

THE WORLD'S CLASSICS

HENRY JAMES

THE WINGS OF
THE DOVE



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EDITED WITH AN INTRODUCTION
AND NOTES BY
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INTRODUCTION

READING *The Wings of the Dove* can initially be a baffling experience. We appear to move forward in a perpetual suspension of meaning, attempting to read the characters' silences as much as their words, like them 'hanging fire' as we await the naming of hitherto unarticulated motives and interpretations—searching, through that elaborately fluid, conversational, yet also precise medium that is Henry James's late prose, to see and to understand. We begin to make sense of our bafflement only when we come to realise that understanding itself is the adventure we are embarked on. If the goal of all imaginative literature is to turn experience into knowledge, the quest toward that goal is explicitly James's subject. Especially in his last three completed novels—*The Ambassadors*, *The Wings of the Dove*, *The Golden Bowl*—the reading process, in its active effort to master a rich and elusive text, very much represents what the novel is about: the dramatic possibilities of consciousness engaged in the risky, yet utterly necessary, business of interpretation.

James's fiction apparently belongs to the tradition of the English (and also the French) 'novel of manners', concerned with details of action and gesture within the narrow confines of a closed milieu, where behaviour is elaborately coded and ritualised, where the passing of teacups gives a significant clue to character and motive. Yet the ways in which we are asked to interpret the significance of social gesture make us quickly realise that far more than 'manners' is at stake, for the reader of *The Wings of the Dove* as for its characters, 'readers' of one another. James provides an example that comes close to self-parody late in the novel, when Merton Densher, back in London following the Venetian catastrophe, explains to his fiancée Kate Croy how Lord Mark's revelation of their secret engagement

touched off Milly Theale's mortal crisis. "Well, it's all most wonderful!" she [Kate Croy] exclaimed as she rather too profusely—a sign her friend noticed—ladled tea into the pot.' Such a 'sign' belongs to social rituals that James has carefully detailed, yet by this point in the novel we know it is also strained with the weight of other realms of experience and meaning, referring us beyond the theatre of manners, to a stage of heightened psychological and moral conflict. Such signs, noticed, questioned, pressured for their meaning, open the way to the reading of another, more elemental drama—in *The Wings of the Dove*, to matters of life and death. In this novel, we explore to the full the riches, real and deceptive, of man's worldly condition, and at the same time come face to face with the blank of nothingness. It may be James's most ambitious novel because it so extraordinarily brings together the elaborately civilised consciousness and what he once, in his Notebook, called 'the cold Medusa-face of life'.

Even more than the other two late masterpieces, *The Wings of the Dove* creates its high drama of consciousness from material that is originally and ultimately of the simplest and starkest. Reduced to its bare bones, the plot of the novel appears the stuff of popular romance or melodrama, or of a novel by Balzac, to whom James paid lifelong homage as 'the master' of all true novelists. A young heiress, condemned to an early death, falls in love with a man who, himself without means, is secretly engaged to another woman, also without means, and this woman encourages her fiancé to court the heiress for her money, so that when they marry they will be rich. As James first sketched out the plot in his Notebook, the woman of the engaged pair says to her fiancé: 'Play a certain game—and you'll have money from her. But if she knows the money is to help you to marry me, you *won't* have it; never in the world!' Though the novel will greatly amplify and complicate this outline, its premises remain essentially unchanged. We are never for long allowed to forget the egotistical imperatives of desire and the will to

power, or to avert our eyes from Kate Croy's—and the whole society's—preoccupation with money, money as the precondition of freedom, as the very definition of self in a milieu presided over by Aunt Maud Lowder, imaged as 'Britannia of the Marketplace', who has added a ledger to the traditional symbols of national grandeur. Milly Theale's fortune is something she can't get away from: 'that was what it was to be really rich. It had to be *the* thing you were.' Milly herself is virtually the 'poor little rich girl' of pulp fiction, inexorably led back to the situation, and the terms, in which James originally sketched her, in the Notebook entry: 'She learns that she has but a short time to live, and she rebels, she is terrified, she cries out in her anguish, her tragic young despair. . . . She is like a creature dragged shrieking to the guillotine—to the shambles.' James's flamboyantly melodramatic language here is not uncharacteristic: it will be found again at moments of crisis in the novel itself, when the coloration of his prose becomes—to use one of his favourite words—most 'lurid'.

