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Henry James and the Venetian Voice

by EBEN E. BASS

Apparently Henry James saw some affinity between Morgan Moreen, the aged child of his story "The Pupil," and Milly Theale, the young woman in The Wings of the Dove who longs for the rich experience of culture and living. (As Leon Edel has shown, Milly yearns for what was missed in life by Minny Temple, James's talented cousin who died young.) In his Preface to The Wings, James says he "can scarce remember the time when the situation on which this long-drawn fiction mainly rests was not vividly present." Although "The Pupil" (1891) appeared eleven years before The Wings, the Preface to the novel could well be describing Morgan too when James says that Milly is 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" (AN, p. 288). The anecdote of an invalid, precocious child and his adventurous social-climbing family came to James from a medical doctor whom James met on a hot summer train ride to Florence (AN, pp. 150-51), but that anecdote or germ sprang into the full life of his story "The Pupil." Of that transformation James says, "It lives again for me, this vision, as it first alighted; though the inimitable prime flutter, the air as of an ineffable sign made by the immediate beat of the wings of the poised figure of fancy that has just settled, is one of those guarantees of value that can never be recaptured" (AN, p. 150).

Since the emersion of "The Pupil" was like a fluttering bird, and since the plight of the young person in the story resembles that of the dove-like Milly Theale, "early stricken and doomed . . . while also enamoured of the world," the story's mode of being can be said to anticipate the major symbol of The Wings of the Dove. An even more striking parallel, however, is the use of language and voice allusions in both story and novel as means of persecution. Both Milly Theale and Morgan Moreen are the victims of language: they sense its oppressiveness and wish to escape it. True, Morgan the child genius is himself a master of language, but at the same time he is the victim of its false uses as these are practiced by his family. Milly too senses language as one

form of oppression used against her by exploiters who pretend to be her friends.

Psalm 55 contains much of the figurative language that gives substantive meaning to the Venetian chapters of *The Wings of the Dove*; in addition to the Psalm's plea “Had I the wings of a dove,” four significant themes of the Psalm appear in the novel. Two of them also dominate, and two appear incidentally, in James’s earlier story “The Pupil.” The four themes are as follows: 1. The voice and tongues of the enemy (“Because of the voice of the enemy” “Destroy, O Lord, and divide their tongues”); 2. The terror of death, overwhelming horror (“The terrors of death are fallen upon me” “Horror hath overwhelmed me”); 3. The storm (“I would hasten my escape from the windy storm and tempest”); 4. Deceit and guile of a friend (“Deceit and guile depart not from her streets,” “For it was not an enemy that reproached me,” “But it was thou, a man mine equal, my guide, and mine acquaintance”).

The two dominant themes used in “The Pupil” (which in some ways anticipate their use in the novel) are the voices and the storm. As for the two other themes, Morgan Moreen the boy-hero of the tale also betrays his anticipation, in his forward way, of death; and the deceit and guile of the “friend” are the deceit of his family, although their trickery is not deliberately aimed against him; still, he suffers intensely by his shamed awareness of it. The oppressive voice and tongues in the Venetian episode of *The Wings of the Dove* (theme one of the Psalm) are an interesting extension of the literal and figurative language allusions in “The Pupil,” in which much is made of the linguistic facility (and infelicity) of the Moreens. The second theme from Psalm 55, Milly’s terror of death, has touched her before she comes to Venice, and there it overwhelms her at last, with the dramatic revelation made to her during the autumnal storm that deluges the sweet sea-city. She learns a dreadful secret and turns her face to the wall, just as some unnamed disaster visits the Moreens during the Venetian storm in “The Pupil,” and just as in Paris, toward the end, Mrs. Moreen’s “social calendar was blurred—it had turned its face to the wall.” In the novel the storm episode (theme three) marks the breaking point. The fourth theme from Psalm 55 appears in *The Wings of the Dove* as Milly’s loss of faith in her friends. Lord Mark reveals the deceitfulness and guile of her friend Kate Croy, who has falsely told Milly that she, Kate, does not love Densher, and Mark also exposes the false role of Densher, whom Milly thought to be in love with her, but who in fact is Kate’s lover and who has been playing the other role only because Kate so conceived it for him. The voice motifs of the story and of the novel permit the most rewarding comparison; they are the main current that accompanies the three other themes.

