

Honoré de Balzac, Henry James, and Seraphic Devotions

IN THE EIGHTH BOOK OF Henry James's late novel *The Wings of the Dove*, the young orphaned American heiress Milly Theale has a party. She has rented a Venetian palace from which she is too ill to leave. She is even too sick, although she refuses to acknowledge it, to come down for dinner. But she will, her companion Susan Stringham tells Merton Densher, one of the three key figures in this (doubly) failed marriage plot, come down after dinner, to a candlelit frescoed room filled with music. ("He had found Susan Shepherd alone in the great saloon, where even more candles than their friend's large common allowance—she grew daily more splendid; they were all struck with it and chaffed her about it—lighted up the pervasive mystery of Style.")¹

Mrs. Stringham insists that Densher stay to participate in what he calls the "court life" Milly and her companion, together with their Italian cicerone, Eugenio, have created. Milly is, Mrs. Stringham insists, a princess. (This has been her refrain for the length of the novel.) But Milly is more than that. When Densher admits all that Milly has done for him and those who attend her court, Mrs. Stringham

promptly showed how this was almost all she wanted of him. "That's all I mean, if you understand it of such a court as never was: one of the courts of heaven, the court of a reigning seraph, a sort of a vice-queen of an angel. That will do perfectly." (*Wings*, 560)

Milly is an angel, and not just any angel, but a seraph, the highest of the angelic orders, one of those who stand closest to God and are fully infused with God's light and love.

The biblical basis of James's word choice echoes, of course, the words of the Psalm with which he names the novel. James's seraph elicits Christian conceptions of the celestial hierarchies as well as nineteenth-century British

ABSTRACT Reading Henry James's late novel *The Wings of the Dove* with Honoré de Balzac's *Seraphita*, this essay argues that James performs through his novel an act of secular devotion, a memorialization of lost others through which he enables himself to continue to live. REPRESENTATIONS 153. 2021 © The Regents of the University of California. ISSN 0734-6018, electronic ISSN 1533-855X, pages 127–43. All rights reserved. Direct requests for permission to photocopy or reproduce article content to the University of California Press at <https://www.ucpress.edu/journals/reprints-permissions>. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1525/rep.2021.153.8.127>.

and American domestic angelology, yet the more direct reference is, I think, to a very specific seraph, the title character of a short novel by Honoré de Balzac, published in the *Revue de Paris* in 1834, later republished with *Louis Lambert* and “Les Proscrits” as *Le Livre Mystique*. James had most certainly read *Seraphita*, as he seems to have read all of Balzac’s work in preparation for various essays designed to assess the work of the French realist for American audiences.² *The Ambassadors*, written in 1900 and 1901, before *The Wings of the Dove*, but published a year after, in 1903, takes Lambert as the name of its hero, Lambert Strether.³ Other hints scattered throughout *The Wings of the Dove* point us to *Seraphita*, as I will show.

But just as Balzac crucially revises his Swedenborgian sources in writing *Seraphita*, so too does James use Balzac to his own ends in *The Wings of the Dove*. If the character Seraphita is something like a Swedenborgian angel come to earth, male and female united in one figure (and hence in strictly Swedenborgian terms, a married angel), or, alternatively, if she or he is a human being who has become an androgynous angel before death, Milly Theale is that earthbound angel rendered as an ordinary, if extremely wealthy, American woman. Like Seraphita, Milly is on the verge of death, and she is instrumental in the romantic affairs of a heterosexual couple. But whereas Seraphita longs for death, Milly wants desperately to live; and while Seraphitus does all he can do to bring together Minna and Wilfrid, the two humans who love her, to unite them in love for each other and for God, Milly, wittingly or not, pulls Kate Croy and Merton Densher—who know and love each other long before Milly comes on the scene—apart.

After Milly’s death, Densher lives on, devoted, religiously, to her; his memory of Milly is the sole artifact available to him of her brief life. The religious language is James’s own, as he describes Densher taking the thought of Milly “out of its sacred corner and its soft wrappings; he undid them one by one, handling them, handling *it*, as a father, baffled and tender, might handle a maimed child” (*Wings*, 683). The shift in number is both puzzling and crucial; Densher’s thought is singular and multiple. It is his constant wondering about what was in Milly’s last letter to him, a letter he handed over to Kate, who immediately cast it into the fire. He knows it tells him Milly left him her fortune. What he would never know, what he puzzled over and tended, hidden from Kate, “was the turn [Milly] would have given her act.” This “he would never, never know” and “his imagination . . . extraordinarily filled out and refined” that space of unknowing (*Wings*, 683). Although Densher did not love Milly when she was alive, death renders her the primary object of his devoted attention. He tells Kate he would still happily marry her, yet a part of him will always, Kate knows, tend Milly’s altar, the thought of her now infinite magnanimity. Milly was a seraph in life and she becomes ever more seraphic through Densher’s devotion to her in death.

I do not want to argue that Balzac's *Seraphita* provides "the key" to *The Wings of the Dove*. There is no key to *The Wings of the Dove*, and a certain part of its mystery will always, perhaps should always, remain. Yet attention to the similarities and differences between Balzac's and James's novels, and between Balzac's novel and its Swedenborgian sources, illustrate or draw out crucial issues in James's novel and in all of his writing about the living and their relationship to the dead.