The Notebook entries for 3 and 7 November 1894, from which these quotations are taken—James was at the time in the midst of his 'theatrical years', attempting without success to write popular dramas for the London stage—would find their fulfilment only in June 1901, when he began dictating (as was his habit) the novel, which he completed in May 1902. But the figure of Milly Theale goes much further back in James's consciousness, as he obliquely suggests in the first line of his Preface to the New York Edition when he notes that the novel 'represents to my memory a very old—if I shouldn't perhaps rather say a very young—motive', one that even the least biographically inclined of critics will trace to the marking experience of James's young manhood, the death of his beloved cousin Minny Temple, who incarnated for him the spirit of youth and life. Her death in retrospect symbolised the close of his own youth; and when he came to write his memoir, *Notes of a Son and Brother*, he set Minny Temple's struggle against her doom as its climax

and conclusion. 'Death, at the last, was dreadful to her; she would have given anything to live—and the image of this, which was long to remain with me, appeared so of the essence of tragedy that I was in the far-off aftertime to seek to lay the ghost by wrapping it, a particular occasion aiding, in the beauty and dignity of art.' Some thirty years later, Milly Theale becomes James's vehicle for a psychic reworking of Minny Temple's agony, a contemplation of the rich possibilities of life at the verge of their extinction.

For all its complexity and indirection, *The Wings of the Dove* remains faithful to the underlying melodrama of Milly's situation, as well as Kate Croy's. As Kate says of Milly halfway through the novel, 'She'll really live, or she'll really not': a stark antithesis that excludes any middle ground. And when Milly, after her consultation with the medical luminary Sir Luke Strett, understands the meaning of his compassion and his injunction 'to live', she feels it as 'divesting, denuding, exposing. It reduced her to her ultimate state, which was that of a poor girl—with her rent to pay for example—staring before her in a great city.' The rich girl is the poor girl, stripped to the essentials of the 'great common anxiety'. Later on, when Merton Densher pieces together Milly's last days, confronting death in the splendour of her rented Venetian palazzo, he returns to the violent image of doom used in the Notebook sketch, no less sinister for its now substituting grim silence for shrieks: 'Milly had held with passion to her dream of a future, and she was separated from it, not shrieking indeed, but grimly, awfully silent, as one might imagine some noble young victim of the scaffold, in the French Revolution, separated at the prison-door from some object clutched for resistance.' Our sense that James is dealing in melodrama is only enhanced when we consider that Milly's life and her death finally become matters of will and of the moral consciousness. 'She has turned her face to the wall,' Milly's confidante Susan Stringham announces: she has renounced the will to live, and this because she has discovered her betrayal, her deception by

the plot hatched by Kate and co-operated in by Densher. And when the Venetian climax has come, and has made itself known through a closing of doors—Densher denied entry to the Palazzo Leporelli—it at once results in ‘a Venice all of evil’ breaking out, to the accompaniment of the raging elements: ‘a Venice of cold lashing rain from a low black sky, of wicked wind raging through narrow passes, of general arrest and interruption, with the people engaged in all the water-life huddled, stranded and wageless, bored and cynical, under archways and bridges.’ It is a splendidly operatic moment.

Even in a highly elaborated late novel, then, we recognise James’s lifelong preoccupation with melodramatic antitheses, with polarities of innocence and deception, good and evil, life and sudden death, the persistence of what he called his ‘imagination of disaster’. His secretary of many years’ standing, Theodora Bosanquet, was struck by this persistent aspect of the Jamesian sensibility: ‘When he walked out of the refuge of his study and into the world and looked about him, he saw a place of torment, where creatures of prey perpetually thrust their claws into the quivering flesh of the doomed, defenceless children of light.’ Yet we of course recognise also how utterly the material of the Notebook sketch has been transformed in the novel, transmuted into what we might call the melodrama of consciousness.

