

**Henry James, *The Wings of the Dove***  
**Programme d'Agrégation 2020-21**  
**texte de cadrage**

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*The Wings of the Dove* (1902) is doubtless the most obscure of the three most famous novels belonging to James's late or major phase. Compared with the sense of harmony and symmetry that has often appealed to readers of *The Ambassadors* (1903) and of *The Golden Bowl* (1904), *Wings* is striking in part for the very absence of these values, notably in Volume Two where scenic condensation and narrative gaps tend to generate a sense of incomplete revelation and suspended meaning. James was fully aware of what he didn't hesitate to call the "deformity" of the work, and discusses it at some length in the 1909 preface he wrote for the New York Edition, where blame for the perceived anomalies of construction is placed most notably upon the displaced center of the work's composition, which he situates in Book Fifth of Volume One. Without directly associating the "misplaced pivot" of his composition with the scene of Milly's encounter with the Bronzino portrait (Book Fifth, Chapter Two), many critics agree that much of the structural impetus of the work turns upon this episode, where the American girl encounters at the very height of her melodramatic success and social triumph in London an indisputable presentiment of her mortality.

Pictorial values occupy therefore a central place in the compositional structure of *Wings* and in the overall framework of its representational logic, as is often the case in James's fiction. To a significant extent, the trajectory of Milly Theale's European experience, following her sudden desire for descent from the Brünig in Book Third, has the qualities of an aesthetic education, the encounter with Bronzino's *Lucrezia Panciatichi* in Book Fifth setting the stage for the heroine's scenic performance of the Veronese painting, *The Marriage Feast at Cana*, that she has arranged in her Venetian palace, in Book Eighth, Chapter Three, of the second volume. Throughout the novel, pictorial values and scenic values mesh in a way that is central to James's representational logic, and the reader will want to familiarize herself with these values and various representational techniques by consulting the prefaces the author composed for the New York Edition. James's "scenic law" of composition, his "centre of consciousness" technique, his use of "reflectors," or of "polished mirrors" of consciousness as a means of indirect presentation, the pictorial metaphor of "foreshortening," for example, are discussed in the prefaces in ways intended to foreground the compositional and formal dimensions of the fiction (see bibliography for more precise references to subjects related to technique in the prefaces).

If aesthetic values are central not only to formal but also to thematic dimensions of *Wings*, criticism of the last thirty years or so has also placed considerable emphasis on historical and cultural values, and on issues related to sexuality and gender. Early critical responses to *Wings* (Matthiesson, Anderson, Krook) were quick to identify the novel as a complex moral allegory in which the Christological allusions in the text elevated Milly to the status of a transcendental force serving to redeem a world of commodified values. By the late 1960's this treatment gave way to interpretations which questioned the redemptive logic of the narrative and emphasized the existence of gaps and differences opening the way to more equivocal views about the moral nature of the drama (Sears, Bell, Bersani). The shift away from the themes of moral innocence and transcendence continued into the '70's and '80's, with the arrival of structuralist and narratological approaches placing a more concerted focus on the complex use of free indirect discourse, the centre of consciousness technique, and other linguistically determined devices (Rowe, Kappeller), opening the way for more problematic understandings of ethical agency and spiritual transformation in the central characters. Psychological interpretations of Jamesian consciousness

gave way to a variety of phenomenological and psychoanalytical approaches, while rhetorical and deconstructive readings (Teahan, Rivkin, Miller) have emphasized the instability of the novel's basic aesthetic principles and representational values. As on the academic critical scene in general, the turn away from aesthetic values and their deconstruction, towards cultural and historical values (Freedman, Mizruchi), in interpretations of *Wings*, has been contemporaneous with a variety of interests in sexual and gender issues (Sedgwick, Moon, Ohi), whether focus is on gender roles and their construction, on homosocial and homoerotic subtexts and character behaviour, or on queerness considered as a stylistic characteristic of James's writing (for more details concerning these critical approaches, see the bibliography, where the titles of most of the secondary resources indexed are followed by a short description of content).

James informs us in the opening sentence of his 1909 preface to *Wings* that his idea for the story was a very old one. It is the idea of a young person enamoured of life and gifted with a great capacity of responsiveness to it, but who is condemned to die and who wishes, in the time still left her, to take in as many of the "finer vibrations" as possible. Critics early recognized in this allusion to Milly Theale and her fate an evocation of the author's cousin, Mary ("Minnie") Temple, whose death from tuberculosis at the age of 24 marked the end of James's youth, as the author declares in the closing words of the second volume of his autobiography, *Notes of a Son and Brother* (1914). If the aesthetic project of the novel is associated therefore from the outset with death, as the author suggests, it is also affiliated (perhaps more intimately than any other major work by James), with the author's personal life, insofar as Minnie Temple is the prototype of Milly Theale. In early stories like "Daisy Miller" and "Georgiana's Reasons" James seems already to have been experimenting with transforming the remembered life of his cousin by means of the sublimated economy of his art, and this effort achieves a first apotheosis with the figure of Isabel Archer in *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881). In *Wings*, James promotes the natural and the spontaneous, the spiritually generous and innocent American girl, whose New York origins resemble in certain respects the milieu of the James family, to the status of "heir of all the ages," in short to nothing less than a figure of universal humanity.

The second apotheosis, then, of the American girl, after numerous less ambitious efforts, brings to fruition a host of Jamesian themes that had slowly emerged in over thirty years of writing: the moral value of human consciousness, the pursuit of cultural fulfilment, the limitations of the aesthetic, European and American social identities, the mimetic grounds of selfhood, the proliferating reflective modes of modern subjectivity, the sacrificial conditions of spiritual life, the secular faith in innocence, the melodramatic quest for experience, the ethical category of renunciation, the sexual origins and shadows of the psyche, the political ramifications of family, the power of money and the capitalistic structure of modern social relations, the privilege of taste and the refined iniquitousness of high culture, the problem of free will, and the experience of love and of mortality, to name a few.

Critics have nonetheless disputed, if not the centrality, at least the significance of Milly's role in the cast of three central characters. As the preceding list of themes suggests, *Wings*, like all of James's writing, is partly about the inscription of individual subjectivity and experience in its social and cultural environments. Milly Theale, Kate Croy and Merton Densher, represent different aspects of an aesthetic imagination which transcends the Americanness of its origins. Milly doubtless represents, however, a human potentiality that James believed was the condition of artistic experience itself, and in this sense *Wings*, despite the very fading of its American heroine from the final chapters of the novel, can melodramatically be considered a tribute to the muse of his own aesthetic imagination.