HENRY JAMES AND SCIENCE: THE WINGS OF THE DOVE

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“The critic’s first duty in the presence of an author’s collective works,” Henry James says in discussing George Eliot, “is to seek some key to his method, some utterance of his literary conviction, some indication of his ruling theory.” There are dozens of such comments in James’s work which declare his central interest in philosophical and ethical attitudes—an area which recent criticism of James has neglected in its concern with formal technique rather than content. But it seems only logical to turn more fully to content in order to learn more about that area of James, the writer, which he as a critic centered on in other writers—an ethical sense. For, as James wrote in French Poets and Novelists, “Be the morality false or true, the writer’s deference to it greets us as a kind of essential perfume.” In view of the weight James placed on moral questions and motivation, then, let us consider The Wings of the Dove, 1902, the culmination of some thirty-six years of thoughtful fiction and criticism, in terms of its philosophical and ethical attitudes.

James was, as is well recognized, especially concerned in general with the distinction between surface appearance and inner or psychological reality. But, holding that the novel “should begin with a picture and end with an idea,” he was just as concerned with ways in which he could flesh out his characters’ distinctively psychological conflicts. In fact, the quest of such ways, such images, seemed to James the very “essence of poetry.” Hence, the critical interpreter has the problem of finding what James himself called “the figure in the carpet” represented in the configurations of images in a given story, assisted by what he said in non-fictional work about his general ideas.

Such an approach to The Wings of the Dove suggests that here James is ultimately concerned with a struggle for existence which

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1 Views and Reviews (Boston, 1908), p. 1.
is economic at center, though it is a struggle in which Milly Theale excels because of superior moral force. Further, the terms in which James describes this struggle—his images—suggest that Social Darwinism influenced his conception of the novel.

That James had such a view of the world is apparent from his other writings. "James saw [the world] a place of torment," his personal secretary Theodora Bosanquet wrote, "where creatures of prey perpetually thrust their claws into the quivering flesh of the doomed, defenseless children of light . . . He . . . saw fineness sacrificed to grossness, beauty to avarice, truth to a bold front . . . He hated the tyranny of persons over each other." And in his non-fictional English Hours James makes clear he saw society in general as well as business in terms of "the steady rumble of that deep keynote of English manners, over-scored so often, and with such sweet beguilement, by finer harmonies, but never extinguished—the economic struggle for existence." As James sees meaning in society beneath its smooth surface, we should look for significance in The Wings of the Dove beneath all its surface "sweet beguilement."

One related consideration is important, and that is the novel's reflection of James's lifelong concern as an expatriate writer with the theme of international contrasts. For the struggle for existence is embodied in terms of these contrasts in The Wings of the Dove. This theme of international contrasts is considered not only because of James' travels and his conscious attempt to play the observant "cosmopolite," but because of his interest in the theme of "the great and admirable Taine" (on whom he wrote five essays) that a given book is determined by a writer's time, place, and race or nationality. Along this line, Professor Christoff Wegelin in The Image of Europe in Henry James argues that in The Wings of the Dove the two contrasting heroines, "Milly and Kate are representative of the civilizations which formed them." And Mr. R. P. Blackmur says that Milly Theale, with Maggie Verver of The Golden Bowl, "although victimized by Europe, triumph over it, and convert the Europeans who victimized them, by the positive strength of character and perceptive ability which their experience of treachery only brings out . . . By these means, in the figure of the American girl, candor, innocence, and loyalty become char-

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9 English Hours (Boston, 1905), p. 71. (First edition, 1875.)
6 I have elaborated on these matters in "The Influence of Science on American Literary Criticism, 1860-1910, Including the Vogue of Taine," in Transactions of the Wisconsin Academy (XXXIV, 1955), 109-164.
7 Christoff Wegelin, The Image of Europe in Henry James (Dallas, 1958), p. 117.
characteristic through not exclusive American virtues which redress the deep damage done by a blackened Europe."