All of this is rendered even more complex when we recall that James's father, Henry James Sr., was himself, much more than Balzac in fact, a diligent reader and exponent of Swedenborg. Henry Sr.'s Swedenborgianism changed over the course of his career; he wrote an enormous amount about Swedenborg and about the radical socialist Charles Fourier, two figures whose work, like many nineteenth-century Americans, Henry Sr. brought together despite their apparent incongruities. Swedenborg, unlike Fourier, remained a Christian, deeply committed to the spiritual realm and to the idea of life after death. Henry Sr. also, unlike some of his more famous contemporaries and friends, remained, perhaps despite himself, deeply Calvinist. His loathing for the body only intensified, as I will show, with age. At the same time, he rejected the mild forms of associationism found among the New Church followers of Swedenborg, for he was deeply distrustful of all institutionalized religion. This refusal of any church gives rise to Henry Jr.'s feeling, recorded in his *A Small Boy and Others*, that he grew up without any recognizable form of religious life.

Much has been made of the complex influence of Henry Sr.'s views of religion, gender, and sexuality on his sons and daughter, and particularly on Henry Jr. (who dropped the "Jr." as soon as "Sr." died). Alfred Habegger has done a great deal to help us understand the tortured nature of Henry Sr.'s life and thought and their, in Habegger's view, almost entirely deleterious impact on Henry Jr.'s work.⁴ But the return to Balzac in James's late novels—not the realist Balzac whose empiricism the younger James found degrading, although the older James came to appreciate it deeply, but the philosophical or mystical Balzac, the Balzac who spends seventy pages having different characters refer to the same person as male and female without anyone seeming to notice, until finally, Wilfrid, the entirely masculine third in the novel's love triangle, impatiently exclaims, "He? He who?"—the turn to this Balzac also marks a return to Henry Sr.'s influence on a son ready and able to rewrite the paternal heritage.

Seraphita tells the story of a mysterious figure, seen as male (Seraphitus) by Minna, the daughter of the decidedly agnostic minister, Becker, and as female (Seraphita) by Wilfrid, a man who has come to the small Norwegian village where Minna, Becker, and Seraphita live. Both Minna and Wilfrid love Seraphita; both are almost hypnotically entranced while in his or her

presence; both are rejected as lovers by him or her. Together, they elicit long discourses from the now dying Seraphita in which she describes a life of prayer and commitment to God in what I will show are decidedly Swedenborgian terms. Margaret Haywood argues, following an early study by Pauline Bernheim, that Balzac draws his Swedenborg from a manual, François-Jean Dailliant de la Touche's *Abrégé des ouvrages D'em. Swedenborg*.⁵ Dailliant's Swedenborg already bears traces of Dailliant's interest in mesmerism, and it appears that Balzac plays fast and loose even with this source.

On the basis of her reading of Dailliant, later essays written by Balzac's father, and Bernheim's study, Haywood argues that Balzac is not a Swedenborgian—as members of the New Church have themselves rightly insisted—but like his father, an adherent of mesmerism and theories of animal magnetism, the latter understood as an invisible but material force. Haywood's Balzac, then, is a thoroughgoing naturalist, a mesmerist, and a Christian, of however unorthodox a variety, rather than a Swedenborgian. Yet *Seraphita*, if taken as evidence of Balzac's views in 1834, which I think it likely cannot be, resists these conclusions. In other words, I am not interested in whether Balzac was a Swedenborgian, a mesmerist, or some odd combination of the two, nor am I interested in deciding between spiritualist and naturalist readings of Swedenborg (although my hermeneutic sympathies are with the former); my concern is with the novel's portrayal of Seraphita and the views espoused by that figure.

Any determination of the meaning of Balzac's novel rests on how one reads this character. As Haywood rightly notes, although Swedenborg held that human beings could become angels—that in fact all angels had once been human—and even that human beings might encounter angels in this world, the angelic marriage in which male and female come together as one is a spiritual occurrence. The oddity of Seraphita, the novel and the character, seen from a Swedenborgian perspective, is that the androgynous figure generated by the wedding of two angels is present and visible on earth, seemingly clothed in a material body.⁶ Although there are intense debates about the relationship between the material and the spiritual in Swedenborg's angelology, he in places insists—and the handbook from which Balzac drew emphasizes—that angels possess spiritual rather than physical bodies. Balzac's angelic figure is more novelistically compelling than an account of heavenly matrimony might prove to be; this might be one reason for his revision of Swedenborg. Yet Haywood leaves out of her account a vital aspect of Balzac's characterization of Seraphita, for in the novel, Seraphita is almost unremittingly anguished, culminating in the intensity of her desire to leave the material body behind and rise to the spiritual realm, described at length in the closing pages of the novel, in which Minna and Wilfrid are allowed, again in an almost hypnotic state,

to see the fate of Seraphita's soul at the moment of his or her (his and her?) death. Seraphita's sole reason for living is to draw Minna and Wilfrid to God and to each other, suggesting that they will be the next pair to create an androgynous angelic being, as Seraphita's parents created her, whether by giving birth in the regular way or by uniting themselves in Seraphita's singular body. Yet one can only imagine that this creature, born of the love between Minna and Wilfrid, will, like Seraphita, long for death, a death in which the body and the soul are separated.

