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Living for the Dead in Henry James's "Maud-Evelyn"

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Résumé : Dans « Maud-Evelyn » (1900), Henry James met en scène l'improbable mariage d'un aristocrate anglais désargenté et d'un fantôme. Décédée alors qu'elle n'était encore qu'une enfant, Maud-Evelyn Dedrick se voit offrir, par ses parents endeuillés, une vie posthume dont le point culminant est son union avec Marmaduke. Parvenus ainsi à trouver un héritier à qui transmettre leur immense fortune, M. et Mme Dedrick meurent à leur tour, bientôt suivis par Marmaduke qui laisse *in fine* son héritage entre les mains de son amie et confidente, Lavinia. La vie imaginaire de Maud-Evelyn aura donc d'abord servi à perpétuer la fortune familiale : toujours déjà absente, celle-ci apparaît comme la femme idéale et semble conforter la logique nécrophile qui sous-tend l'économie patriarcale de l'Angleterre victorienne. La revenance de cet étrange fantôme génère cependant une série de troubles dans le genre qui viennent contrarier la dynamique héréditaire censée régir la circulation des richesses pour lui substituer un modèle de transmission que l'on pourrait qualifier de *queer*. Dans l'un et l'autre cas toutefois, la lecture vise la mise au jour d'un secret supposément dissimulé dans les plis du récit et l'interprétation postule que l'absence est le signe paradoxal d'une présence cachée. Or la structure du conte empêche cette herméneutique du soupçon en même temps qu'elle l'encourage en ne cessant pas de différer l'accès aux « trésors extraordinaires » accumulés en mémoire de Maud-Evelyn qu'il ne nous sera jamais donné de contempler. Pour finir, c'est la « légende » de Maud-Evelyn elle-même, l'idée d'une absence toujours présente, qui prend la forme d'un quasi-objet au gré de sa circulation entre les personnages, le narrateur et le lecteur.

Keywords: Henry James; "Maud-Evelyn"; death; ghost; marriage; queer; economy; inheritance; things

"To begin (writing, living) we must have death," Hélène Cixous declares at the outset of *Three Steps on the Ladder of Writing* (5), echoing Derrida's intimation, in *Specters of Marx*, that "learning to live" means "[learning] to live *with* ghosts, in the upkeep, the conversation, the company, or the companionship, in the commerce without commerce of ghosts" (xviii). Life, therefore, is a matter of death; it is quite literally a ghost story, originating in loss and grounded in absence, since the living are faced with the enduring responsibility of living with and for the dead, of continually "bearing" them in the double sense of "supporting them and imaginatively conceiving and giving birth to them" (Schor 9). First published in the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1900 and set in *fin-de-siècle* London, Henry James's "Maud-Evelyn" stages that injunction, as it tells the posthumous life of its eponymous character who died as a young girl and for whom her bereaved parents, the Dedricks, "invented a whole experience" (184), so that "she shall have had more life" (195), so that she shall have enjoyed in the end "*all* her young happiness" (201). This consists essentially in offering Maud-Evelyn the marriage that, according to the standards of Victorian respectability, they believe she ought to have made, had she not died prematurely. Marmaduke, an impoverished aristocrat, progressively enters the fantastic "legend" (194) that the Dedricks fashioned for their daughter to the point of becoming their son-in-law, thereby fulfilling their desired life for Maud-Evelyn and benefitting from their lavish generosity by the same token. This odd marriage is immediately followed however by what can only be construed as Maud-Evelyn's second passing, which sends in turn her parents to the grave. Yet Marmaduke does not profit for long from the fortune he inherited from his in-laws, as he dies shortly after them, leaving everything to his long-time friend Lavinia who, many years earlier, had unwittingly helped launch the plot of the tale by rejecting his marriage proposal, before spending her life observing silently her former suitor's infatuation with a dead girl. Mostly told by Lavinia, the details of "the case" (185) are reported by Lady Emma, their mutual friend, who agreed to reveal the secret behind her protégée's

unexpected accession to wealth to the main narrator and his friends as they sat around a fire one day, in a *décor* vaguely reminiscent of the opening of *The Turn of the Screw*.