As we explicate The Wings of the Dove, then, let us watch for reflections of the influence of the current scientific determinism (whose teachings in general James had access to in hundreds of contacts) and the influence of Taine’s thesis of the author being a spokesman of his time and place. By approaching this book in the light of ideas associated with science—an approach hitherto unexplored in depth—I do not claim that James was directly influenced by Darwinism. My point is only that in The Wings of the Dove James sees his characters’ psychological conflicts and the essential conflict of the novel in terms of images of destruction, counterpointed at the end by an ethical renunciation associated with what Emerson called “the internal check.” These images reflect current scientific ideas which make plausible in 1902 his interpretation of the socialite life of that time.

There is in Milly Theale’s situation in The Wings of the Dove more than a suggestion of the evolutionary concept of the survival of the fittest in a struggle for existence. James, characteristically, is not interested primarily in the struggle in a life and death sense; he is concerned chiefly with the struggle of Milly, the wealthy young American who is dying of an incurable disease, to achieve at all costs life’s fullest potentialities. As such, her struggle and quest is a matter of sensitivity and realization, not of breath and blood; its arena is not the jungle of fang and muscle but rather of drawing-rooms and galleries, of intellectual conversations and social graces. And it is here that Milly encounters the forces—members of London society who view her in economic terms—forces which would inhibit her quest.

James turns to upper-middle class English society because it has the conditions he considers necessary for the realization of life’s highest potentialities. And, though this arena has its beguiling social aspects, it is a psychological jungle and James is as concerned with the moral and ethical problems of its conflicts as are those who deal with more obvious and basic jungles.

The essentially savage nature of English society is revealed by Kate Croy in her description of it to Milly Theale. For Kate speaks in terms of a “monster,” to which one must be introduced and enabled to “walk all round . . . whether for the consequent exaggerated ecstasy or for the still more . . . disproportionate shock.” Milly’s immediate social success in London is discussed one evening in similar bestial terms at a dinner party from which she is absent.

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Milly's friend and companion, Mrs. Stringham, is pictured as observing the discussion "very much as some spectator in an old-time circus might have watched the oddity of a Christian maiden, in the arena, mildly, carelessly martyred. It was the nosing and fumbling not of lions and tigers but of domestic animals let loose as for the joke" (II, 46). And for Merton Densher at the same party, Milly's success is best described with similar animal images. He sees the situation in terms of competition within nature: "The huddled herd had drifted to her blindly—it might as blindly have drifted away. There had been of course a signal, but the great reason was probably the absence at the moment of a larger lion. The bigger beast would come and the smaller would then incontinently vanish. It was at all events characteristic . . ." (II, 47). James thus describes English society as an arena in which a struggle for existence akin to that in primeval nature is constantly going on.

Nearly everyone of English society in the novel is engaged in this struggle; more important, almost all are selfishly and unscrupulously using their personal relationships to advance their material and social interests. Kate's despicable father is a prime example, for he hopes to gain wealth and position through Kate's relationship with her wealthy aunt, Mrs. Lowder. Kate is ready to give up Mrs. Lowder because her aunt has offered her a home only on the condition that Kate have nothing further to do with her father and sister. But her father, insensitive to the insult and very greedy for money, refuses such a plan: "One doesn't give up the use of a spoon because one's reduced to living on broth. And your spoon, that is your aunt, please consider is partly mine as well" (I, 17).

Mrs. Lowder also sees in Kate a means of achieving her goals—in this case, attracting guests to enable her to outdo other competitors for social prominence. She feels that her money combined with Kate's charm and beauty will produce a marriage with the highest social connections. In the most economic of terms, Mrs. Lowder explains to Merton Densher her "feeling" for Kate: "I've watched [Kate's presence] long; I've been saving it up and letting it, as you say of investments, appreciate, and you may judge whether, now it has begun to pay so, I'm likely to consent to treat for it with any but a high bidder. I can do the best with her, and I've my idea of the best" (I, 92).