For against all the nineteenth-, twentieth-, and twenty-first-century attempts to blur the line between body and spirit in accounts of Swedenborgian angelology, Balzac's Seraphita *does* die. Minna and Wilfrid see her soul ascend to God and her dead body remains. What Balzac wants to convey in all this, about Swedenborg or mesmerism, angels or humans, the material and the spiritual realms, is still not clear to me. Yet there is no gainsaying the decidedly otherworldly nature of Seraphita's desire and her essential nature. Life on earth is treated throughout the novel as a trial and a hardship for the angel—or almost angel, as Seraphita may be a human who has attained angelic androgyny and is just on the verge of a fully spiritual angelic status conferred only with death—who lives solely in order to engage in prayerful asceticism and to draw Minna and Wilfrid to the same life. Minna's and Wilfrid's love for her, him, or them, the intensity of Minna's and Wilfrid's fully embodied and sexual devotion, is experienced as itself a source of Seraphita's pain. Seraphitus is, he tells Minna, "an exile, far from heaven; a monster, far from earth. . . . No one here below can fulfill my desires or calm my griefs. I have forgotten how to weep. I am alone. I resign myself, and I wait" (*Seraphita*, 17).

So why see Balzac's angel, who is androgynous, desires death, and refuses the love of humans, in James's Milly Theale, however seraphic the latter might be? The term is too commonplace in nineteenth-century American and English literature to itself warrant extended comment. Even Milly Theale's angelic aspect the night of her final party—all in white, surrounded by light and love, seemingly on the verge of ascending, although to what is not clear—the entire scene, evocative as it is, and what first drew me back to Balzac's novel, is likely inadequate to justify the comparison between them. Two other factors weigh on my decision to read *The Wings of the Dove* in light of *Seraphita*. Both Seraphita and Milly are described in crucial scenes as facing the abyss—and in a way that explicitly recalls Satan's temptation of Christ raised to a mountaintop to see all of the kingdoms of the earth—and both are spoken of as doves. Again, the differences in the ways these two images are handled in Balzac and in James are as telling as the similarities, but the string of associations suggests the comparison.

The Wings of the Dove also involves a love triangle, although this is not the way James claims he first envisioned the novel, nor is it the way it is generally described by critics. James doesn't tell us this in his preface to the New York edition, but the idea of Milly Theale came to him thirty years earlier, after the death of his cousin, Minny Temple. What James does tell us is that it's a story he has been thinking about for a very long time:

"The Wings of the Dove," published in 1902, represents to my memory a very old—if I shouldn't perhaps rather say a very young—motive; I can scarce remember the time when the situation on which this long-drawn fiction mainly rests was not vividly present to me. The idea, reduced to its essence, is that of a young person conscious of a great capacity for life, but early stricken and doomed, condemned to die under short respite, while also enamoured of the world; aware moreover of the condemnation and passionately desirous 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.⁷

What most interests James is not her death, but "the unsurpassable activity of passionate, of inspired resistance" ("Prefaces," 1288). It is to make this resistance as fierce as possible that James gives his heroine every resource with which to fight: "One would see her then as possessed of all things, all but the single most precious assurance; freedom and money and a mobile mind and personal charm, the power to interest and attach; attributes, each one, enhancing the value of a future" ("Prefaces," 1290). But it is precisely the possession of all of these attributes and particularly her wealth, together with her impending death, that render her a temptation and a target. Or read from another angle, they are what she uses to gain what little life she can at the end.

James, reflecting back on the novel in the preface, presents Milly as a victim of her wealth.

What one had discerned, at all events, from an early stage, was that a young person so devoted and so exposed, a creature with her security hanging so by a hair, couldn't but fall somehow into some abysmal trap—this being, dramatically speaking, what such a situation most naturally implied and imposed. ("Prefaces," 1291)

Yet in describing "the whirlpool movement of the waters produced by a sinking vessel or the failure of a great business" in which Milly sinks, we see that she is the ship who takes Kate Croy and Merton Densher down with her ("Prefaces," 1291).

For the novel opens, not with Milly Theale, but with Kate Croy and then Merton Densher, two young people who love each other but feel constricted by a lack of material resources from marrying. Kate sees in the dying Milly a chance: if Milly falls in love with Densher, if Densher and Milly marry, then

when she dies he will inherit her vast wealth. The scheme in all of its stark crudity comes to a head—and is explicitly named—the night of Milly’s angelic descent, the party in the palazzo with which I opened.⁸ That night Milly still believes, or pretends to believe, that she can live. It is only on later learning from Lord Mark, who loves Kate Croy (and who is cast as the truth-telling spoiler to protect the reader from the necessity—although it paradoxically remains—of acknowledging Densher’s role in Milly’s death), that Kate Croy and Merton Densher are secretly engaged, that Milly Theale sends Densher away and, in the words of the one person she agrees to see in her final days, Mrs. Stringham, “turns her face to the wall” (632).