For many of its readers, this ghost story without a ghost, or at any rate without the dread we have come to expect from the genre, exemplifies a series of interrelated Victorian obsessions, from the idealization of the child to the commodification of women, to the necrophiliac cult of the dead.[1] Serving as a backdrop to the tale, the Dedricks' house in the fashionable neighbourhood of Westbourne Terrace has been converted into a "temple" or a "museum, " filled over the years with ever more "relics" that serve to memorialize Maud-Evelyn even as they contribute to objectifying her, turning her eventually into a commodity fetish (204-5). Like his in-laws, whose family name (*Dead*-rick) inscribes their life-long devotion to their deceased daughter, Marmaduke follows strictly the articles of this "religion" of the dead (189) and the ostentatious signs of the "deep mourning" he enters into upon his wife's demise (200)— "his black suit, his black gloves, his high hatband" (201)—recall the chronic grief of Queen Victoria, "the eternal widow of Windsor" (Jalland 318), after Prince Albert's passing in 1868, as if to confirm that the era was indeed one of "hysterical mourning, " to borrow the words of Philippe Ariès (66-8). Recent forays into the late Victorian culture of mourning tend to show however that Marmaduke and the Dedricks, like Queen Victoria herself, may well be the exception rather than the rule, for the turn of the century proved a moment of transition towards much less spectacular manifestations of grief, testifying to the advent of a more modern and unobtrusive sensibility with respect to death and the dead. By 1900, both in England and in the United States, as death increasingly became a privatized affair, delegated to professional caretakers rather than family members, grief became simultaneously a matter of private expression rather than public display. As a consequence, it also became something of a clandestine experience and, potentially at least, a source of guilty pleasure (Stuart 131-32). Far from being representative of the times, the obsessive "fidelity" of the Dedricks and Marmaduke to the memory of Maud-Evelyn marks them as "people in some old story or of some old time" (191), relics of a former age haunting a modern world that, "for the most part, allows no leisure for such a ritual … of a rigid, antique pattern" (192). Withdrawn from the rest of their contemporaries and priding themselves in living apart, they are free to engage in socially unacceptable rituals and secret transactions whose perversities we, readers, revel in tracking and exposing. This atmosphere of suspicion is partly fuelled by Lady Emma who repeatedly presents us with a convenient set of alternatives that she ambiguously maintains, abandons, and takes up again throughout the story to account for Marmaduke's uncanny behaviour. To her mistrustful and seemingly rational mind, the young man's involvement with the Dedricks is either the symptom of his insanity or the telltale sign of his being "the boldest and basest of fortune-hunters" in disguise (198). To a large extent, these mutually exclusive interpretations have guided the critical reception of the tale as readers have taken their cue from Lady Emma in trying to determine whether Marmaduke was "altogether silly" or "altogether mercenary" (190), whether the story typified a classic case of "mildly maniacal" psychosis by association (191)—of *folie à deux* or even *à trois* (Houston)—or whether it was one of vile economic and sexual exploitation (Bronfen).

While acknowledging the power of suspicion that pervades "Maud-Evelyn" as it shrouds most of James's fiction, turning readers into compulsive sleuths on the lookout for suggestive blanks and revealing silences as evidence of the text's unspeakable yet disclosable secrets the better to convert these spectral absences into the full presence of meaning, this essay would also like to take a different view and consider the way in which absence itself is paradoxically reified and even imagined as an object that characters, narrators and readers exchange, allowing for another economy of meaning to emerge. Taking as a starting point Marmaduke's offhand remark that the Dedricks, and later himself, chose to "live for Maud-Evelyn" (185), I would like to argue that this purposefully equivocal formula, along with the missing body of the dead little girl that it refers to, function as empty signifiers and become sites of investment for competing narratives and desires, whereby James investigates the forms and consequences of the circulation of the dead at the turn of the twentieth century. If Lavinia

[1] If Maud-Evelyn is admittedly an unusual ghost in that she is *made* to return, rather than repressed, by the living, the logic of *revenance* is not entirely absent from the story: by conceiving of her newly acquired inheritance as Marmaduke's rather than Maud-Evelyn's (205), Lavinia suggests that she may now "live for" him, just as he lived for Maud-Evelyn, in an endless cycle that suggests, not only that the dead never cease to haunt the living, but also that the dynamics of narrative is that of haunting itself.