James discusses in his Preface ‘the author’s instinct everywhere for the *indirect* presentation of his main image’, by which he means in the first instance Milly Theale, but by extension the whole of his central dramatic situation. ‘Indirect presentation’ entails the use of ‘centres of consciousness’, discrete and limited narrative points of view, which James here and in other of the Prefaces sees as a key to the novelist’s art, since it provides a way of not simply telling a story, but telling a story as it is seen or pieced together, interpreted (or misinterpreted) by one individual mind and sensibility (as in *The Ambassadors*) or (as in *The Wings of the Dove*) a series of different minds. When James

talks about his 'centres of consciousness', his 'registers and reflectors' as he also sometimes calls them, he tends to sound like an expert technician of fiction (which indeed he is, and the collected Prefaces offer a remarkable sustained analysis of the components of fictional narrative); but more is at issue than technique. For James, the most exciting drama is less in the thing itself than in the ways of looking at the thing. And when we look at a situation as it appears to different consciousnesses, in its various possible 'relations' (to use a favourite Jamesian term), we enter a world of uncertainties where interpretation must precede and suspend judgement.

Nowhere is this Jamesian complication of situation and judgement more in evidence than in his transformation of Kate Croy from the scheming villainess of the Notebook sketch into the fine, passionate, poetic, and still scheming intelligence we see in the finished novel. James carefully protects Kate from our premature judgement by recording in the long preparatory section of the novel—the first two Books—the conditions that make it imperative that she scheme for the future happiness of Merton Densher and herself, that make her plotting appear the necessary and admirable response of a passionate and inventive imagination to the sordid constraints of reality. Kate's dishonoured and dishonest father, her impoverished widowed sister, her squalid nephews and nieces, are so presented as to make us understand that the protection of her rich Aunt Maud Lowder, who has removed her from the sleazy and precarious to the solid wealth of Lancaster Gate, offers an escape from a life not worth living. Aunt Maud's interest in her must of course find its repayment on the London marriage market (a subject that fascinated James, and that he had treated with the greatest acerbity three years earlier, in *The Awkward Age*), where Kate must be matched either with a great personage, or with a rich one. Lord Mark, in Aunt Maud's estimation, is the former; Merton Densher is neither. Kate's passion for Densher, and her loyalty to him, are such that she will temporise with Aunt

Maud while searching for the possible reconciliation of money with love, the creation of a union freely consented to, and also free of sordid constraints. She says to Densher, 'That's just my situation, that I want and that I shall try for everything'; and again, 'if we avoid stupidity we may do *all*.'

If we infer that Kate's plans are at this moment still fluid and unfocussed, she is none the less 'laying a trap for the great innocence to come', as James puts it in the Preface: creating a situation that will require deception, and hence a victim. Abruptly, Book Three interrupts the novel of worldly intrigue to present two wholly new characters, two Americans just arrived in the old world: Susan Stringham, the literary Bostonian, and Milly Theale, the rich New York orphan, survivor of all shipwrecks, American princess and 'potential heiress of all the ages', whom we first discover sitting on an Alpine ledge looking down on the kingdoms of the earth which ought, given her immense wealth and her peculiar American freedom from social constraint, to belong to her. The world 'is all before her', in a phrase, several times repeated, that echoes the close of *Paradise Lost*; but 'where to choose' (as the Miltonic text continues) is the problem. Milly's vision of the possibilities of life makes her want people, the interest of social relations, including complexity of motive—what she calls (in one of those key but elusive terms of the novel) 'abysses'. And so she will enter the worldly novel already begun, and walk into what is (again in the language of the Preface) an 'abysmal trap'.