Milly’s death haunts the novel long before its actual occurrence, and it is again Mrs. Stringham who first intimates its approach. In a scene that has generated considerable critical attention, and that will take us back to Balzac and Seraphita, Milly Theale and Mrs. Stringham stop in the Alps on their way to Italy. Milly had gone for a walk after lunch and Susan Stringham goes to find her:

The young lady had been seen not long before passing further on, over a crest and to a place where the way would drop again, as our unappeased enquirer found it in fact, a quarter of an hour later, markedly and almost alarmingly to do. It led somewhere, yet apparently quite into space, for the great side of the mountain appeared, from where she pulled up, to fall away altogether, though probably but to some issue below and out of sight. (*Wings*, 297)

After finding Milly’s discarded book, Mrs. Stringham continues “with the descent of the path,” which

appeared to fall precipitously and to become a ‘view’ pure and simple, a view of great extent and beauty, but thrown forward and vertiginous. Milly, with the promise of it from above, had gone straight down to it, not stopping till it was all before her; and here, on what struck her friend as the dizzy edge of it, she was seated at her ease. The path somehow took care of itself and its final business, but the girl’s seat was a slab of rock at the end of a short promontory or excrescence that merely pointed off to the right at gulfs of air and that was so placed by good fortune, if not by the worst, as to be at last completely visible. For Mrs. Stringham stifled a cry on taking in what she believed to be the danger of such a perch for a mere maiden; her liability to slip, to slide, to leap, to be precipitated by a single false movement, but a turn of the head—could one tell?—into whatever was beneath. (*Wings*, 297–98)

Mrs. Stringham’s first thought was a fear of some “latent intention,” “of some betrayed accordance of Milly’s caprice with a horrible obsession” (*Wings*, 298). She fears, to put it plainly, which James eventually does, that Milly has come to this precipice in order to hurl herself into the

abyss, to commit suicide and therefore end the constant suspense that is her life.⁹

Despite this premonition and this fear, that day in the Alps Mrs. Stringham comes almost immediately to read Milly's stance in a completely different way. She carried away with her

the impression that if the girl was deeply and recklessly meditating there she wasn't meditating a jump; she was on the contrary, as she sat, much more in a state of uplifted and unlimited possession that had nothing to gain from violence. She was looking down on the kingdom of the earth, and though indeed that of itself might well go to the brain, it wouldn't be with a view of renouncing them. Was she choosing among them or did she want them all? This question, before Mrs. Stringham had decided what to do, made others vain. (*Wings*, 298)

Critics debate whether James would have been thinking of Christ's temptation, in which he refused the offer of all the kingdoms of the earth made to him by Satan. What's remarkable about the passage, however, is that Milly, in all of her putative seraphic innocence, is seen by Mrs. Stringham as not only choosing the kingdom, but pointedly considering the possibility that she might take possession of them all. Her wealth, central to this chapter as to the book as a whole, the prodigious freedom it allows her and the fearlessness it enables, are vital to her power to face the abyss that is, for James, life.

The scene stands in marked contrast to the opening of *Seraphita*, in which the title character, in her masculine form, takes Minna to the very top of the ice cap that rises above the inlet on which they live. Although Becker and others emphasize the impassibility of these heights, and the whole takes place in a hypnotic state, it is also very clearly stated that both Minna and Seraphitus are wearing skis. In the face of the abyss below them, Seraphitus is fearless, whereas Minna's terror is acute. Seraphitus tells Minna not to look down. "Why not?" she asked. "You wish to know why? then look!"

Minna glanced quickly to her feet and cried out suddenly like a child who sees a tiger. The awful sensation of abysses seized her; one glance sufficed to communicate its contagion. The fiord, eager for food, bewildered her with its loud voice ringing in her ears, interposing between herself and life as though to devour her more surely. From the crown of her head to her feet and along her spine an icy shudder ran; then suddenly intolerable heat suffused her nerves, beat in her veins and overpowered her extremities with electric shocks like those of the torpedo. Too feeble to resist, she felt herself drawn by a mysterious power to the depths below, wherein she fancied that she saw some monster belching its venom, a monster whose magnetic eyes were charming her, whose open jaws appeared to craunch their prey before they seized it.

"I die, my Seraphitus, loving none but thee," she said, making a mechanical move to fling herself into the abyss.

Seraphitus breathed softly on her forehead and eyes. Suddenly, like a traveler relaxed after a bath, Minna forgot these keen emotions, already dissipated by the caressing breath which penetrated her body and filled it with balsamic essences as quickly as the breath itself had crossed the air. (*Seraphita*, 8–9)

Seraphitus, “an abyss facing the abyss,” full of superhuman power, is able to look into the void and out over all the kingdoms of the earth, with equanimity, even with disdain. Minna later remembers him, like “our Savior,” carried to “the pinnacle of the Temple” by Satan and shown the kingdoms of the world only to reject them (*Seraphita*, 74). For, as Seraphitus tells Minna, the true abyss and the true kingdom lie within the soul.

Seraphitus, like Christ, can look into the abyss, can see the kingdoms of the world, and can stand firm in his rejection of this world in favor of another. Milly Theale, sitting on the precipice, evokes Seraphitus (and Christ), just as Mrs. Stringham reminds us of Minna, filled with terror at the vertiginous fall that might await one standing on the edge. Yet Milly chooses—or tries to choose—the kingdom of life over that of death, even if she is ultimately relegated to the latter. She joins Seraphitus’s equanimity with Minna’s desire, and, although the stance will prove untenable, it is the one that interests James. It is the story he is trying to tell: how a character with a man’s fearlessness and a woman’s desire, for so the two are figured in these two scenes, might live.