innocently equates "living for Maud-Evelyn" with “[living] for her memory” (188) and with "[feeling] and [caring] for the dead" (195), for Mr. Dedrick and Marmaduke, it proves an elaborate scam more than a generous gesture of compassionate grief, as it means living off her and using her loss for their own gain: in providing his daughter with a husband, Mr. Dedrick effectively forces her into a life, imaginary as it is, that allows him to hand down his considerable fortune to a male heir, while Marmaduke enjoys the social and financial benefits of a marriage that is all the more perfect as his wife remains a bodiless fiction. In that perspective, the tale exposes the contradiction of Victorian patriarchy that relies on marriage to ensure the transmission of capital, yet reduces women to invisible and silent figures, if it does not effectuate their elimination altogether. Such a reading, however, overlooks the story’s dénouement, in which the Dedricks’ inheritance finally reverts to Lavinia by virtue of her being "like a sister" to Marmaduke (204). Horizontal affiliations eventually unsettle the vertical line of patriarchy, pointing in retrospect to a series of queer destabilizations that Lady Emma’s suspicious reading both conceals and reveals. In that second perspective, the gun of suspicion shifts to Lady Emma, as the reader attempts to pry open the closet of her narrative. Yet even this super-suspicious tack depends on the presumption that absence is the sign of presence, that behind the rifts of the text lies a series of queer secrets that will out. That revelatory structure is eventually frustrated, as we are tantalized, in the last words of the story, with a full description of Marmaduke’s—now Lavinia’s—wonderful "things" (200) that never comes about. The more objects accumulate in the tale, the more they recede from view and escape our grasp, while in an odd reversal the story’s central idea, that of Maud-Evelyn’s continuing life in death, takes on material shape. In the end, then, thought, and in particular the thought of death, becomes a thing, a palpable presence, the source of an aesthetic pleasure and a "shared fiction" (Lewis) that enables alternative kinships and original lines of relation to form.

The Victorian economy of death

From the outset, the tale is framed as a rags-to-riches story in which the reader is promised a full conversion of loss into gain and ignorance into knowledge, as Lady Emma, suddenly coming back "from a mental absence" from which the entire narrative proceeds—or rather returns, almost like a ghost—, consents to relate "the odd circumstance of what [Lavinia] had just 'come in for'" (178), a phrase she will use again later to evoke "all the luxuries and conveniences … that [Marmaduke] comes in for through living with [the Dedricks]" (193). The whole cast of characters is thus bound within a ghostly economy set up around the spectral figure of Maud-Evelyn whose absence both hides and enables a series of profitable exchanges. Much emphasis is laid at first on the impoverished condition of the main protagonists: as the daughter of a governess, whose mother "had married—for a governess—'well,'" as Lady Emma wryly puts it (179), Lavinia ought not to have refused Marmaduke’s marriage proposal, even though he had, despite his aristocratic parentage, "no great things to offer" (180), being "always short of funds" (181). Evidenced in his "handsome empty young face" (180), Marmaduke’s constitutive lack also transpires in the absence in him of any remarkable qualities, save his takingness, "a quality implying no others" (183). Much like Maud-Evelyn’s absence, his initial vacuity is quickly filled by the other characters who all supply him with various identifying traits. Where the fact that "Marmaduke *was* 'taking'" (183) justifies his quasi-adoption by the Dedricks who see in it a manifestation of his natural charm, the double meaning of the word, denoting rapaciousness as well as allure, also leaves it open for Lady Emma and the reader in her wake to envisage his potential duplicity and to suspect his every word of betraying his greed, as when he declares, on his first mention of the Dedricks, that they are "as safe … as the Bank of England" (184). In effect, he will continue to be associated with economic images even after Lady Emma claims to have renounced her mercenary reading, which suggests that the logic of acquisitiveness remains throughout a valid avenue for interpretation. In the end Marmaduke’s own body seems to register the transfiguration of poverty into wealth, and more generally of lack into fullness, since the clean slate of his empty face progressively fills and fattens with the outward signs of manliness, good health, and respectability: "He had grown fat … he was rather more of a man … he had grown like a person with a position and a history" (192, 196): displaced from Lavinia to Maud-Evelyn, the marriage plot brings

Marmaduke in possession of the Dedricks' "considerable gains" and secures his social ranking (184). He becomes, to speak like Judith Butler, one of those "bodies that matter. "