Kate, whom we shall see has had her sordid family background to teach her the meaning of a struggle for existence, realizes she

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20 In a non-fictional essay on "London," 1888 James remarks, "A sudden horror of the whole place came over me, like a tiger-pounce of home-sickness . . . London was hideous, vicious, cruel, and above all over-whelming: whether or not she was 'careful of the type' (as in Tennyson's view of evolution), she was as indifferent as Nature herself to the single life." (James's Art of Travel (New York, 1958), pp. 176-77.) On p. 189 he envisages London as an "agress devouring the poor."
has "been marked from far back" (I, 32) for Mrs. Lowder's predatory purposes. She goes to live with her aunt, but secluded herself in her room as much as possible where she thinks of herself as "a trembling kid, kept apart a day or two till her turn should come, but sure sooner or later to be introduced into the cage of [Mrs. Lowder] the lioness" (I, 32–33). While Kate ponders her fate, James makes his most telling comment on the savage character of the situation: "Yet what were the dangers, after all, but just the dangers of life and of London? Mrs. Lowder was London, was life—the roar of the siege and the thick of the fray" (I, 35).

Yet Kate, too, is involved in the struggle as selfishly and unscrupulously as the next. She is in love with Merton Densher, the penniless but cultivated and charming journalist; but she refuses to marry him until her Aunt is reconciled to the marriage, for she doesn't want to lose the material affluence which life with Mrs. Lowder means. In a conversation between Kate and Densher on this subject, James seems clearly to indicate the basic nature of the struggle for existence which characterizes the society he is describing:

"I don't see," [Kate remarks,] 'why you don't make out a little more that if we avoid stupidity we may do all. We may keep her.'

He stared. 'Make her pension us?'

'Well, wait at least till we've seen.'

He thought. 'Seen what can be got out of her?'

Kate for a moment said nothing. 'After all I never asked her; never, when our troubles were at the worst, appealed to her nor went near her. She fixed upon me herself, settled on me with her wonderful gilded claws.'

'You speak;' Densher observed, 'as if she were a vulture.'

'Call it an eagle—with a gilded beak as well, and with wings for great flights.'" (I, 82–3)

It is into this unscrupulous social struggle for existence that the American Milly Theale steps upon her arrival in England. She is innocent, not as one who is unaware of the art of living, but as one who is uncorrupted. And, suffering from an incurable disease, she is herself engaged in a struggle for existence far more importunate than that which she enters. In his preface James indicates explicitly—as does finally the entire novel—that his concept of a social struggle for existence is not the simple one between life and death; the struggle is rather to live up to life's fullest potentials. "The idea," writes James in the preface, "reduced to its essence, is that of a young person conscious of a great capacity for life, but early stricken and doomed ... while also enamored with the world; aware moreover of the condemnation and passionately desiring to 'put in' before extinction as many of the finer vibrations
as possible, and so achieve, however briefly and brokenly, the sense of having lived” (v).\(^{11}\)

It is essentially in the struggle of life and not in the fact of death that James is interested. Of the artist and his characters James says, “It is still by the act of living that they appeal to him, and appeal the more as the conditions plot against them and prescribe the battle. The process of life gives way fighting, and often many so shine out on the lost ground as in no other connexion” (vii). James, then, meant his tale in no way to be “the record predominately of a collapse” (viii) but rather the portrayal, of an ethical triumph. Thus, in the novel “powers conspiring to a sinister end” are yet “in such straits really to stifle the sacred spark” that Milly as “a creature so animated, an adversary so subtle, couldn’t but be felt worthy, under whatever weaknesses, of the foreground and the limelight” (viii-ix).

When Milly arrives in England, she immediately is seized upon as all things to all people—all in an economic context in the struggle for existence. In Milly, Mrs. Lowder, who was Mrs. Stringham’s classmate in girlhood, sees the person who will marry Densher and thus eliminate him as a threat to her plans for Kate’s marriage to a man of social prominence. When Kate learns that Milly is dying and that her physician, Sir Luke Strett, feels that only happiness can prolong her life, she tries to arrange a marriage between Milly and Densher. Such a marriage, Kate feels—though she is secretly engaged to Densher—will bring Milly happiness and bring Densher, after Milly’s death, the wealth which will make them independent of Mrs. Lowder. Milly and Mrs. Stringham leave London for Venice and Milly rents an ancient palace which becomes the scene of action. They are joined there by Mrs. Lowder, Kate, and Densher. Densher has agreed to Kate’s plans, if in deference to his conscience he is a passive rather than an active participant. But Lord Mark, a penniless aristocrat whom Mrs. Lowder wants Kate to marry and who had met Milly in London, comes to Venice to ask Milly to marry him. As much involved as anyone in the economic struggle for existence, Lord Mark too is after Milly’s money. Milly refuses him and he realizes that she loves Densher. Lord Mark then returns to London to ask Kate to marry him, but she also refuses. Now he discovers the scheme which she and Densher have to obtain Milly’s money and he returns to Venice (motivated by animal-like jealousy and frustrated greed) to tell Milly