Verbal deceit is the comic hallmark of the Moreens, an expatriate American family with a Welsh-sounding name; their linguistic gifts and the shifting uses to which they put these keep the family “afloat” for much longer than might be expected. Mrs. Moreen even does translating to earn extra money, although the work “pays wretchedly.” Morgan, her talented youngest child, speaks colloquial Latin, and among themselves the whole family talk “Ultramoreen,” their synthetic language. Pemberton the tutor instructs Morgan in Greek, and the boy uses a German-Greek dictionary to find opprobrious terms for Pemberton’s white lies about Morgan’s parents, especially Pemberton’s way of covering up for their not paying their debts. Aware of his parents’ shiftiness, Morgan mocks the trait with his own language shifts—thus when Mrs. Moreen says Pemberton’s salary “will be quite regular,” the boy elicits “a strange little comment in the shape of the mocking foreign ejaculation ‘Oh la-la!’” (“P,” p. 219).

The verbally talented Moreens live “very well”—that is, beyond their means, with the result that they often have to change European domiciles—but Pemberton, too, has exhausted his small patrimony on travel after taking his Oxford degree. Therefore, his need for culture and travel matches that of the Moreens, and he shares their affinity for living in expensive surroundings on very little income. Pemberton’s main interest, however, is his pupil, a boy whose prodigious talents appear in a very odd setting: “Morgan had been as puzzling as a page in an unknown language . . . the whole mystic volume in which the boy had been amateurishly bound demanded some practice in translation” (“P,” p. 223). Even James’s metaphor stresses language skills, but skills that are put to strained uses.

In like manner, Pemberton is surprised at the language facility of Morgan’s family. The tutor’s Yale and Oxford training have not prepared him for the gypsy-like variety of these cultural transients: “their chatter of tongues, . . . their French, their Italian and, cropping up in the foreign fluencies, their cold tough slices of American”; indeed, “They could imitate Venetian and sing Neapolitan” (“P,” p. 224). Even the suitors of Morgan’s older sisters, whom the boy mockingly calls “the Princes,” “talked French very loud—though sometimes with some oddity of accent—as if to show they were saying nothing improper” (“P,” p. 225). The “Princes” sit on sofas with the Moreen girls, who are trained to hope for rich and titled husbands and who must keep their language wits about them for the enterprise. The Moreen family play at the old comedy of social climbing: they are “a houseful of Bohemians who wanted tremendously to be Philistines” (“P,” p. 225). Without much money, they venture forth with language and talk as their main resource.

Though Morgan is a Moreen, his weak heart and his remarkable intellect make him a separable family member: he is worshipped in one
sense, yet his mother never dares to embrace him physically. Pemberton notes this odd combination of the family’s “adoring the child” and “their eagerness to wash their hands of him” (“P,” p. 226). Still, Morgan cannot be sent to a regular school, where he might have been thought “rather a polyglot little beast” (“P,” p. 227). James’s private irony is that Morgan is the real tutor, and Pemberton the pupil, who under Morgan’s guidance learns all of the subversive language shifts whereby the family live well on little or no income; but also, Pemberton must pretend, along with the family, that Morgan is still only a child who does not understand the shiftiness of adults.

His language tricks permit Morgan to allude to that forbidden topic. Pemberton tries to hide from the boy the fact that the parents do not pay, but Morgan says to him, “You ought to jiler, you know.” Pemberton has learned from him that the French slang expression means to cut sticks. When the tutor objects to this sort of disrespect for the parents, Morgan searches his Greek lexicon for the equivalent of “awful whopper” to ridicule the tutor’s sense of duty to the parents (“P,” p. 236). Language skills enable the boy to speak the unspeakable truth.