The dove of James’s title appears in the final chapter of Balzac’s novel. “At the moment when Seraphita revealed herself in her true nature, her thoughts were no longer enslaved by human words,” the narrator tells us.

The violence of that last prayer had burst her bonds. Her soul, like a white dove, remained for an instant poised above the body whose exhausted substances were about to be annihilated. (*Seraphita*, 123)

The soul’s movement toward heaven is so contagious that Minna and Wilfrid are able to see the “radiant scintillations of Life” in the place where other mortals saw only death. Veil after veil falls away before them as they see the living word and the living light who transform the soul into a seraph; further veils are lifted as they come to understand “some of the mysterious sayings of him who had appeared on earth in the form which to each of them rendered him comprehensible,—to one Seraphitus, to the other Seraphita,—for they saw that all was homogeneous in the sphere where he now was” (*Seraphita*, 127).

Minna and Wilfrid are now exiles to themselves, hoping to arise “through the wings of Prayer” to the heights Seraphitus occupies. Minna will be Wilfrid’s love, he will be her strength, as they pursue the kingdom of Heaven; Seraphitus’s death and the ascension of their soul, as I said at the

outset, bring Minna and Wilfred together even as these events render the characters desirous of a state beyond the earthly life to which Seraphita leaves them. Seraphita is the dove on whose wings Minna and Wilfred will take flight to God and who brings them together under the embrace of its wings. Their sexual, bodily devotion has been transformed through the sublimation and ascension of Seraphita; the altar to which they are now devoted is an invisible shrine to a purely spiritual being.

Milly Theale, whose entire family is dead, first appears in *The Wings of the Dove* all in black, with her red hair vibrant against her dark clothing and a seemingly endless string of pearls wrapped around her neck, holding into place layers of exquisite lace. The night of her party, for the first time, she appears all in white; “let loose among” her guests “in a wonderful white dress,” she “brought them somehow into relation with something that made them more finely genial.” For Densher,

there was perhaps something for him in the accident of his seeing her for the first time in white, but she hadn't yet had occasion—circulating with a clearness intensified—to strike him as so happily pervasive. She was different, younger, fairer, with the colour of her braided hair more than ever a not altogether lucky challenge to attention; yet he was loth wholly to explain it by her having quitted this once, for some obscure yet doubtless charming reason, her almost monastic, her hitherto inveterate black. (*Wings*, 562)

It is the white dress and again, the pearls, that evoke Kate's identification of Milly as a dove:

Kate's face, as she considered them, struck him: the long, priceless chain wound twice around the neck, hung, heavy and pure, down the front of the wearer's breast—so far down that Milly's trick, evidently unconscious, of holding and vaguely fingering and entwining a part of it, conduced presumably to convenience. “She's a dove,” Kate went on, “and one somehow doesn't think of doves as bejeweled. Yet they suit her down to the ground.”¹⁰ (*Wings*, 564–65)

The contradiction or tension in the figure of the bejeweled dove runs throughout the figuration of Milly. It is a figuration, moreover, which like that of Seraphita is peculiarly and complexly gendered. For whereas Milly's apparent docility renders her feminine, her wealth, and the power it gives her, renders her decidedly masculine. (Even as it is the very thing that renders her vulnerable—the pearls wound around her neck are held in her hands, one imagines, at the place of a wound—to Kate Croy and Merton Densher.)

For Milly is a dove under whose wings Kate and Densher and all the other key characters in the novel are sheltered—even as Milly is ultimately unable to shelter herself. Densher thinks to himself, while speaking to Kate of Milly:

Milly was indeed a dove; this was the figure, though it most applied to her spirit. Yet he knew in a moment that Kate was just now, for reasons hidden from him, exceptionally under the impression of that element of wealth in her which was a power, which was a great power, and which was dove-like only so far as one remembered that doves have wings and wondrous flights, have them as well as tender tints and soft sounds. It even came to him dimly that such wings could in a given case—*had*, truly, in the case with which he was concerned—spread themselves for protection. Hadn't they, for that matter, lately taken an inordinate reach, and weren't Kate and Mrs. Lowder, weren't Susan Shepherd and he, wasn't *he* in particular, nestling under them to a great increase of immediate ease? All this was a brighter blur in the general light, out of which he heard Kate presently going on. (*Wings*, 565)

Yet at this moment, as Densher comes to the realization of Milly's great power, she is most vulnerable.

For Kate's next words to Densher are a mark of *her* desire:

"Pearls have such a magic that they suit every one."

"They would uncommonly suit you," he frankly returned.

"Oh yes, I see myself!"

As she saw herself, suddenly, he saw her—she would have been splendid; and with it he felt more what she was thinking of. Milly's royal ornament had—under pressure now not wholly occult—taken on the character of a symbol of differences, differences of which the vision was actually in Kate's face. (*Wings*, 565)

For as Kate knows, and as Densher himself had already had occasion to reflect, pearls are precisely what he cannot give to Kate. (He is, within the terms in which he and Kate and Milly live, effectively emasculated.) This leads directly to Kate's explicit request, one to which she has been leading Densher, the narrator has been leading the reader, since Milly's arrival in London—that Densher make love to the dying girl.