\(^{11}\) Leon Edel in Henry James: The Untried Years (Philadelphia, 1953), pp. 226–33 and 323–33, discusses James’s youthful devotion to Mary Temple, and the extent to which she served as an inspiration to his creation of Milly and others. Mr. Edel’s many studies of James and his editing have placed all who study James deeply in debt to his expert knowledge and rich insights.
of their secret engagement, and hence of Densher's duplicity. This is the greatest of blows for Milly and she turns "her face to the wall" (II, 294).

At this point Mrs. Stringham goes to Densher and describes Milly's struggle to live:

"'She's more than quiet, She's grim. It's what she has never been. So you see—all these days, I can't tell you—but it's better so. It would kill me if she were to tell me.'

'To tell you?' He was still at a loss.

'How she fells. How she clings. How she doesn't want' to die (II, 299).

But Densher can't tell a direct lie by going to Milly and denying Lord Mark's accusation, as Mrs. Stringham asks. A few weeks later Milly dies. But her physician, Sir Luke, had convinced her that Densher meant well in trying to prolong her diseased life, and Milly had seen him before her death. She sends him home in order that he might not see her die.

Densher's relation to Milly has been a very subtle one; he has been a passive participant in Kate's plan, but he has become involved with Milly on their own terms to the exclusion of other considerations. And he finally realizes he is in love with her memory. He refuses to marry Kate ("I won't touch the money") unless she joins him in renouncing the money. She replies she will if he can deny he is in love with Milly's memory. But this he cannot do, and they both realize there is too much between them—Milly's wings, the wings of the dove—to permit their marriage.

Both in the English society he describes, then, and in the character of Milly Theale, James seems to reflect the influence of the evolutionary concept of the survival of the fittest in the struggle for existence.

The fact that James's characters are clearly products of hereditary and environmental factors also reflects the influence of evolutionary science in The Wings of the Dove. Kate Croy's family background is one in which personal attachments are weighed in terms of financial value. To her father and her destitute sister, Marian, as Kate so clearly recognizes, "My position's a value, a great value, for them both. It's the value—the only one they have" (I, 80). In the light of such conditioning, Kate's actions in this pattern toward Milly Theale are easily understood. And Kate heavily feels the burden of her heredity, her natural affinity for family and its unhappy consequences: "Her haunting harassing father, her meanacing aunt, her portionless little nephews and nieces," writes James, "were figures that caused the chord of natural piety superabundantly to vibrate. Her manner of putting it to herself—but more
especially in respect to Marian—was that she saw what you might be brought to by the cultivation of consanguinity” (I, 36).

In his preface James leaves little doubt of his intention with Kate as the product of corrupted heredity and environment. He explains her thus: “The image of her so compromised and compromising father was all effectively to have pervaded her life, was in a certain particular way to have tampered with her spring ...” (xviii). And in a conversation between Kate and Densher, James again indicates the fruits of heredity, for to Kate her father’s dishonor has become a part of her, and she concludes, “How can such a thing as that not be the great thing in one’s life?” (I, 77)12 Kate “sleeps” with Densher to encourage him to continue to make love to Milly!

Quite ironically, Milly Theale sees Kate as the “wondrous London girl” (I, 190), the particular product of the London environment of whom she had read. But as the two girls become close friends, Milly perceives more than Kate’s turns of head and tones of voice; she sees the Kate who is straining in an earnest competition. Significantly, James describes this element in Kate in terms that reflect both his conception of a social struggle for existence and his concern with environmental determinism. “Wasn’t it,” he writes, “that the handsome girl was, with twenty other splendid qualities, the least bit brutal too, and didn’t she suggest, as no one yet had ever done for her new friend, that there might be a wild beauty in that, and even a strange grace?” (I, 201). And, as James continues, Milly soon saw the reason for such a bold approach to life, for “There were more dangers clearly round-about Lancaster Gate [Mrs. Lowder’s ostentations home] than one suspected in New York or could dream of in Boston” (I, 201).