Morgan’s innuendoes prepare the tutor for other shifty uses of language by the parents. When Mrs. Moreen comes to Pemberton’s room at an unseemly early hour with a placating fifty francs, “she talked and reiterated as women reiterate, and bored and irritated him.” Now Pemberton learns what he has come to suspect—that the family would be happy for him to take Morgan off their hands. Clad only in her wrapper, Mrs. Moreen admits that she writes translations to earn money and advises Pemberton to do the same if he lacks resources, rather than demand his salary. When the tutor refuses the fifty francs, Mrs. Moreen gives up any verbally protective claim she has to her son—“You may tell him [Morgan] any horror you like [about the shiftiness of the parents]!” (“P,” p. 242). But Morgan already knows what these horrors are, in fact is more expert in them than is Pemberton, who has still much to learn about them.

A further indictment of the Moreens’ talk comes from Mrs. Clancy, a widowed sister of Mr. Moreen’s who “had the air of not knowing what they meant when they talked” (“P,” p. 250). Pemberton takes the reluctance to mean her disapproval of the Moreen lifestyle, more especially their dishonest uses of language. Thus when the family linguistically celebrate all their reasons for going to Venice—they inevitably use “the languages in which they could tutoyer”—Pemberton learns that the real reason for their going there, to toady to the wealthy and titled Dorringtons, goes unmentioned (“P,” p. 251).

The desolation of Venice in the late fall—after the Dorringtons leave and no advantage has accrued to the Moreens—suits the ebbing family fortunes. (In like manner in The Wings of the Dove, when Milly learns from Lord Mark that Kate and Densher have schemed against her, the
Venetian weather turns foul.) During the November storm, Mrs. Moreen makes a particularly desperate plea for a loan from Pemberton, who replies, "'Dear lady, c'est trop fort!' . . . in the manner and with the borrowed grace of idiom that marked the best colloquial, the best anecdotic, moments of his friends themselves" ("P," p. 253). Pemberton has learned the language shifts of the Moreens and uses them to good advantage against the mother, even to the extent of making himself appear less humane than he really is: "the abasement of living with such people" was that one "had to make vulgar retorts, quite out of one's own tradition of good manners" ("P," p. 254).

The Moreen family disintegrates in Paris—it is in character that they choose "the most expensive city in Europe" for their bankruptcy. Pemberton has been lured back from a wealthy pupil in England by a letter from Mrs. Moreen which gives a false warning about the state of Morgan's health. Still humoring his former charge, the tutor returns to find the family in its worst crisis yet: the hotel manager has seized all their possessions for unpaid debts, and the parents are now eager to give the tutor full charge of Morgan. After a long walk in the Bois de Boulogne, Pemberton and the boy return to the destitute family, and Morgan, upon hearing that he is free to join Pemberton, suffers a fatal heart attack. The exertion of the long walk, and the excitement of being dispossessed of his shameless family, are both possible causes, but Pemberton too shares a responsibility for the death of his pupil. As is often true in James, "The Pupil" ends with an announced verbal ambiguity: Mr. and Mrs. Moreen disagree about whether Morgan really wanted to go away with Pemberton after all. This verbal tangle entrap's Pemberton too in the web of responsibility for Morgan's death.

Unlike the tentative case of Morgan Moreen, Milly Theale is clearly the pleading dove of Psalm 55, with a small but distinctive voice of her own. She gives a "weak word" to indicate where she would like to live in Venice. Throughout the Venetian episode she is surrounded by voices, which she tries to subdue or quiet, with but diminishing success. Even the silence about her is often one of pent-up sound, of voices straining to be heard, irresolutely mute. Thus the spectacle of Milly has for Densher "an eloquence . . . ; they were living together, the five of them, in an air in which the ugly effect of 'blurting out' might easily be produced" (WD, p. 359). Yet most often while with her deceiving

3. James's Morgan, Milly, Maisie and Miles are all exploited children. Morgan Moreen and Miles (of The Turn of the Screw) die as children, victims in part at least of a tutor and of a governess, Milly dies as a victimized young woman who is still childlike in her unfulfilled sense of life; and the fourth child, Maisie Farange (of What Maisie Knew), remains on the edge of a dubious fulfillment of adulthood which she has learned about from spoken innuendoes not meant for childish ears. The four young people are afflicted by the verbal dangers of life. Miles and Maisie have both their skills and their difficulties with language; the talented Miles is said to have stolen letters and to have "said things" that are bad, and Maisie the bright little survivor puzzles amazing meanings out of adult talk, talk that itself is "bad." As developed in the present essay, Morgan and Milly are shown to be victims of verbal deceit.

friends the dove feels oppressed by their words, which she scarcely needs.