The Dedricks' fortune, which later becomes Marmaduke's, is spent acquiring ever more wonderful objects that serve as tangible substitutes to Maud-Evelyn's dead body. Always already absent, she is simultaneously replaced with and dismembered into "the fondest figments and fictions, ingenious imaginary mementoes and tokens … [and] unexposed make-believes of the sorrow that broods and the passion that clings, " whose incantatory evocation, with its alliterative dynamics and balancing rhythms, underlines both their magnificence and the sacred spell they exert (191). The "marvels" and "treasures extraordinary" that the Dedricks and Marmaduke keep accumulating testify to their extravagant though discreet consumerist frenzy (205). Their cult of the dead takes the form of a religion of objects, and the "temple of grief and worship" (191) erected to commemorate Maud-Evelyn anticipates the "warehouses, vaults, banks, safes, wonderful secret places" hidden all around London and elsewhere in Europe in which Maggie Verver remarks, at the beginning of *The Golden Bowl*, that her father "stores" his many "things" (464). That instance of material fetishism masquerading as spiritual devotion to a dead child may well serve as a reminder that, at the end of the nineteenth century, Britain's prosperity was largely the product of imperial trade and that the circulation of commodity within the bounds of the Empire was also secured through the actual deaths of the nation's children (Perrot 189-90). In a letter to Charles Eliot Norton written in November 1899 when he was composing "Maud-Evelyn," James lamented the outbreak of the second Boer's War and mourned the losses that many British families were forced to endure to maintain British imperial power: "We are living, of course, under the very black shadow of S. Africa … friends moreover, right and left, have their young barbarians in the thick of it and are living so, from day to day, in suspense and darkness that, in certain cases, their images fairly haunt one" (James 1984, 124-25). Converted into sacred relics, Maud-Evelyn's things conceal and reveal their economic origin as spoils of the Empire obtained through the sacrifice of Britain's youth, even as their obsessive accumulation and their safe transmission from the Dedricks to Marmaduke may be seen as an attempt to keep at bay the nightmarish spectre of an Empire on the brink of collapse, of "Finis Britanniae," as James wrote another of his correspondents in that same gloomy winter of 1899 (James 1984, 132).

To a large extent, the plot does hinge on the preservation of the Dedricks' fortune that the untimely death of their only heir threatens at first sight to hinder, but that it actually facilitates. Imaginatively revivified, Maud-Evelyn is indeed a blank page on which the anxieties of Victorian England, as well as some of its main ideological tenets, can be inscribed in the form of a narrative co-authored by her parents and her fictional husband under cover of celebrating her memory. Projecting on her absent body their "sum of passion" (203), they shape her posthumous life according to their own desires that prove, at least initially, complementary, as they come across as representatives of a patriarchal economy that relies on marriage for the transference of wealth and simultaneously requires the erasure of women as subjects in their own right. At a time when the law of coverture was already being challenged on both sides of the Atlantic through the passing of several acts guaranteeing married women's access to property, Maud-Evelyn appears as the ideal *feme covert* whose perfection lies precisely in her being already dead, while the tale exposes the necrophiliac logic that undergirds Victorian patriarchy and dooms women to inexistence. In that respect, Lavinia may be read as Maud-Evelyn's "inadequate copy" rather than her rival (Izzo 131): "unknown … obscure and lonely" (178), she has interiorized the "angelic" duty of self-sacrifice (182) and casts herself as a model of Victorian selflessness and insubstantiality, yet, despite the vaporous "flatness of her life" (179), she remains a bodily presence and, as such, cannot hope to compete with a ghost that never existed for Marmaduke in the first place but as a figment of his imagination.[2] More exactly, as Kevin Ohi has astutely observed, not only is Maud-Evelyn a fiction, but the odd temporal structure of the tale paradoxically contributes to erasing her existence while extending her life, since the future anterior of the life that she shall have had results directly into the simple past of the one that she finally had without ever going through the present: "they make out that certain things really happened to her, so that *she shall*

[2] If Lavinia aspires to become an angel in the house, as the phrase goes, conversely, Lady Emma first reads Maud-Evelyn as a madwoman in the attic whose parents "keep her apart" because she must have done something "very bad" (186). Either "angelic" or "very bad": such seems to be the double impasse of Victorian femininity as figured in "Maud-Evelyn."

have had more life. … And *she did have* it! " (195; emphasis mine) It is therefore no accident that we should learn of her wedding with Marmaduke at the same time as we witness his grieving for her second passing ("'The marriage *did* take place.' … 'So you're a widower'" [201]): the events of her life, never properly taking place, are but either prospectively imagined or retrospectively remembered, projected into the future or relegated into the past (Ohi 140-41). Poised between two deaths, Maud-Evelyn's fictional life is denied a present, which seals and compounds the foreclosure of her presence, phantasmatically exacted by a Victorian economy of death, imperial and masculine, that her effacement serves to empower.