Densher's tacit agreement to this plan—he stays in Venice after the departure of Kate and Mrs. Lowder, although only after having gotten Kate to come to him in his rooms in exchange for his promise to stay with Milly—leads, if not to Milly's death, which may perhaps have been inevitable, certainly to her dying with her face turned away from rather than toward life. (This is all just as tawdry, just as ugly, as it sounds. James, unlike many of his readers, does not look away.) Milly's power remains, however, even after death, in the form of her memory and of her wealth. "I used to call her, in my stupidity," Kate says, "for want of anything better—a dove. Well she stretched out her wings, and it was to *that* they reached. They cover us" (689).

Milly's wings cover Kate Croy and Merton Densher and in doing so destroy them, or at the least destroy them as a pair, as a heterosexual couple who might live and thrive and reproduce together. Milly leaves Merton her money, but he won't accept it. He will hand it over to Kate, but she can only accept it by giving him up.

“You lose me?” He showed, though naming it frankly, a sort of awe of her high grasp. “Well, you lose nothing else. I make over to you every penny.”

Prompt was his own clearness, but she had no smile this time to spare. “Precisely—so that I must choose.”

“You must choose.” (*Wings*, 689)

Kate insists that she will choose Merton, but only if he can promise that he is not in love—not with Milly, but with her memory. “Oh—her memory!” Despite that, he claims, “I’ll marry you, mind you, in an hour.”

“As we were?”

“As we were.”

But she turned to the door, and her headshake was now the end. “We shall never be again as we were.” (*Wings*, 689)

Just as Seraphita has forever changed Minna and Wilfrid, turning them to each other and to God and so to the birth of a new Seraphita in and through their now entirely spiritual union, so Milly has forever changed Kate and Densher. But Milly, wittingly or not, turns Kate and Merton away from each other and away from all but her memory (with which Densher will live) and her money (with which, perhaps, Kate will).

I suggested earlier that in *The Wings of the Dove* we see James wrestling with his father’s legacy. I also join a host of readers in seeing in the outlines of the novel, particularly in the figure of Milly Theale, James’s cousin, Mary “Minnie” Temple, who died in 1870 at the age of 24. (Minnie died of tuberculosis, the unnamed but most frequently guessed cause of Milly’s death—although who is to say how a fictional character dies? It is hard, I should add, not to wonder if Balzac’s Minna did not echo, for James, Minny’s name.) James was in Europe when Minny died, and his anguished letters home demonstrate the intensity of his grief and of his guilt; he was able to leave, to escape parental and familial expectations, to go to Europe, and so to live, in a way that Minny was not. She became almost immediately, and for the forty-six remaining years of James’s life, the site of his sacred devotion. The novel itself is a memorializing object, a place wherein James’s memory of Minny—and of other losses that congeal around her figure—might be rendered concrete, manifest, in some way sharable.

There is much more to be said about James’s mourning and his devotion to Minny Temple, and the complex role it plays across the span of his career. But for now, I want to think about her in relationship to Henry James Sr., who didn’t care for Minny Temple, nor did she care for him. Minny Temple couldn’t marry, because she was sick, but she also did not want to marry, at least not within the terms available to her, those that were undertaken by her two sisters, like herself, orphaned young and left to the good graces of aunts and uncles and cousins like the Jameses. (When the second of her

sisters married a much older, wealthy man, the brother of her eldest sister's husband, Minny wrote of her disgust at the union. "I am aware that if all women felt the eternal significance of matrimony to the extent that I do, that hardly any of them would get married at all, & the human race would come to stand-still."¹¹

Henry Sr., the paternal authority within the James family, after flirting with Fourierist notions of multiple forms of sexual relationships, followed by an intense period of controversy in which accusations that he was a supporter of "free love" were rampant in the American press, came down on the side of conservative patriarchal conceptions of marriage, tinged by his oddly Calvinist form of Swedenborgianism. For Henry Sr., men were filthy and carnal and only the spiritual grace of women—a partner chosen for life—could save them. (The fate of women seemed of considerably less interest to him.)

Minnie Temple, something of whose character we can only glimpse from the thirty letters of hers known to remain and from those things said about her by her friends and family, was neither a believing Christian of any recognizable sort nor a calming, spiritual presence. (Here the gap between Milly Theale and Minny Temple becomes most evident. Little of Minny's spirit is vocalized by Milly, although the impossibility of a woman possessing such spirit is central to the plot.) As Minny writes to her friend John Chipman Grey, with whom she tries to sort out what she thinks about life and death and God as her own illness progresses, "I have nobody to speak to about serious things. If by chance I say anything or ask a question that lies near my heart, Kitty & Elly both tell me that I am 'queer' & that 'they wouldn't be me for anything,'" which is no doubt sensible on their part, but which puts an end to anything but conversation of the most superficial kind on my part" (*Notes*, 501–2). In another letter, later, closer to her death, she makes an excuse for her weary tone:

Can you understand the weariness of thinking about one thing all the time, so that when you wake up in the morning, consciousness comes back with a sigh of—"Oh yes, here it is again—another day of doubting & worrying, hoping & yearning has begun"—and if you don't sleep at all, which is too frequently the case with me, the strain is a "leettle" bit too hard, & I am sometimes tempted to take a little "pison" to put me to sleep in earnest. (*Notes*, 519)