Milly's London success reaches its 'pink dawn of an apotheosis' at Matcham, Lord Mark's country house, on a day that marks for her a 'high-water mark of the imagination', when it becomes clear that she can do anything, assume the rank of princess in society and live within the frame of 'an almost extravagantly grand Watteau-composition'. Yet it is now that, through the canvas of another painter—a portrait by Bronzino that is thought

remarkably to resemble her—Milly comes face to face with the limits of her mortality. As she looks at ‘her pale sister’ in the painting, Milly cannot restrain her tears. ‘The lady in question... with her slightly Michael-angelesque squareness, her eyes of other days, her full lips, her long neck, her recorded jewels, her brocaded and wasted reds, was a very great personage—only unaccompanied by a joy. And she was dead, dead, dead.’ An instant later, with her appeal to Kate to accompany her on a visit to Sir Luke Strett, comes Milly’s first acknowledgement of her own menace.

The moment marks a high-water mark in English prose fiction, a passage that will never quite yield to analysis all its mystery and pathos. These are pages of remarkable ambition and reach that take us beyond the social drama to the pity and terror of existence. Milly and the portrait mirror one another—if the Bronzino gives an image of Milly, we are told also that ‘she was the image of the wonderful Bronzino’—and what Milly discovers in this act of mirroring is the ‘cold Medusa-face of life’, the death of the once-living woman whose glory should be perpetuated in its pictorial representation, yet is perpetuated only by way of its having ceased to be, as immobility, as the absence of joy. It is as if artistic representation, as a mirror of man’s condition, created that which it mirrors, yet created it only through mortal fixity.

The point bears some insistence, for the question of artistic representation returns insistently in the novel, not only in its evocation of paintings—the climactic scene in Milly’s Venetian palazzo, for instance, will unfold within the frame of an elaborate reference to Veronese, perhaps (with fine ironic effect) his *Marriage at Cana*—but as well in its references to novels and to written texts in general. Milly and Susan Stringham originally look forward to London as ‘the concrete world inferred so fondly from what one had read and dreamed’, and they make reference to Dickens, Trollope and Thackeray as literary models for understanding English society. Yet as Susan Stringham

recognises—in language that will be echoed on several occasions—they are really ‘afloat, like some island of the south, in a great warm sea that represented, for every conceivable chance, a margin, an outer sphere, of general emotion; and the effect of the occurrence of anything in particular was to make the sea submerge the island, the margin flood the text.’ This elaborate and difficult image suggests the relations of the ‘already written’ (and already read) to that which does not yet have textual existence, yet can none the less be felt as exerting a pressure on the text: a margin that threatens to encroach on the text, altering radically the situation and the story in which Milly and Susan think they are acting.

So it may be with the Bronzino portrait, when Milly suddenly discovers her own doom written in the face of ‘her painted sister’. So it is also, more obliquely, in Milly’s relation to Kate. When she becomes aware of Kate’s strangely unmentioned acquaintance with Densher, she cannot help but think of Kate as she is seen by Densher, in that relation carefully shrouded from public representation. ‘Is it the way she looks to *him*?’ she will ask herself just after her confrontation of the Bronzino, setting up another process of mirroring, now in an absent mirror, and giving us an example of that typical Jamesian astronomical observation, whereby the existence of an unseen body is inferred by way of the gravitational ‘pull’ it exercises on the body under study. Milly’s consciousness of others’ consciousness of the same object in other relations raises the disquieting possibility of volumes of text that she has not read and cannot read. Densher likes to compare Kate to an uncut volume: ‘The women one meets—what are they but books one has already read? You’re a whole library of the unknown, the uncut.’ In fact, it is Kate who will, even more than the match-making Aunt Maud, write the unwritten volumes, create the future plot.

Kate may be said to invent the plot of *The Wings of the Dove* as the novel proceeds, using new elements as they