Voices had surrounded her for weeks, and she had tried to listen, had cultivated them and had answered back; these had been weeks in which there were other things they might well prevent her from hearing. . . . Susan Shepherd had compared this portion of the girl's excursion to the Empress Catherine's famous progress across the steppes of Russia; improvised settlements appeared at each turn of the road, villagers waiting with addresses drawn up in the language of London. Old friends, in fine, were in ambush, Mrs. Lowder's, Kate Croy's, her own; when the addresses were not in the language of London they were in the more insistent idioms of the American centres. (WD, p. 324)

James himself, in his Preface to The Wings of the Dove, notes his concern for the aural oppression of Milly: "the pressures all round her kept easy for her, the sounds, the movements regulated, the forms and ambiguities made charming" (AN, p. 306).

On occasion, the voices around Milly become operatic in quality; vying with each other for Milly's attention and entertainment, they "failed but little, really, of the concert-pitch" (WD, p. 324). Milly's struggle against vocal oppression is made clear at her palazzo when she rejects Mark's suit, offered once before in the presence of the Bronzino portrait at Matcham. "We're all in love with you. . . . I speak as one of the lot. . . . Therefore you must listen to us." She equates listening with acceptance, and she refuses to do either: "No, I musn't listen to you. . . . It simply kills me. . . . Only I can't listen or receive or accept—I can't agree. I can't make a bargain" (WD, pp. 341-42). The operatic silence she demands of Mark in this conversation is the most gratifying part of it to her, and it follows her wish for a voiceless life at Palazzo Leporelli. "The romance for her, yet once more, would be to sit there for ever, through all her time, as in a fortress; and the idea became an image of never going down, of remaining aloft in the divine, dustless air, where she would hear but the plash of the water against stone" (WD, p. 332). Besieged by Mark's as well as by others' voices she even fears on occasion, like poor Pemberton the tutor in "The Pupil," that she will be trapped into the mode of their lowered discourse: "She was to wonder afterwards as if she had not been, at this juncture, on the point of saying something emphatic and vulgar—'Well, I don't at all events want you!' [Mark]" (WD, p. 342).

James conceived the setting of these chapters of The Wings of the Dove, Venice itself, in vocal and linguistic terms. Densher leaves his hotel to take private rooms because the hotel was filled "with the

5. James often associates Venice with its voices. "The Venetian footfall and the Venetian cry—all talk there, wherever uttered, having the pitch of a call across the water—come in once more at the window, renewing one's old impression of the delighted senses and the divided, frustrated mind" (Preface to The Portrait of a Lady, AN, p. 41). "Where above all the strong Venetian voice, full of history and humanity and waking perpetual echoes, seemed to say more in ten warm words, of whatever tone, than any twenty pages of one's cold pale prose" (Preface to The Spoils of Poynton, AN, p. 136). "The vine-leaves, trained on horizontal poles, make a roof of chequered shade for the gondoliers and ferry-men, who doze there according to opportunity, or chatter or hail the approaching 'fare.' There is no
polyglot herd, cockneys of all climes. The Venetian . . . was pure Attic
beside some of the dialects of the bustling inn,” filled as it is with a
“concert of false notes” (WD, p. 349). After the great storm and its ter-
rrible silencing of all voices save that fatal one of Lord Mark, the city
returns once more to its turbulent vocal sunshine, which “came into its
own again and, with an almost audible paean, a suffusion of bright
sound that was one with the bright colour, took large possession. Venice
glowed and plashed and called and chimed again; the air was like a clap
of hands” (WD, p. 435). As a part of such Venetian discourse one
might add Kate and Densher’s talk at San Marco, that “great social
saloon, a smooth-floored, blue-roofed chamber of amenity, favourable
to talk” (WD, p. 362). We shall return to the voices of Kate and Den­
sher presently. Also indigenous to Venice, Eugenio is the agent who se­
cures Milly’s palazzo for her “after multiplied pourparlers with Mrs.
Stringham” (WD, p. 321). Milly and her Bostonian friend judge
Eugenio to be “polyglot and universal” (WD, p. 322) and very probably
a swindler, but he still wins Milly’s confidence whenever they
talk. Encountering this native voice, Densher finds his own thwarted when he
seeks admission to Milly’s palace and is denied it after Mark’s fatal visit
there. Fellow-voices, fellow-deceivers, “it was one of the signs of what
Densher felt in him [Eugenio] that, by a refinement of resource, he
always met the latter’s Italian with English and his English with Italian”
(WD, p. 410).