Minnie, without a personal fortune and without illusions about her possibilities for life, struggles not to die before her time. She tries, despite dire temptation, not to turn her face to the wall. Religious conversion—belief in the Christian promise—tempts her. She has a brief moment in which she thinks that her Uncle Henry was right, feeling peace and repose in the idea of giving herself over to God. But, as she explains to Gray,

The momentary vision of Redemption from thinking and striving, of a happy Rest this side of Eternity, has vanished away again—I can't keep it—peaceful, desirable as it may be, the truth is that practically I don't believe it—It was such a sudden thing, such an entire change from anything that had ever come to my mind before, that it seemed almost like an inspiration, & I waited, almost expecting it to continue, to be permanent. But it didn't stay—and so back swings the universe to the old place—Paganism—natural Religion, or whatever you call the belief whose watchword is “God and our own Soul”—And who shall say there is no comfort in it—One at least feels that here one breathes one's native air—welcome back the old *human* feeling, with its beautiful pride, and its striving—its despair, its mystery and its faith.¹² (*Notes*, 519)

In 1902, Henry James had yet to see these letters, which came into his possession after the death of William, when he was preparing what were meant to be memorial volumes about William's life. (These volumes turn out, of course, to be about Henry.) But James knew his cousin; he knew and shared her “Paganism.” At the same time, he was stricken by a seemingly ineradicable guilt—for having survived, for having gotten away, for having escaped the heteronormative coupling to which his father would have consigned them both.

Many criticize James for not having been able to imagine a future life for Minny Temple (or for his sister, Alice, or his friend, Constance Fennimore Woolson). But he did memorialize their struggles—and his own; their struggle to live within the terms set for them, not just by Henry Sr., but by the larger societal forces represented by his views. The conjoining of great wealth and great spirit—bringing together the masculine and the feminine, within Henry Sr.'s terms—is not enough, or perhaps simply not possible in that old human world in which they then lived.

For Minny Temple insists, in a way that I think her cousin Henry follows, that what is of value lies in the body, where one can breathe “one's native air—welcome back the old *human* feeling, with its beautiful pride, and its striving—its despair, its mystery and its faith.” I said I think Henry follows and yet, toward the end of that same letter to Gray, Minny writes: “I had a long letter yesterday from Harry James, from Florence—Enjoying Italy, but homesick.” Most pointedly in *Portrait of a Lady*, *The Wings of the Dove*, and *Notes of a Son and Brother* (one of the two memoirs putatively about William), Henry writes about Minny Temple, her life and her death and her memory; he tries, over and over again, to bring Minny to Europe and to take himself home. He and Alice always laughed at their elder brother William's interest in spiritualism—séances and manifestations, ectoplasm and spirit writing and the medium Mrs. Piper. Yet in the end, Alice welcomed death, and Henry, in order to live, pursued his own ghosts, endlessly enshrining them within the intricacies of his prose, trying to bring the past into the present.

Henry Adams, who had been friends with William and Henry James, with Minny Temple and John Chipman Gray and Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr., when they were all young together, spending summers in Newport, insists on the impossibility of the task Henry James sets himself. The past is irrevocably lost; it isn't real and it wasn't real, not in the way James remembers. Responding to *Notes of a Son and Brother* (1914), in a letter to his close friend Elizabeth Cameron, Adams writes,

I've read Henry James' last bundle of memories which have reduced me to a dreary pulp. Why did we live? Was that all? Why was I not born in Central Africa and died young. Poor Henry James thinks it all real, I believe, and actually still lives in that dreamy, stuffy Newport and Cambridge, with papa James and Charles Norton—and me! Yet, why! It is a terrible dream, but not so weird as this here which is quite loony. Never mind!¹³

Adams and James tended to disagree about their shared past, but in this instance, James's response marks a present concern for Adams more than a desire to be right.

James had presumably received an outpouring from Adams not unlike the one Adams wrote to Cameron. On March 21, 1914, writing from Cheyne Walk, James remonstrates with his “dear Henry”:

I have your melancholy outpouring of the 7th, & I know not how to acknowledge it than by the full recognition of its unmitigated blackness. *Of course* we are lone survivors, of course the past that was our lives is at the bottom of an abyss—if the abyss *has* any bottom; of course too there's no use talking unless one particularly *wants* to. But the purpose, almost, of my printed divagations was to show you that one *can*, strange to say, still want to—or at least can behave as if one did. Behold me therefore so behaving—& apparently capable of continuing to do so. I still find my consciousness interesting—under *cultivation* of the interest. Cultivate it *with* me, dear Henry—that's what I hoped to make you do; to cultivate yours for all that it has in common with mine. *Why* mine yields as interest I don't know that I can tell you, but I don't challenge or quarrel with it—I encourage it with a ghastly grin. You see I still, in presence of life (or of what you deny to be such,) have reactions—as many as possible—& the book I sent you is a proof of them. It's, I suppose, because I am that queer monster the artist, an obstinate finality, an inexhaustible sensibility. Hence the reactions—appearances, memories, many things go on playing upon it with consequences that I note & “enjoy” (grim word!) noting. It all takes doing—& I *do*. I believe I shall do yet again—it is still an act of life. But you perform them still yourself—& I don't know what keeps me from calling your letter a charming one! There we are, & it's a blessing that you understand—I admit indeed alone—your all-faithful

*Henry James*¹⁴

To live, for James, is to *do*, to cultivate interest in consciousness, in memory, and in the “presence of life.” James remains devoted, even in writing of his lost idols, to the “act of life”—“It all takes doing—& I *do*”—and he calls to

his friend, from across the abyss of their shared grief, to act with him. Devotion to the dead, to memory, to consciousness, is devotion to life: the past and the present, the living and the dead, *life* and *death*, for James, as he writes lovingly to his old friend, can never be disentangled.