In the case of Merton Densher, James depicts an individual in whom the qualities have yet to be shaped by his environment into a final character. And of course in the novel it is Kate’s plan and Milly’s splendid fortitude, coupled with his renunciation of Milly’s money, that determine the final form of his character.

It is significant that the two characters in the novel who see the final circumstances of Milly’s death as a sort of ethical triumph are those two who are not distinctly products of any one environ-
ment, that is, Densher and Susan Stringham. These characters also are the ones who, with Milly, spiritually gain something from the total experience encompassed in the novel. Thus, Densher, who had lived abroad, is delineated as “but half a Briton” (I, 101). Mrs. Lowder notices his “want of the right marks, his foreign accidents, his queer antecedents,” (I, 101), and Kate discovers “how many more foreign things were in Merton Densher than he had hitherto taken the trouble to catalogue . . . .” (I, 103). Densher himself insists he had come back “to being a Briton,” but James observes, indicating clearly his partial belief in environmental determinism, “Brave enough though his descent to English earth, he had passed, by the way, through zones of air that had left their ruffle on his wings . . . . Something had happened to him that could never be undone” (I, 104). Densher’s final renunciation of Milly’s money is also explained in part by the fact that his father was a clergyman whose idealism the son inherited.

Mrs. Lowder and Mrs. Stringham are as much products of their backgrounds as the other characters, but background has fixed the London society matron into a rigid pattern of behavior and has left the New Engander all the more flexible for her experience. In renewing her childhood friendship with Mrs. Lowder when they were classmates in Switzerland, Mrs. Stringham notes the differences between her London friend and herself. To the questing New England companion of Milly, Mrs. Lowder appears now as concerned only with the fundamental “business” of life. Mrs. Stringham sees it thus: “The joy, for her, was to know why she acted—the reason was half the business; whereas with Mrs. Lowder there might have been no reason: ‘why’ was the trivial seasoning-substance, the vanilla or the nutmeg, omittable from the nutritive pudding without spoiling it” (I, 187–8).

Mrs. Susan Stringham is the perfect companion for Milly, whom she worships as a princess, because her character’s development is determined throughout the story by the demands of the new environment, as was noted of Densher’s character. Like Densher, she had spent part of her life in foreign lands; her mother had given her daughters five years abroad which was “to stamp the younger in especial—Susan was the younger—with a character [which] . . . made all the difference” (I, 133). Coming equipped with the simplicity and directness of a New England background and the perspective of travel, Mrs. Stringham does develop—under the demands of a new environment—a character subtle enough to perceive by the end of the story the involved but untold relationships between Merton, Kate, and Milly. “She has seen for herself,” Merton tells Kate. “I’ve told her nothing. She’s a person who does see” (II, 358).
James makes it clear in his preface what he intends of heredity and environment for Milly. "She should be the last fine flower,—blooming alone, for the fullest attestation of her freedom—of an "old' New York stem ..." (x). Going with this, James sees a peculiar American background, for he speaks of "a strong and special implication of liberty, liberty of action, of choice, of appreciation, of contact—proceeding from sources that provide better for large independence, I think, than any other conditions in the world" (x).

When Susan Stringham visits Milly in New York, it is Milly's New York background which impresses, a background which is an "immense, extravagant, unregulated cluster, with free-living ancestors, handsome dead cousins, lurid uncles, beautiful vanished aunts, persons all busts and curls, perserved, though so exposed, in the marble of famous French chisels ..." (I, 124). Milly is upper class New York to Mrs. Stringham, is undeniably the product of her environment. And what Milly represents is "all on a scale and with a sweep that had required the greater stage; it was a New York legend of affecting, of romantic isolation ..." (I, 118). But most of all, James stresses, Milly represents, "in respect to the mass of money so piled on the girl's back, a set of New York possibilities" (I, 118). This is what makes Milly "the thing you were" (I, 136) for with her vast wealth and complete personal freedom she is truly "the heir of all the ages" (xi), with an unparalleled opportunity to encompass in herself all of the past which remains worthwhile.