Queer secrets

If Maud-Evelyn's obliteration first profits the men in the story, it is also because it sanctions between them a covert homosocial contract that simultaneously underwrites and subverts the heterosexual norms of patriarchy. As the concomitance between Marmaduke's wedding and his grief intimates, and as Mrs. Dedrick's predictable "extinction" thereafter confirms, the expected outcome of both marriages is the wife's death, since it leaves the now "positively gay" mourner free at last to be "wholly taken up with his bereaved patron" (201, 203; Wichelns 82-83). As in James's tales of writers and artists, however, homosocial desire in "Maud-Evelyn" is driven by—or conceals—a tautological fantasy of self-authoring: the successive passing of Maud-Evelyn and her parents becomes the necessary condition to the generation of the subject, since it allows Marmaduke eventually to live alone in the house he inherited from them, surrounded, as he says, with "all *my* things" (200) that is, with all the presents that he patiently selected for her over the years and that he in fact made for himself. It is no accident therefore that, unlike the Dedricks who resort to a medium to communicate with their daughter, Marmaduke should "do beautifully without it" (191). He requires no intermediary because his ghostly wife is the product of his own fictional powers, offering him a mirror image of himself (Bronfen 255-56). More exactly, their specular relation, founded on the aboriginal absence of one and the corresponding lack of identity of the other, enables Marmaduke to fictionize Maud-Evelyn, which in turn permits his own fashioning as subject.

Yet the self that Marmaduke produces through "the loss of his 'family'" (203) is curiously decentred insofar as he chooses not to move in the Dedricks' house after their death, which suggests that his resulting identity is much less stable than the logic of masculine self-creation supposes initially. If he shuns professional mediums, "his fun, " as Lady Emma rather obscenely insinuates, comes from looking at the "little photograph" of Maud-Evelyn that he carries with him and that sends him back effectively an image of himself as "a little girl in a pinafore" (189, 188). And as Kathryn Wichelns has argued, his bodily transformations in the course of the story speak to his gender trouble as much as they signal his triumphant accession to manhood: "fat," "full-blown" and "rosy" (192, 196), Marmaduke is simultaneously identified as a doting son and a blushing, if not pregnant, young girl in flower, before appearing "neither robust nor rosy now" and looking "not … at all himself," subject to a deflating and withering "change" that may even connote menopause (204, 203; Wichelns 83). His pseudonym (for "[Marmaduke] isn't *his* real name!" as Lady Emma ejaculates at the beginning [179]) also reflects his transgression of gender boundaries: etymologically meaning "leader of the sea" in Old English, it amalgamates "Marm," a British slang form of "Madam" and a New England word for a married woman, and "a Duke," while recalling the character of "Lady Marmaduke" in James's 1883 tale "Lady Barberina." Likewise, Maud-Evelyn combines a female name and one assigned to both men and women in late nineteenth-century Britain, just as its compoundedness evokes another of James's early tales, "Rose-Agathe" (1878), initially titled "Théodolinde" in reference to Théophile Gautier's 1835 *Mademoiselle de Maupin*, a novel of transgender cross-dressing in which Madeleine de Maupin, passing for Théodore in order to pierce the secret of masculine desire, comes to play Rosalind, the daughter of the Duke in Shakespeare's *As You Like It*, who disguises as a page named Ganymede in a carnivalesque reversal of social hierarchies and gender categories (Perrot 187-88). Even Lavinia, in her discreet but wilful reluctance to correspond to the Victorian archetype of feminine absence, oversteps the limits of her gendered confinement. As the daughter of a governess, she inherits her mother's liminal status, both inside and outside the family, hovering between an ideal of domestic motherhood that her work was meant to enforce, a reality of

working-class labour that her wages signified, and a fearful fantasy of "sexual susceptibility and social incongruity" elicited by her unmarried status (Poovey 136). And in declining to marry, Lavinia, whose name ironically recalls the last of Aeneus's wives and ancestor to Romulus, remains voluntarily on the edge of heterosexual normativity while opposing her commodification, haunting the story as a "bleached" spinster (194), "already faded, already almost old" (193), and participating thereby in the general queering of identities that "Maud-Evelyn" enacts.