come to hand with imaginative flair—and especially, of course, recognising in Milly a possible alternative story-line to that prescribed by Aunt Maud. In another important scene at the richly packed centre of the novel, the ‘strange and indescribable session’ Kate and Milly have together one night at Milly’s hotel, Kate virtually warns Milly of the plot to come: ‘My honest advice to you would be’, she tells Milly, ‘to drop us while you can.’ In retrospect we divine that Kate by now sees how all the plot elements may fall into place: Densher paired with Milly, partly through Aunt Maud’s manipulations, Milly herself deceived as to Kate’s feelings for Densher, and condemned to an early death. For Milly, this scene has ‘the quality of a rough rehearsal of the possible big drama’, a perception that incidentally reminds us of how much James, failed playwright, worked by what he called the ‘scenic method’, building toward theatrical moments of enactment. Yet the rehearsal does not bring enlightenment to Milly, but simply fear: she feels herself ‘alone with a creature who paced like a panther’. It is as if in response to this unspoken epithet that Kate now explicitly for the first time calls Milly a ‘dove’—a predicate that Milly not only accepts, but at once uses as a guide to the role she should play: ‘she studied again the dovelike.’ By the end of the rehearsal scene, it is as if the future ‘big drama’ had been cast and blocked, and the enactments to come all set down in Kate’s script.

The frightening drama of the panther-and-dove scene is only in small part overt and articulate, it is much more latent, divined rather than seen, played out on that ‘other stage’ that Freud designated as the place of dreams. ‘What was behind showed but in gleams and glimpses; what was in front never at all confessed to not holding the stage.’ Here we have the indirection, the obliquity of late-Jamesian theatricality, where violence hovers off-stage, in the wings; and also a major theme of James’s fiction, perhaps nowhere so important and so masterfully sustained as in *The Wings of the Dove*: the relation of the drama in front to the drama

behind, the apparent to the latent, the spoken to the unspoken. One might understand the whole of the novel as a filling-in of the silences, the suspensions, the withholdings of words that so mark the Jamesian text, a 'naming' of areas of knowledge and intention at first silenced or unavailable to speech, texts in the state of potential meaning but not yet written.

Naming will be the unwanted but insistent activity of the climactic scenes in Venice—a Venice of appearances 'rich and obscure and portentous' (as James describes it in the Preface), where Milly's entourage settles into a 'common duplicity' of silence which events keep forcing into speech. It is not Milly's silences only that are encroached upon. Kate's and Densher's relation has from the start been marked by suspensions of speech, an unwillingness to name their game by the labels that it might deserve, and especially to designate the course of its future plot. If Densher sometimes pushes for specification (translating Kate's suggestive scenarios into a brutal language of the world: 'What you want of me then is to make up to a sick girl?'), it is part of his density, his inadequate readership of what he calls 'Kate's poetic versions' of life, that he must always be asking for names, filling in blanks, too late, at a time when the text has already been woven as a seamless web, from which the only escape would be a repudiation of the very novel in which he figures as a kind of unwitting protagonist. The central moment of naming between the two breaks out during Milly's brilliant soirée at the Palazzo Leporelli—the Veronese scene—and is set off by Kate's saying: 'If you want things named you must name them.' Densher in response finds there is 'only one' name that fits:

... 'Since she's to die I'm to marry her?'

It struck him even at the moment as fine in her that she met it with no wincing nor mincing. She might for the grace of silence, for favour to their conditions, have only answered him with her eyes. But her lips bravely moved. 'To marry her.'

'So that when her death has taken place I shall in the natural course have money?'

It was before him now, and he had nothing more to ask; he had only to turn, on the spot, considerably cold with the thought that all along—to his stupidity, his timidity—it had been, it had been only, what she meant. Now that he was in possession moreover she couldn't forbear, strangely enough, to pronounce the words she hadn't pronounced: they broke through her controlled and colourless voice as if she should be ashamed, to the very end, to have flinched. 'You'll in the natural course have money. We shall in the natural course be free.'

'Oh, oh, oh!' Densher softly murmured.

'Yes, yes, yes.'

Here, in Book Eighth, the terms of Kate's plot are at last fully voiced, take their place at centre stage. The passage records at once a fear of names and a delectation in naming, a sense of heroism in breaking through suppressions and repressions, yet a heroism that creates a chill. The passage is important not simply for making Densher aware of what the reader has already named as Kate's meaning, but still more for giving the authority of text to Kate's plot which by this point excludes all alternatives, so successful has her authorship been. To break with Milly now, Densher is forced to realise, would be to kill her. His only honourable course of action with Milly, he decides, is a studied passivity, whereas with Kate he now turns acceptance of her names for things into a bargain: if he is to continue to play in her plot, she must 'come to him', become his mistress. 'If you decline to understand me,' he says to her, 'I wholly decline to understand you.' And so the latent erotic drama also will finally be enacted.