Aware that the opportunity is hers but that the time is limited, Milly feels the need to grasp quickly the influences of the European cultural heritage. It is ironic that it is this heritage which kills her, but which also completes her in leaving her with an acute awareness of life, and which she triumphs over in her forgiving generosity to her false lover, because of the hereditary and environmental power of her ethical innocence and goodness.

It is Milly's awareness of what she is that makes her a truly tragic character. She is never blinded by the London she encounters (except in the case of Densher). For, noticing the difference at a dinner party in Lord Mark's attitude toward Kate Croy and herself, Milly reflects that it was Kate, "one of his own species," who made him uncertain. But toward Milly his attitude is confident, for "about a mere little American, a cheap exotic, imported almost wholesale, and whose habitat, with its conditions of climate, growth, and cultivation, its immense profusion but its few varieties and thin development, he was perfectly satisfied" (I, 184). As the product of such an environment, born with every conceivable advantage but without the vigilance which experience usually in-
spires, Milly can flourish only for a moment’s brilliant intensity and then die, knowing that her deceitful lover had been mainly actuated by mercenary motives.

What is most interesting in James’s portrayal of Milly Theale’s physician, Sir Luke Strett, is that James makes him on the surface a sort of demi-god and quite as much a psychiatrist as he is a physician. Throughout the story Sir Luke acts as the prime dispenser of understanding, sympathy and commands to action. And he is interested on Milly’s behalf “in other questions beside the question of what was the matter with her. She accepted such an interest as regular in the highest type of scientific mind—his being the even highest, magnificently...” (I. 263). In this role, as something of a psychiatrist in the era of Walter Pater, he urges Milly on in the “pursuit of happiness.” He tells her, “You’ve a right to be happy... You must accept any form in which happiness may come” (I. 265). Thus, Sir Luke, whom we may take as representing James’s ambivalent attitude towards science, plays a strange role: unwittingly, he paves the way for Millie’s gullible acceptance of Densher’s pretended love, but he also administers “therapy” which may have been a factor in Milly’s partial foregiveness of Densher. James appears (judging by his scientist in Confidence and Washington Square) to have absorbed something of Hawthorne’s general view that the scientist has an inadequate insight into the emotional needs of distinctively human beings (cf Beatrice Rappaccini). Thus, James shows that Sir Luke in his prescribed treatment fails to predict that Lord Mark’s jealous nature will motivate his telling Milly of the plot of Kate and Densher, and to realize that Milly’s being told of Densher’s duplicity will kill her. He also does not realize that Kate will lose Densher because of the wings of the dove which have eventually caused Densher to refuse to marry Kate if she keeps Milly’s money secured by such duplicity.\(^{13}\)

The rapid contemporary development of the science of psychology (in which his brother William’s pioneering early studies were synthesized in 1890 in his Principles of Psychology\(^{14}\)) influenced James’s writing of The Wings of the Dove. As we have noted, Henry James is most obviously concerned with the psychological factors of consciousness and motivation. He seldom deals with his

\(^{13}\)In “Lady Barberina,” in a contexture contrasting the idle life of the British aristocracy with that of his hero, an American physician, James says the latter’s “repression of pain, the mitigation of misery, constitute surely the noblest profession in the world.” But the brilliant and cold-hearted Dr. Sloper in Washington Square illustrates James’s ambivalent attitude toward men of medicine.

\(^{14}\)“All my life I have... unconsciously pragmatized,” Henry James wrote William (Letters, II, 83). “You are immensely and universally right” in evaluating ideas and conduct in terms of practical consequences as contrasted with Platonic absolutes. Densher fears that his duplicity (eventually brutally revealed to Milly by Lord Mark in his jealousy) will kill Milly in her delicate condition. She should have been more vigilant and pragmatic.
subject directly in an omniscient way; rather, he treats it from different points of view in terms of the varying consciousness of the observers. Thus, when Mrs. Stringham and Milly are introduced, their “more or less associated consciousness...” deals “unequally with the next presented fact of the subject” (xxviii), James notes in the preface.