Venice and its native voices are but the background, however, for the
more dramatically important speakers who address Milly. It is true that
James’s Preface to The Wings of the Dove gives the vocal initiative, if
only figuratively, to the heroine. There he visualizes Milly’s friends
“drawn in as by some pool of a Lorelei” (AN, p. 291), yet it is unde­
niably the friends rather than Milly who are vocal. Even if James’s
Preface says Milly’s interest and attraction lure the others as does the
song of a Rhine maiden, the novel itself shows how they persecute her as
the dove with their many voices. James’s richness and ambiguity are not
fully explored through any single chain of figurative language, to be
sure, but prominent among the metaphors in the latter part of the novel
are the dove and the voices; as a kind of afterthought the interpretive
Preface adds the Lorelei whereby James, forgetting himself, reverses the
verbal initiative.

If we note theme four of the 55th Psalm and seek the one friend in the
novel who deceives the dove, Kate Croy must be singled out as that per-

‘hum’ in Venice, so that their voices travel far; they enter your windows and mingle with your dreams!”
(Italian Hours [New York: Grove Press reprint], p. 16). “Without streets and vehicles, the uproar of
wheels, the brutality of horses, and with its little winding ways where people crowd together, where
voices sound as in the corridors of a house. . . . And somehow the splendid common domicile,
familiar, domestic and resonant, also resembles a theatre with its actors clicking over bridges and, in
struggling processions, tripping along fondamentas” (“The Aspern Papers,” The American Tradition
in Literature, Sculley Bradley et al. eds., II [New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1974], 491).
This is her voice: “Kate Croy assisted with the cool, controlled facility that went so well, as the others said, with her particular kind of good looks, the kind that led you to expect the person enjoying them would dispose of disputation, speculations, aspirations, in a few very neatly and brightly uttered words, so simplified in sense, however, that they sounded, even when guiltless, like rather aggravated slang” (WD, p. 325).

James’s admiration for Kate appears in his comment on her finding no pleasure in the scheme for Densher to marry Milly. At the time, Kate tells Densher she has will enough, however, to do the thing she most dislikes doing. “It was not until afterwards that, going back to it, I was to read into this speech a kind of heroic ring, a note of character that belittled his [Densher’s] own incapacity for action” (WD, p. 388). James was aware of this conflict in his own loyalties: that they are for Kate in the earlier books of the novel; and in the later ones for Milly. “The whole actual center of the work, resting on a misplaced pivot and lodged in Book Fifth, pretends to a long reach . . . with the straight exhibition of Milly” (AN, p. 306). Despite James’s qualified feelings for Kate, there is about her heroism a desperation that makes Densher wince on more than one occasion. The last is the one of Kate’s words about Milly, dying in Venice: “‘We’ve succeeded.’ She spoke with her eyes deep in his own. ‘She won’t have loved you for nothing’” (WD, p. 462).