As ever in James, the exercise of power over another suggests a certain constrained violence—the violence of constraint—that by this point permeates relations in the novel, and pushes characters into roles of victims and victimisers. The oblique and hidden drama more and more comes to the surface, and speaks its demands. It is significant that Densher will reach a fullness of articulate

knowledge with Kate that is more than he can bear, so that he feels as the only remedy 'the need to bury in the dark blindness of each other's arms the knowledge of each other that they couldn't undo.' Kate, on the other hand, has all along maintained—with superior lucidity—the value of the lie, the imaginative fiction carried to its logical consequence: for instance, the lie to the mortally stricken Milly that Densher decides he cannot make. But isn't Kate also forced to recognise the consequences that arise when certain realms of knowledge are brought from silence to speech: when at the last Densher tells her that he will marry her 'as we were', she replies: 'We shall never be again as we were!' She appears to draw the conclusion that the acquisition of knowledge is irreversible, that what has come to light has become ineffaceable, like a written text.

Milly—whom we first encounter looking out over 'gulfs of air' and who tells Susan Stringham, 'I want abysses'—confronts the ultimate abyss of extinction, a confrontation that more and more will be imaged as silence, as the impossibility of speech. Densher will describe this impossibility as 'an impenetrable ring fence, within which there reigned a kind of expensive vagueness made up of smiles and silences and beautiful fictions and priceless arrangements, all strained to breaking.' He goes on to elaborate a metaphor that recalls another 'beautiful fiction', Bronzino's portrait: 'It was a conspiracy of silence, as the *cliché* went, to which no one had made an exception, the great smudge of mortality across the picture, the shadow of pain and horror, finding in no quarter a surface of spirit or of speech that consented to reflect it.' Artistic representation is 'smudged' by the unspeakable. James refers to this question in his Preface—characteristically viewing it as a matter of artistic technique—when he notes that 'Milly's situation ceases at a given moment to be "renderable" in terms closer than those supplied by Kate's intelligence, or, in a richer degree, by Densher's, or, for one fond hour, by poor Mrs Stringham's.' It appears that

the moment when Milly finds herself reflected and represented by her 'pale sister' as painted by Bronzino sets off a movement that will eventually take her beyond the possibility of representation, so that in the final stages of the Venetian climax she is known only indirectly, through the disintegration of the mendacious social texts that have been woven around her. When Densher is refused entry to the Palazzo Leporelli, he feels that the air has become a 'non-conductor of messages', as if to indicate that the media of conventional social exchange have given way, that the fabric of manners has been rent. There will be no representation of Milly's decisive interview with Lord Mark, nor of her final meeting with Densher, in which he will feel himself 'forgiven, dedicated, blessed', but which he cannot put into words, since it is 'too beautiful and too sacred to describe'. Moreover, Densher himself, and the reader, never will see Milly's final words to him, those of her testamentary letter which Kate throws into the fire. And while, as Kate very well knows, Densher will be sent the terms of Milly's bequest by her bankers in New York, what he has lost forever is 'the turn she would have given her act' in that final letter.

Another word for 'turn', in the language of literary criticism, would be 'trope': the particular figure Milly would have given her action from beyond the grave. The absence of this last trope may serve most of all to make us aware of how Milly in her death 'turns' the whole text of the novel. Kate comes close to such an understanding when she says to Densher, 'she died for you . . . that you might understand her . . . She did it *for us*.' The implications of Kate's statement are quite breathtaking, and they remind us again of how James has created a unique sort of melodrama of consciousness. To die in order to be understood, to make one's life the text that others then will read—must perhaps devote the rest of their lives to reading—is to achieve at the last a kind of spiritual authority and authorship that goes beyond anything worked for or imagined by Kate: it sacrifices life to signs,