Notes

1. Henry James, *The Wings of the Dove*, in *Novels, 1901–1902* (New York, 2006), 555. This is the text of the first edition of the novel, rather than the revised New York edition. All further references will be parenthetical within the text.
2. Honoré de Balzac, *Seraphita*, trans. Katharine Prescott Wormeley (Gloucestershire, UK, 2017), 74; also available through Project Gutenberg. Further references to this translation will be parenthetical within the text. Wormeley (1830–1904) was a major translator of Balzac and other French works. James would, of course, have read the novel in French. Among the most insightful analyses of James as a reader of Honoré de Balzac remains Peter Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama, and the Mode of Excess* (New Haven, 1995).
3. For James and Emanuel Swedenborg, particularly with regard to *The Ambassadors*, see Quentin Anderson, *The American Henry James* (New Brunswick, NJ, 1957); James W. Gargano, “*The Ambassadors and Louis Lambert*,” *Modern Language Notes* 75 (1960): 211–13; Hazel Hutchison, “The Other Lambert Strether: Henry James’s *The Ambassadors*, Balzac’s *Louis Lambert*, and J. H. Lambert,” *Nineteenth-Century Literature* 58, no. 2 (2003): 230–58; and Joan Richardson, *A Natural History of Pragmatism* (Cambridge, 2007), 137–78.
I can find no reading of *The Wings of the Dove* in relationship to the particular form of Swedenborgian angelology found within Balzac’s *Seraphita*. My reading remains indebted to the large body of scholarship on the novel in ways that I hope to articulate in a longer project. I am perhaps most closely in conversation with Sharon Cameron’s reading in *Thinking in Henry James* (Chicago, 1989), 122–68.
4. For an extended treatment of Henry James Sr., see Alfred Habegger, *The Father: A Life of Henry James, Sr.* (New York, 1994). For an earlier account of the deleterious effect of Henry Sr.’s views on his son, as well as a reading of Henry Jr. in relationship to the women novelists of the mid- and late nineteenth century, see Alfred Habegger, *Henry James and the “Woman Business”* (Cambridge, 1989).
5. Margaret Haywood, “Plagiarism and the Problem of Influence: Pauline Bernheim, ‘Balzac und Swedenborg,’” *Australian Journal of French Studies* 29, no. 1 (1992): 41. François-Jean Daillant de la Touche was himself suspect among Swedenborgians, apparently, because of his interest in animal magnetism and mesmerism, an interest Balzac shared. See also Margaret Haywood, “The Myth of Balzac’s Mysticism: His Father’s Mesmerist Ideals,” *History of European Ideas* 27 (2001): 273–87; Pauline Bernheim, *Balzac und Swedenborg* (Berlin, 1914); and Lynn R. Wilkinson, *The Dream of an Absolute Language: Emanuel Swedenborg and French Literary Culture* (Albany, 1996).
6. In both the title of the book and by the majority of the, admittedly male, characters, the angel is seen as female. The sexual and gender dynamics of

- Seraphita*, of *The Wings of the Dove*, and of the interplay between them requires more elaboration than I can provide here.
7. Henry James, "Prefaces to the New York Edition," in *Literary Criticism*, vol. 2, *French Writers, Other European Writers, The Prefaces to the New York Edition* (New York, 1984), 1287. Further references will be parenthetical within the text.
 8. On the crudity of the plot, see Leo Bersani, *A Future for Astyanax: Character and Desire in Literature* (London, 1978), 142 (he calls it "inferior" and "corny"); and Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious* (Ithaca, 1981), 222–24. For a reading with and against Jameson, see Constance Wilmarth, "Framing the Subject: Jameson's James and *The Wings of the Dove*," *Henry James Review* 36, no. 3 (2016): 241–48.
 9. We see this plunge taken in James's early novel, *Roderick Hudson*.
 10. In *Seraphita*, the narrator explicitly writes that pearls and other jewels dragged from the bowels of the earth are fitting only for material beings, not for spiritual angels like Seraphita.
 11. Henry James, "*Notes of a Son and Brother*" and "*The Middle Years: A Critical Edition*," ed. Peter Collister (Charlottesville, 2011), 500. Further references will be parenthetical within the text. Collister provides Minny Temple's letters in his critical edition of James's autobiographical writing. James himself cites Minny Temple at length in the closing pages of *Notes of a Son and Brother*, yet expurgated and edited the letters extensively, then destroyed the originals. Fortunately, Alice James, wife of William, to whom John Chipman Gray had entrusted the letters, made copies before sending the originals to Henry in England. These transcriptions are now at the Houghton Library at Harvard University.
 12. James changes this passage considerably in *Notes of a Son and Brother*.
 13. George Monteiro, ed., *The Correspondence of Henry James and Henry Adams, 1877–1914* (Baton Rouge, 1992), 89n2. After Adams suffered a stroke in 1912, he often writes of "this queer mad world."
 14. *Ibid.*, 88–89.