James is even more concerned with the factor of motivation, for he is constantly probing for the “motive still finer” beneath the apparent actions and passions of his characters. The development of Densher and his reasons for becoming involved in such deep duplicity is a masterful study in motivation. Beginning as the son of a chaplain, Densher agrees to Kate’s plan. This depends on many subsequent factors including love for Kate, financial needs, and the idealistic belief that his pretending to love Millie will prolong her life.

The influence of science is reflected in much of James’s literary theory and practice, for he frequently refers to the “laws” which underly his writing. In developing his plot, James proceeds much after the scientific fashion of a construction-engineer. He describes the “fun” of establishing successive centers so that the portion of the subject commanded by them and accordingly treated from them would constitute “sufficiently solid blocks of wrought material, squared to the sharp edge, as to have weight and mass and carrying power; to make for construction, that is, to conduce to effect and to provide for beauty” (xvi). For example, James conceives of Kate Croy as “such a block (xvi). Thus, it is in Kate’s consciousness at Milly’s party in Venice that the drama is brought to a head, for there Kate “takes the measure of her friend’s festival evening, squares itself to the same synthetic firmness as the compact constructional block inserted by the scene at Lancaster Gate” (xxiii).

James feels this scientific method of plot development—of devising blocks of action—is the best: “I have never... embraced the logic of any superior process,” he says in his preface (xxi). The writer “places,” he states, “after an earnest survey, the piers of his bridge—he has at least sounded deep enough, heaven knows, for their brave position; yet the bridge spans the stream, after the fact, in apparently complete independence of these properties, the principal grace of the original design” (xvii). Thus he sees The Wings of the Dove as blocks, each governed by a new center, although he deprecates his “regular failing to keep the appointed halves of my whole equal.” (xxiv).

James’s method of describing persons and events through the consciousness of his characters is equally scientific and geometrical. He manipulates their consciousness like high-powered searchlights,
revealing with dimensional intensity the elements of his story when they are turned on the object. Thus in the suspenseful final sections, while the center "dwell mainly ... in the depths of Milly Theale's 'case'" (xxviii), it is through the other characters that actual events are related. In discussing the functional purpose of Milly's party in her Venetian palace, James very clearly describes his scientific and mechanical method of reflecting persons and events. "My registers or 'reflectors,'" he writes, "as I so conveniently name them (burnished indeed as they generally are by the intelligence, the curiosity, the passion, the force of the moment, whatever it be directing them), work ... in arranged alternation ..." (xxii). So it is in Venice that Kate Croy is "turned on ... where the appearances, rich and obscure and portentous ... as they have by that time become and altogether exquisite as they remain, are treated almost wholly through her vision of them and Densher's" (xxii).

James, then, engineers his scenes around carefully selected centers of consciousness which, in turn, are the determined products of their heredity and environment and which color the scenes in these terms.

His concern with environmental determinism is also reflected in his use of environment as an organic and quite functional background for his story. Mrs. Lowder's home is more than a simple setting for her part in the novel; it is Mrs. Lowder, and it gives her a dimensional expression beyond the power of direct descriptions. When Densher visits her he is dismayed by the massive and ostentatious furnishings of her house. He takes in "the message of her massive florid furniture, the immense expression of her signs and symbols ..." (I, 85). He feels the "language of the house itself" speak to him, "writing out ... the ideals and possibilities of the mistress. Never, he flattered himself, had he seen anything so ... ugly—operatively, ominously so cruel" (I, 87). In Venice, when Lord Mark tells Milly of Densher's duplicity and Milly "turns her face to the wall," the weather immediately reflects the psychological climate. The sunny days end and the city becomes "a Venice all of evil ... A Venice of cold lashing rain ... 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" (II, 283). With the arrival of Sir Luke and with Milly's psychological improvement, the weather changes and comes "into its own again" with "a suffusion of bright sound that was one with the bright color ..." (II, 320).