Yet this "queer part" of the tale (196) is given to us to read under erasure, as it were, since Lady Emma's narrative repeatedly voices it in the "quasi-nominative, quasi-obliterative" structure of preterition that, as Eve Sedgwick has shown, renders the thematics of the closet present and legible in James's fiction as "a thematics of absence, and specifically of the absence of speech" (Sedgwick 203, 201). Indeed, throughout the story, Marmaduke keeps disappearing and his frequent absences—from the letters he no longer sends Lavinia and Lady Emma to their hearing "no echo" of him for extended periods of time, to his even "[dropping] out of [their] talks" (196)—are taken as unmistakeable "signs" of an "unspeakable" secret (183, 196) that the two women swear to protect the better to watch it grow in silent fascination: "There had been little need of my enjoining reserve upon Lavinia: she obeyed, in respect to impenetrable silence save with myself, an instinct, an interest of her own. We never therefore gave poor Marmaduke, as you call it, 'away'" (196). Their failure to understand the nature of the secret guarantees its performative and "contagious" circulation as such within the tale (195), while enticing us, trained as we are in reading between the lines and against the grain, to uncover its queer content for the greatest satisfaction of our critical compulsion. More generally, our passion for interpretation tends to focus on what is left unsaid or did not happen as constituting the main springs of James's narrative economy. Opening with an unanswered question ("'Then why on earth don't you take him?'" [178]), itself prompted by the non-event of Lavinia's not marrying Marmaduke and leading to the negative promise by the latter never to marry anyone but her, Lady Emma's narrative may productively be read as woven around a series of non-relations or hypothetical affiliations that bind the characters to one another through decisions not made and lives not led, just as she is herself "conscious of a pleasant link with [Marmaduke] whose stepmother it had been open to [her] to become," even though—perhaps even because—she chose not to (179), or just as Lavinia "might have had *him*," had she accepted his proposal (195). Relying on a counterfactual grammar,[3] this logic of productive negativity, where what could have taken place but did not becomes more significant than what actually did, informs in turn our understanding of the characters' defective biographies, in which missing elements translate into puzzling lacunae that spur the wildest and most intense speculation. For instance, does not the fact that Marmaduke only inherited "three hundred and fifty a year from his mother" (180), and nothing, it seems, from his father although he belonged to Lady Emma's aristocratic circle, mark him as an illegitimate child (Wichelns 82)? Similarly, does not the uncertain age of Maud-Evelyn at the time of her death ("about fourteen. Unless it was sixteen!" [189]), combined with the unlikely fact that her parents would have been about fifteen themselves when they had her, intimate that she may never have existed at all (Houston 41)?[4] These hiatuses in the plot are mirrored in the many aposiopeses that riddle the dialogues, where unfinished lines are either left hanging or taken up and reoriented, maybe even disoriented, by another character. This structure of suspension, of interruption and silence, can be seen to underwrite and undermine the narrative itself, whose fabric is punctured by James's recurrent recourse to dashes and equivocal use of punctuation, often leaving the reader at a loss while prompting his desire to know, if not to supply the missing information, for the logic of supplementarity that informs the practice of critique leads him to fill the many gaps that are seen as making up the paradoxical substance of the plot and of James's rhetoric of reticence, and to view the story's queer secrets as being reflected in, even voiced as, diegetic cracks and stylistic indeterminacy.

[3] I am indebted for this and other formulations to Eric Savoy, whose forthcoming book, *Conjugating the Subject: Henry James and the Hypothetical*, explores the generation of the subject through the disjointed temporalities of grammar in James's fiction.

[4] The Dedricks are "forty-five" when they meet Marmaduke and Maud-Evelyn has been dead for "fifteen" years (184, 188). As she died at fourteen or sixteen, her parents were themselves between fourteen and sixteen when she was born.