Ironic to her role as exploiter, Kate herself names Milly as dove after she has sought out this friend who is to become the victim of her deceit. Milly’s friendship is sincere; through this confidence Kate learns of Milly’s grave illness. Kate, though, denies to Milly the shared confidence that she as a friend ought to have returned, the fact of her love for Densher. Her denial is thus the deceit of a friend, an analogue to the final theme of Psalm 55. Combining Kate’s and Milly’s voices in dialogue, James hears them as two characters in a Maeterlinck drama: “the broken talk, brief and sparingly allusive, seems more to cover than to free their sense” (WD, p. 327). Assuring Lord Mark of the authority of Kate’s voice, Milly says, when he questions the assumption of Kate’s not being in love with Densher, “I speak on the best of authority . . . She has given me her word for it . . . She naturally tells me things” (WD, pp. 344–45).

In her conversation with Densher, too, Kate’s voice assumes the dominant role. She tells him he ought to try harder to convince her aunt Mrs. Lowder that he is really interested in Milly. “‘You can say something both handsome and sincere to her about Milly . . . That wouldn’t be lying’” (WD, p. 365). At the Square of St. Mark’s these conversations take on an insidious note, and here for once Densher takes the initiative from Kate by speaking the terms upon which he will accept the plan to exploit Milly—that Kate must become his mistress.
His naked, demanding voice confronts Kate there in the vast openness of the Square. The colloquy goes on again at Milly’s party, where Kate forces Densher to name the thing to be done to Milly; he says, “‘Since she’s to die, I’m to marry her?’” and Kate’s “lips bravely moved. ‘To marry her’” (WD, p. 387). This verbal acknowledgement accompanies the equally explicit verbal agreement that Kate will come to Densher’s rooms.

Densher’s and Milly’s talks are the most subdued of all the dialogues of voices. His tone shows extreme caution, partly from his concern for her grave illness, even more so because of the gravity of his own compromising role. When at length Milly asks the reason for his staying so long after the departure of the other voices, Densher’s is remarkably muted: “‘Isn’t it enough, whatever may be one’s other complications, to stay, after all, for you?’... The speech in question, at least, wasn’t disloyal to Kate; that was the very tone of their bargain” (WD, p. 404). What constitutes “loyalty” to Kate becomes its own dilemma to Densher: he is loyal to her by refusing Milly the one request she ever makes of him, an invitation to tea at his rooms, the rooms where he was physically intimate with Kate. And he is also loyal to Kate in his “courtship” of the girl whose money will enable him and Kate to marry after Milly’s death. This loyalty accounts for his tentative voice in telling Milly that he and she are “indissoluble good friends” (WD, p. 406). He hopes that Milly, as Kate implies she may, will herself propose marriage, and free him of the onus of that verbal deceit. For Densher cannot finally verbalize what he promised in honor to perform for Kate: the promise was that “He would act absolutely in her [Kate’s] sense.... Straight in the white face of his young hostess [Milly], divine in her trust, or at any rate inscrutable in her mercy—what it implied was that he should lie with his own lips” (WD, p. 398). The “divine trust” and “inscrutable mercy” attributed to Milly in this passage make one think of the Dove as Holy Spirit, and Densher’s falseness to her comes close to that unforgiveable sin, blasphemy of the Holy Spirit, as defined in Mark 3, 28-29. The fact that Densher does not vocalize his deceit (contra Lord Mark) saves him from the final act of blasphemy. The lie, so distasteful to Densher, never becomes audible, but from other words that are less committal, and from the meaningful silences, Milly nevertheless takes the message as Kate meant it to be delivered.

