, as she faced the picture, to one of the doors of the room, which was open, and on her turning as he spoke she saw that they were in the presence of three other persons, also, as appeared, interested enquirers. Kate Croy was one of these; Lord Mark had just become aware of her, and she, all arrested, had immediately seen, and made the best of it, that she was far from being first in the field. She had brought a lady and a gentleman to whom she wished to show what Lord Mark was showing Milly [. . .] "*You* had noticed too?"—she smiled at him without looking at Milly. "Then I'm not original—which one always hopes one has been. But the likeness is so great." And now she looked at Milly—for whom again it was, all round indeed, kind, kind eyes. "Yes, there you are, my dear, if you want to know. And you're superb." She took now but a glance at the picture, though it was enough to make her question to her friends not too straight. "Isn't she superb?" (*WD* 158)

Here, James carefully describes the movements and the positioning of the characters, especially Milly's position with respect to the painting. Just as

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makes, drawing upon Stephen Bann's discussion of Caravaggio and Poussin. Bryson writes: "Representation would involve mimesis, the repetition of what is already there, a representation of realities already known"; "Bann argues that still lifes by Caravaggio and Cézanne share the mode of 'representation as *presentation,*' where the viewer does not 'see' but 'is shown'"(Norman Bryson, *Looking at the Overlooked: Four Essays on Still Life Painting* (London: Reaktion Books, 1990) 79, 183 n.11. Bryson cites from Stephen Bann, *The True Vine: Visual Representation and Western Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989) 81.

[11] See, for example, Tintner, *Henry James and the Lust of the Eyes,* 100; Meyers, 24, and Winner, 82-84.

[12] See, for example, Quentin Anderson, *The American Henry James* (London: John Calder, 1958) 233, 237; Christof Wegelin, *The Image of Europe in Henry James* (Dallas: Southern Methodist University Press, 1958) 109; Edward Wagenknecht, *Eve and Henry James: Portraits of Women and Girls in His Fiction* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1978) 168.

Kate and the Aldershaws enter the room, Milly turns toward Lord Mark so that from the viewpoint of Kate and the couple, Milly stands almost side by side with the portrait as if to insist on their remarkable resemblance. James also skilfully depicts the way in which Kate asks, "Isn't she superb?"; her glance at the portrait before asking the question leaves it uncertain whether Kate is talking about Milly or about the lady in the painting. Every little detail about how Kate directs her eyes and attention expresses her attempt to treat Milly and the picture synonymously—with the backing of Lady Aldershaw who looks at Milly "quite as if Milly had been the Bronzino and the Bronzino only Milly" (*WD* 159). In conflating Milly with the portrait, Kate treats Milly as if she were an art object, and in doing so, she asserts her power over her. In fact, Kate's attitude toward Milly is rather provoking from the very moment she enters the room; although Milly must be within the range of her vision, Kate does not acknowledge her presence and speaks only to Lord Mark with a smile "without looking at Milly." Because of this, when Kate finally does look at Milly, we wonder whether her "kind, kind eyes" are sincerely kind, or whether they might be feigned, hiding some slightly malicious intention.

In this scene, because the agency of defining Milly's position within her social circle is given to Kate and the rest of the 'viewers' rather than to Milly herself, Milly appears to be situated in a passive state. Virginia C. Fowler has remarked:

> Milly, like many of James's earlier American girls, experiences extreme difficulty in living within the subjective "I"; she is surrounded, moreover, by characters who seek to deny her such a status. These two forces seem to thrust her into a defensive isolation and her course in the novel moves consistently in the direction of greater and greater passivity—until, in fact, James completely removes her from the novel.[13]

Milly's own thoughts about the dominance of other people over her seem to confirm Fowler's reading:

> It pressed upon her then and there that she was still in a current determined [...] by others; that not she but the current acted, and that somebody else always was the keeper of the lock or the dam. Kate for example had but to open the flood-gate: the current moved in its mass—the current, as it had been, of her doing as Kate wanted. (*WD* 195-96)

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[13] Virginia C. Fowler, *Henry James's American Girl: The Embroidery on the Canvas* (Madison and London: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1984) 88.

Milly's eventual acceptance of the role of the "dove" certainly seems to further reinforce the idea that she falls into "greater and greater passivity." Yet, Milly is not, I think, as passive as she may appear to be or as she takes herself to be.[14]

We can detect the more self-assured or even assertive side to Milly's nature in the passages leading up to the Bronzino scene. As Milly and Lord Mark proceed from the garden to the gallery in which the portrait hangs, they are constantly interrupted by the guests at the party, who approach Lord Mark for a brief chat, though this is simply a pretext for taking a closer look at Milly. Milly faces an incessant stream of inquisitive stares, but she does not find her situation threatening or subjugating; instead, she finds it somewhat amusing:

> [T]hey gave her, in especial collectively, a sense of pleasant voices, pleasanter than those of actors, of friendly empty words and kind lingering eyes that took somehow pardonable liberties. The lingering eyes looked her over, the lingering eyes were what went, in almost confessed simplicity, with the pointless "I say, Mark"; and what was really most flagrant of all was that, as a pleasant matter of course, if she didn't mind, he seemed to suggest their letting people, poor dear things, have the benefit of her. (*WD* 155)

Milly discerns that Lord Mark is deliberately making a spectacle out of her as they make their way through the crowd, but rather than being offended, she oddly feels that Lord Mark "made her herself believe, for amusement, in the benefit [...] that her present good nature conferred" (*WD* 155) his behaviour. Milly does not seem to mind being looked at. Instead of being bewildered by the stare she receives from the crowd, Milly maintains her self-possession, as the narrator describes:

> It was, as she could easily see, a mild common carnival of good nature—a mass of London people together, of sorts and sorts, but who mainly knew each other and who, in their way, did, no doubt, confess to curiosity. [...] The strangest thing of all for Milly was the uplifted assurance and indifference with which she could simply give back the particular bland stare that appeared in such cases to mark civilisation at its highest. (*WD* 155-56)[15]

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[14] For example, Laurence B. Holland argues that Milly's adoption of roles reflects her "gain in self-possession" and that she "begins to mold" the London society (Holland, 298).

[15] The way in which Milly handles Londoners' curious gaze with "the particular bland stare" recalls James's observation of women walking down Fifth Avenue or Beacon Street, which features in his article on the question of "Modern Women": "A young girl of fashion dressed to suit her own taste is undeniably a very artificial and composite creature, and doubtless not an especially edifying spectacle. She has largely compromised her natural freedom of

As the Londoners make a spectacle out of Milly with their curious looks, she, in turn, perceives the crowd as "a mild common carnival of good nature," and makes a spectacle out of them. Milly seems to regard the situation as a kind of mimicking "game" where she must identify and appropriate the other party's set of terms. In acknowledging her position as the object of people's looks not passively but somewhat willingly, Milly affirms her sense of self-identity. Rather than resisting the role that other people impose upon her, Milly takes on this role and plays up to their expectation, thinking that "to accept it without question might be as good a way as another of feeling life" (*WD* 156).[16]

There is an element in Milly that, in some way, thrives on being under other people's eyes. As she observes the ways in which other people look at her, Milly learns to consciously present her self in a way that concurs with how she wishes to be seen—which is, at least partially, based on her idea of how others expect her to appear—thereby constructing her identity and defining her place in relation to those around her. Milly starts to behave with more intentionality in the critical scene at the National Gallery, where she, Kate and Densher have a moment of unexpected and awkward encounter. This is the moment when Milly spots Densher among the crowd of museum visitors, and then discovers that she herself had been spotted by Kate. As the three characters try to make the best of their uncomfortable situation, Milly, remembering her earlier revelation that she was to act like a "dove," decides that the dovelike behaviour at this moment would be to employ "her unused margin as an American girl." She speaks to Densher "not in the tone of agitation but in the tone of New York" because "[i]n the tone of New York agitation was beautifully discounted" (*WD* 211). She manages to use her bewilderment at the situation as a kind of "prop" for performing the role of "an American girl."

Milly's concern for her self-presentation culminates in the grand party scene at Palazzo Leporelli where Susan Stringham's comment invokes the Veronese painting. Milly makes a dazzling appearance at this party in her "wonderful white dress" instead of "her almost monastic, her hitherto inveterate black"

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movement. The most that you can say of her is that she is charming, with a *quasi*-corrupt arbitrary charm. She has, moreover, great composure and impenetrability of aspect. She practices a sort of half-cynical indifference to the beholder (we speak of the extreme cases). Accustomed to walk alone in the streets of a great city, and to be looked at by all sorts of people, she has acquired an unshrinking directness of gaze." ("Modern Women, and What is Said of Them" Reprint of a series of articles in the *Saturday Review*, New York: J. R. Redfield, 1868), *Henry James: Literary Criticism, Essays on Literature, American Writers, English Writers* (New York: Literary Classics of the United States, 1984) 23.

[16] I would like to thank Tessa Hadley for bringing this sentence to my attention.

(*WD* 370), adorned with her exquisite pearls, which she holds, "vaguely fingering and entwining a part of it" (*WD* 373). Everything about Milly's appearance and gestures seem to be calculated to have a certain effect, and it certainly does on Densher, who, up to this point, has not taken the slightest interest in her because his feelings "were all for Kate, without a feather's weight to spare" (*WD* 363). Densher's resolute dedication toward Kate starts to dwindle as he slips out of his complete alignment with her. Densher begins to observe and compare the two women from a more disinterested point of view. He remarks that Milly looks "different, younger, fairer" and that "Kate was somehow—for Kate—wanting in lustre" and "[a]s a striking young presence she was practically superseded" (*WD* 372) by their friend. Milly is at her most striking when James describes how Kate and Densher look at her together:

> She turned her head to where their friend was again in range, and it made him turn his, so that they watched a minute in concert. Milly, from the other side, happened at the moment to notice them, and she sent across toward them in response all the candour of her smile, the lustre of her pearls, the value of her life, the essence of her wealth. (*WD* 382)

The image of Milly saluting her friends "from the other side" registers a clear distance between Milly, who is inside the Veronese painting, and the couple, who stand outside it and watch her with a mixed feeling of admiration and envy and chagrin. In this Veronese scene, although Milly continues to be the object of other people's stares, she is no longer the passive recipient of their curious looks as she was in front of the Bronzino portrait. Because she is simultaneously the creator and the creation of this painting, Milly gains the agency to define her own position as the observed; subsequently, Kate and Densher are *forced into* the position of the observer, and are left feeling powerless at the sight of Milly who represents the object of their desire—the financial wealth that would allow them to marry each other.

I mentioned earlier that Milly's Veronese and Strether's Lambinet are alike, in that they are both *imaginary* paintings that have no physical existence in the world of James's fiction. But the two paintings are diametrically opposed in terms of how James treats the distance between the protagonist associated with this picture and his or her "counter-couple," who acts as a kind of foil to this character. With the Lambinet, Strether allows—or he is unable to stop—Chad and Madame de Vionnet's entrance into his painting. The sight of the couple on a boat becomes integrated into the image as a visual element that does not simply make up but *perfects* Strether's imaginary painting; it is, as Strether says, "exactly the right thing" which "had been wanted in the picture, had been wanted more or less all day."[17] This "permeability" of the Lambinet expresses Strether's more reserved or self-effacing temperament, which leads him to accept painfully yet willingly—and one might even say, heroically—the revelation about the true nature of the couple's "virtuous attachment." By contrast, with Milly's Veronese painting, the distance between the viewer and the picture is never transgressed; it keeps Kate and Densher outside the picture frame, and by maintaining this distance, it operates as a means by which Milly expresses her personal and financial power over the two spectators. That Milly's Veronese gains its "real" significance only when seen by Kate and Densher is another element that distinguishes this picture from Strether's Lambinet, which exists autonomously without the need for an external viewer. The importance of the presence of others is already implicated in the fact that it takes another person to recognise the painting; it is not Milly herself but Susan Stringham who makes the association between Milly's Venetian party and the Veronese. The Lambinet, which functions as a site of self-reflection for Strether, is never viewed by another being; Strether is both its sole creator and its sole viewer. But whether Milly actually has power over the couple becomes questionable when we consider that at the Veronese scene, Kate and Densher are still on their course to successfully acquiring Milly's money. It is in this scene that the couple makes a pledge on their scheme as they watch their friend; the sight of Milly brings the two lovers together "with faces made fairly grave by the reality she put into their plan" (*WD* 382).

Despite some of their differences, what unites the two imaginary paintings is that they both depict the ideal state of their "creator:" the Veronese painting shows Milly at her most striking, acting as the perfect hostess adorned in a beautiful white dress and a lavish pearl necklace; the Lambinet features Strether in the French countryside where he enjoys his solitude away from human complications. Yet, ultimately, Milly's accomplishment and Strether's refuge remain provisional; they last only while each character is kept away from the reality of their predicament, from the truth about their counter-couple: Milly discovers the secret engagement between Kate and Densher, and their plot to obtain her money; Strether discovers that Chad and Madame de Vionnet are having an affair. By representing their ideal state in the form of an imaginary painting devoid of material substance, James conveys its ephemeral nature—that it is "essentially more than anything else a scene and a stage" (*A* 386).

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[17] Henry James, *The Ambassadors* (1903; New York: Oxford University Press, 1998) 388. Further references to this book will be made in the text and will be abbreviated as *A*.

In both novels, the imaginary painting scene functions as a climax and a turning point in the narrative. The collapse of their "perfect" world sets off Strether and Milly to his or her final act: Strether decides to return to America and Milly "turns her face to the wall" (*WD* 410). This expression encapsulates Milly's nature that thrives on other people's looks and seeks them as a means to sustain her self. When Milly loses the will to stay under those eyes, to continue performing her "role," her life slips away.

Just before she dies, Milly manages to present her self one last time. When she makes her final appearance to Densher, she receives him as before "in that glorious great *salone*, in the dress she always wears, from her inveterate corner of her sofa" (*WD* 453). Until the very last moment of her life, Milly is concerned with how she is seen—and how she *will* be seen in Densher's memory. Accordingly, she creates and presents an image of herself just as she had done at her grand party. This final image, like her imaginary Veronese painting, leaves a strong impression on Densher and a powerful influence on the fate of the couple.

In associating Milly with the Bronzino and the Veronese, James not only enhances the aesthetic *ambiance* of the novel but also dramatises the interrelations among his characters, which are shaped and maintained by how they express themselves and perceive others visually. The ways in which he incorporates paintings in his fiction are intricately connected with his views on the dynamics of human transactions. They attest to his 1905 statement, that "all life comes back to the question of our relations with each other."

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