Thinking, thinging

At once elliptic and epanorthotic, mysteriously restrained and bewilderingly voluble, James's style registers therefore a queer economy of non-possession—in Lavinia's words: "He's mine from the moment no one else has him" (195)—hiding behind a dynamics of (self-)possessiveness, itself concealed under the heterosexual logic of transferable capital passing in turn for spiritual devotion. Like a set of Chinese boxes or of Russian dolls, these embedded plots are successively and successfully brought to light owing to a common critical stance that consists in approaching the text in "a mood of watchfulness" and that reads the different forms of absence as so many screens covering the presence of ghostly secrets haunting and unsettling one another and waiting to be disclosed (Felski 96, 100). The conclusion of the story rehearses and thwarts this regressive hermeneutics of suspicion, as Lady Emma closes her narrative with the unfulfilled promise to provide the main anonymous narrator, whom she finally identifies as male, with a complete description of the things that Lavinia inherited: "'They're really marvels, it appears, treasures extraordinary, and she has them all. Next week I go with her—I shall see them at last. Tell *you* about them, you say? My dear man, everything'" (205). Vanishing without having ever appeared, or rather appearing in the form of their vanishing, coming into existence as absence, the things conform to the structure of secrecy and circulate accordingly within the tale. Yet the tension that they convey between an impression of luxurious profusion and a lingering sense of lack also registers a recent debate among critics as to the status of things and objects in James's fiction, between a Marxist interpretation, according to which the association of things with nothingness and vacancy bespeaks the obscuring of human labour in the process of production, and a view inspired by Thing Theory, in which the peculiar elusiveness of Jamesian things testifies to the powerlessness of language to bridge the gap between word and world. In "Maud-Evelyn, " the fact that the things should stand for a dead girl, who functions herself as a substitute for all the dead that helped procure them in the first place, dramatizes the Marxist circuit of economic alienation, while on the other hand the constant deferral of their description ending in a resounding silence may be read as enacting the tragic failure of language to name its object. Conflicting as they are, both views nevertheless conceive of their respective fetish—be it commodity or the linguistic sign—as "constituted by irremediable lack" and inscribe "the void at the heart of representation" (Coulson 323).

Even as the things in the story are hollowed out, however, what seemed at first "only an idea" (202), and a "preposterous" one at that (194), ungraspable save as the figment of deluded minds—that Maud-Evelyn should live posthumously the life that her premature death cut short—, this idea becomes, "in its way, a reality" (194) whose pragmatic, life-changing, consequences affect all the characters, even those who, like Lady Emma, proclaim their aversive unbelief in it (Labbé 1555). Much like the past that the Dedricks' and Marmaduke's fictions of Maud-Evelyn enlarge, this idea grows in the course of the tale and gradually acquires a strange substantiality that turns it into an object of sorts. Drawing on Sharon Cameron's argument, in *Thinking in Henry James*, that James's late fiction dislodges thought from consciousness to relocate it as an intersubjective phenomenon, Shari Goldberg has recently observed that "Maud-Evelyn" similarly dissociates its "preposterous theory" from any one subjectivity and imagines, or metaphorizes, its circulation between characters, narrators and readers in the uncanny form of a material thing that is shared more for its aesthetic qualities than for its truth-value. As Lavinia declares: "'Well, whatever we call it, I like it. It isn't so common, as the world goes, for any one—let alone for two or three—to feel and to care for the dead as much as that. It's self-deception, no doubt, but it comes from something that—well,' she faltered again, 'is beautiful when one does hear of it'" (195). In a typically Jamesian fashion, the story's central though largely unimaginable idea is circuitously voiced using the neuter pronoun "it." Referring at first to no antecedent clearly identifiable by a single, proper noun, "it" then becomes an anticipatory subject whose complement is immediately taken up in the next sentence by another instance of the pronoun that negates its earlier signification before being qualified again, positively this time, as prompting an aesthetic experience. Unnameable otherwise yet compulsively repeated, "it" makes language as such stutter even as its iteration lends it an unexpected texture that transforms it into a quasi-noun standing for "the oddest *thing*" (194; emphasis mine). "Building it up" in the course of the story, the characters "make it and make it" (194), which suggests that ideas are akin to manufactured

objects, fashioned and architectured, delineated and sculptured. Thinking then is conceived of as a form of thinging, which transpires in James's frequent use of "manipular verbs" (Goldberg 316) whose literalness is in fact eminently tropological. In "Maud-Evelyn," ideas and beliefs look "as if there may be many sides to [them]" and are alternatively "turned … over," "dropped," "[taken] up, " or "[pushed] away" (187, 194, 185, 194, 196). As opposed to voided things, objectified thoughts paradoxically belong to no one in particular, they are no one's property, but they operate, to use one of the story's tropes, like a "contagious" virus that can infect one from without (194, 195). This is yet another way of understanding Marmaduke's "taking" quality as connoting his ability to catch and spread the ideas of others. In that sense, non-possession guarantees circulation rather than hinders it and, uncoupling kinship from family ties, allows for the making of a spectral community bound by the thingly thought of a living ghost.

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