In summary, it seems apparent that James's interpretation of life in The Wings of the Dove, as imaged in the destructive aspects
at least, is parallel in many ways to the ideas associated with the
science of James’s era. These ideas certainly mesh with his concept
of the social struggle for existence which underlies his presentation
of English society in Kate Croy, “the modern London girl,” in con-
trast with the American Milly Theale. The same parallel to current
science is also evident in James’s concern with partially explaining
conduct in the light of heredity and environment, and in his
ambivalent attitude toward Milly’s physician-psychiatrist, Sir Luke
Strett. Finally, James’s concern with motivation, presented in all
its complexity, and his psychological concern with “centers of con-
sciousness” and other practices of literary artistry and formal pro-
portioning also parallel current ideas in science. A reading of the
novel in these terms seems to make most potent the significance of
the struggle for existence which James is depicting, for the un
scrupulous world over which Milly must triumph is most terrify-
ing in its determined animalistic aspects.

One must finally recognize, of course, that in The Wings of the
Dove the struggle for existence in terms of money-getting and
grasping for happiness in the face of disease which medical sci-
ence cannot cure is counter-balanced by an anti-materialistic ideal-
ism. Thus, Milly’s ultimate victory over Kate’s predatory spirit is
the more triumphant for its non-materialistic, ethical and moral
basis. Several students of James have concluded that the common
denominator of the climaxes in his major fictional works involves a
free-willed renunciation of something of price for something price-
less, especially for one’s self-respect.

While James never joined any sectarian religious group, it has
been said that he develops his favorite characters as if they were
approaching a religious state of grace after an initiation which
had warned them that they should have been more vigilant of the
world’s evils of a naturalistic kind. The very title phrase, “The
Wings of the Dove,” from Psalm 55 suggests that Milly, after
learning how she had been betrayed, might have yearned for the
“wings of the dove” in order to escape from the city of deceit and
fly from those who pretended to be her friends.\footnote{25 For a discriminating discussion of this question, see Arnold Goldsmith, “Henry
James’s Reconciliation of Free Will and Fatalism,” Nineteenth Century Fiction XIII
(Sept., 1958), 109–126, a discussion condensed from his doctoral dissertation written
at the University of Wisconsin.}

\footnote{26 In addition to James’s regret that this novel, unlike The Ambassadors, is not limited to having all the action refracted through only one unifying ”centre of consciousness,” he deplores (in his Letters, 1920, I, 403) the fact that “The centre . . . isn’t in the middle, or the middle, rather, isn’t in the centre but ever so much too near the end, so that what was to come after it is truncated.” For a discriminating analysis of such formal matters, see Joseph Warren Beach’s The Method of Henry James (New
Haven, 1918).}

\footnote{27 See also the subtle study of Ernest Sandeen, “The Wings of the Dove and The
Portrait of a Lady”, PMLA LXIX (Dec., 1954), 1069–75.}
Another strong influence on James was the semi-platonic Emerson, the spokesman of a spiritual self-reliance. Emerson distinguished sharply between the “law for man” and the “law for thing” (materialism). And James, who wrote three appreciative essays on him, concluded that Emerson, while prone to have a too “ripe unconscioness of evil,” was right in seeing that “the prize was within.” Of course James’s devotion to George Elliot (on whom he wrote five essays) and other Victorians such as Arnold would also have militated against the materialism of the English upper class. Such materialism struck him “in many ways very much the same rotten and collapsible one as that of the French aristocracy before the revolution—minus cleverness and conversation.”

Whatever the sources, the great renunciation scene at the end of The Wings of the Dove in which the chaplain’s son “won’t touch the money” and will not marry Kate unless she too gives it up, is beautifully moving evidence that, fully as James realized the parallels to Darwinism in the socialite life of his time, he also paid homage to the need for the protective and contagious power of ethical innocence and goodness.\\[18\\]

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18 Letters, I, 124.

19 In the latest book-length study of Henry James, The Madness of Art (Lincoln, Nebraska, 1962, p. 55-56) Walter F. Wright follows his predecessors in scarcely mentioning social Darwinism. But he does show insight in finding a recurrence “in novel after novel” of two conflicting commandments. “The one commandment was ‘Live all you can!’ The other was ‘Renounce, renounce!’ The symbol of the first was often Europe; of the second, America, and particularly puritan New England. We should hasten to say that we are speaking only of those instances in which the geographic terms were used as symbols.”