Densher’s voice subdues Kate’s on two occasions—the tone of his physical demand of her at St. Mark’s Square shows that “‘he meant it’” (WD, p. 392), and, after his return to London, in a delayed interview with Kate, he tells her first that he couldn’t go to see Milly after Mark’s fatal revelation, and then that he simply refused, when he did see the dying girl, to contradict Mark at all. Kate has been for the “charitable lie,” and her voice, as has already been shown, closes this exchange with the certainty that Milly will not forget Densher.
In his words with Mrs. Stringham, who sought Densher's charitable lie for different reasons than Kate's but who nevertheless sought it, Densher speaks of Mark as a fellow-voice and knows himself to be a fellow-deceiver with Mark. He condemns the lord's proposal to Milly, made in full knowledge of her great wealth and her fatal illness (WD, p. 433), but by censuring Mark's designing voice he also speaks against his own, the only difference being that his proposal to the dying princess was mute, whereas Mark's was crudely audible. In a comparable situation, Densher recognizes a fellowship of deceit in Eugenio's voice, when it denies him admission to Palazzo Leporelli (WD, p. 410). Here themes one and four of Psalm 55, the known enemy and the deceitful friend, merge into a single effect: the vocal persecution of the dove. In a word, Densher exploits Milly as much as Eugenio and Lord Mark do. The difference, as James shows, is in Densher's sense of guilt, a trait missing in Mark and Eugenio.

Lord Mark's voice is more insistent, condescending, and cynical than Densher's. During his first stay in Venice, he "tells" Milly that his offer at Macham still holds good; she has not lost him. He "explains" how he came to know that she and her friends were in the city. He "mentions this betimes," but his casualness calls Milly's attention to the reason for his summons, that he was called for by Mrs. Lowder, and, apparently, by Kate (WD, pp. 330-31). Yet Mark's words fail and therefore become a reason for his own doubt. His proposal to Milly "wouldn't do as the communication of a force that should sweep them both away" (WD, p. 339). During his second brief stay in Venice, Mark gives Milly his proof that Kate and Densher are secretly engaged, after which Densher sees the informer through the window at Florian's caz with an appropriate copy of the satirical French newspaper Figaro on his knee (WD, p. 412). Lord Mark's villainy becomes apparent to Densher at the very moment he sees his rival "behind the glass." Since Venetians held St. Mark to be the patron of glaziers and of notaries, Lord Mark appropriately sits behind glass after officially authenticating ("notarizing") to Milly the deception practiced against her by Kate and Densher. His proofs having spoken their fullest to Milly, Mark has won only an empty and bitter reward. Not only did Milly refuse his second marriage proposal, but she also expressed her continued faith in Densher, which is Densher's undeserved forgiveness.

Some silences of the voices in The Wings of the Dove are far too intense to be called mute conversation or operatic stillness. The most acute awareness of Milly's suffering can completely suspend the persecuting voices. To Mark's inquiry about her trouble, Milly says, "Don't say, don't try to say, anything that's impossible. There are much better things you can do" (WD, p. 337). Milly's own silence as described to Densher by Mrs. Stringham is intense and moving, "She hasn't so much as named you. We haven't spoken." Milly even forbids Mrs. Stringham
and the Italian doctor to talk of her health—she asks them to speak of the cost of provisions instead (WD, pp. 418-20). Densher himself waits mutely until Mrs. Stringham arrives from the palace and talks to him. During that dreadful waiting silence he has not even the consoling written voice of Kate, who upon her departure from Venice sternly forbade any exchange of letters (WD, p. 417).

The last voice of all is that recorded in Milly’s Christmas letter to Densher, addressing him from beyond the grave in tones of forgiveness he cannot bear to hear unless Kate will bear with him in the hearing—the “faint, far wail for the spiritual ear” (WD, p. 506). Since they both agree they do hear the voice without reading the words, Kate destroys the letter at Marian’s flat in Chelsea where Kate has returned to be persecuted by that “friend’s” voice most filled of all with deceit and guile, the voice of her father, Lionel Croy. The voice itself is not so much what shocks Kate, who has heard it often enough before; rather, it is the fact that Lionel has been reduced to weeping. In Luke 13, 28 Christ answers the question “are there few that be saved?” by saying that many will not be able to enter the strait gate: they will hear the ominous words, “depart from me, all ye workers of iniquity.” Then there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Thus the forgiving voice of Milly as dove does not extend to Lionel Croy, even though Milly’s sheltering wings are said to “cover” Densher and Kate. That protection Kate foregoes with her implicit return to her father.

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