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HENRY JAMES AND DISEASE

A GREAT DEAL has been written about the psychological studies in James' novels. His various Americans and Europeans have been subjected to close scrutiny, the intricacies of their motives being examined along with the complexities of their assorted virtues and villainies. James has been accused of creating such complexities to the exclusion of flesh and blood. A familiar complaint is that his characters are almost disembodied—that they *do* very little, that one cannot imagine their living in a world of sweat, hunger, crude lust, and frequent pain.

There has been almost no study of the part played in his novels by sheer physiology, a part more extensive than has generally been realized. James was, after all, a physical man, not a nebulous genius, and in his work he does recognize the great importance of the physical. His own life, like everyone's, was certainly conditioned by specific physiological events. Perhaps the conditioning began as far back as his father's boyhood when Henry James, Sr., lost his leg helping to put out a hay-barn fire. And then, curiously, came his own "horrid even if . . . obscure hurt", suffered under similar conditions—helping to stop a fire in the country.

Much Freudian speculation has been made about the nature of this "obscure hurt" which seems to have affected James at intervals for the rest of his life. It is pretty clear now that what actually happened was an injury to the sacrum, a sacroiliac strain so severe that it virtually incapacitated the young man for a time, gave him the status of an invalid, and, because he was exceedingly sensitive and prone to quiet brooding, resulted in his feeling more than ever that he was outside the common stream of humanity. As a child he had known that sense of being apart, of looking on at the world. Now he was more than ever removed. The country was just then at the beginning of the Civil War; his two younger brothers and many friends were going off to fight, while he lay on a sofa, unfit. And yet, on another level he felt an odd kinship with the soldiers, for was he not also "engaged in the common fact of endurance"? And could he not now enter into life by means of

his art, which would examine this universal "fact", which would explain it?¹ Young Henry James, for perhaps the first—but by no means the last—time discovered that physical accidents, however gross and uncomfortable, can be turned into the stuff of art, can serve a purpose hidden from the casual eye.²

It is true that all his life the too, too solid flesh was with him, as well as over-active nerves which developed certain hypochondriacal tendencies. He was never in any danger of being made unaware of the importance of illness in the carrying on of life, in the solving of human problems, or in the failure to solve them.

From the time of his youth there were many illnesses in his family, and deaths that affected him deeply. One brother came home from the war so frightfully wounded that he could not be carried upstairs for a long period of time; he was cared for on a bed in the front hall. When the mother died of a heart attack she left the world gently, as she had always lived, but she left her family a sense of great loss and emptiness. Her husband lived less than a year after her; his death, his children realized, came about from the simple loss of any desire to live without his Mary. After a "series of swoons" he took to his bed and waited for the end. He was not gloomy, and there was nothing of the sickroom about him; he enjoyed visitors, talking to them with no apparent effort. But he steadfastly refused food; nothing could induce him to eat. As one relative said, he just "*yearned*" to die. Nine years later, after a number of illnesses, Alice, the only James daughter, brilliant and affectionate, died with the terrible suffering of cancer.

But perhaps the sickness and death felt most keenly of all by the young writer were those of his lovely, lively cousin Mary (Minny) Temple. Much has been written about Henry James' relationship to this attractive girl who was the natural heroine of a large group of cousins and friends. Some of her letters, sprightly, gay, restless, have been printed, and it is certain that they reveal strong affection for him, if nothing else. James himself wrote afterward that he had not been in love with her, but it is evident that his feeling for her was very tender. It was mixed with pity, for Minny was so vital, she desired life with such urgency, she was so awake to the world about her, that mortal illness seemed a cruel enemy. Moreover, she remained for him a symbol of "Youth", he says, "with which, owing to my invalidism, I always felt in rather indirect relation."

Her death, he wrote feelingly to his brother, in some strange way enshrined her. She would live always in his memory as she was at her height of living. We know this turned out to be true; we know that the figure of Minny Temple lived on in the back of his mind, lending some of her characteristics to some of the un-

forgettable women in his fiction, never wholly realized, however, until he began musing over the plot for *The Wings of the Dove*.

An artist who had known so much illness and death so intimately could not ignore them or gloss them over in his work. And Henry James does not. Though he seems extremely diffident when it comes to naming an ailment (few writers at the turn of the century were inclined to be clinical), in several of his stories illness plays an important part. An especially notable case is that of Ralph Touchett's tuberculosis in *The Portrait of a Lady*, because of which he is prevented from making love to Isabel Archer. The short stories "The Middle Years" and "Glasses" both use physical weakness as a part of their plots. In the first an artist discovers during his last illness that frustration is what life is—the element that perishes while other things remain. In the second a young woman's going blind is the means of her making a truly happy marriage. (Nor must we forget what the invalidism of Rosy Muniment adds to *The Princess Casamassima*.) And, as everyone is aware, one of his most successful novels is based on the fatal disease of one character. *The Wings of the Dove* reveals what James had evolved in his thinking concerning illness and death.

It was a novel that was a long time in the making: eight years elapsed between his first thoughts concerning the plot and the actual writing of the long, complicated story. Later, when he prepared it for inclusion in the New York Edition, he wrote a preface in which he says that he can hardly recall a time when Milly Theale's situation had not been with him as a theme for fiction. Why he delayed in forming it into a long novel may be guessed: it was a situation so close to him personally, so surrounded by associations and implications—and, yes, deep grief—that he experienced almost a reluctance to handle it. For it has been pointed out over and over that Milly, in her bright charm, her loveliness, her excited longing after life, is simply Minny Temple, the girl whose life and death had made so strong an impression on his youthful life. It was true of Minny, as he says of Milly, that "her stricken state was but half her case, the correlative half being the state of others as affected by her."

There was another difficulty to the development of such a plot: intrinsically, a story centred upon an invalid, a woman with a terminal disease, would not be easy to write. James does not go into the reasons for this, but any student of literature, popular and otherwise, can supply them. The sticky slough of sentimentality lies in wait for anyone who writes of the infirm; examples of this abound, and by his very nature James would want to keep himself fastidiously away from it. Or there

is the untidy realm of the peckishly sensational, beloved by certain readers with avid eyes and twitching noses. With this he could have absolutely nothing to do.

As he talked the plot over with himself (a habit of his), he recalled that Ralph Touchett's illness had been anything but a drawback in the writing of *The Portrait of a Lady*. On the contrary, he felt that it had contributed to the clarity of the whole, and to the ease. Further, the fact that Ralph was a man could have made his disease no simpler to handle, for men, James is sure, "suffer on the whole more overtly and more grossly than women, and resist with a ruder, an inferior strategy."

Armed with this self-encouragement he began to plan *The Wings of the Dove*, and then to write it—a long, complex story of very human greed, lust, love, and transcendent magnanimity, all on a foundation of the physical predicament. It is not necessary here to dilate on the characters of Kate Croy, Merton Densher, and Milly Theale. Each is sufficiently rich and interesting to warrant a study to itself. Kate is almost the stock figure of the very clever woman made ruthless by frustration, and her lover is the sort usually attracted to such a woman—agreeable, intelligent, quiet, and almost always passive. In a wonderful Jamesian way these two are saved from being types, of course; they are completely individual, and no reader can take his eyes from them. But it is the arrival of Milly, rich and innocent and very sick, who renders them and their situation both complicated and exciting. Lovely, even striking in appearance, with a delicate charm, she seems to captivate everyone she meets. Like her counterpart Minny Temple, she is quite involuntarily the heroine of every circle in which she finds herself. More, there is something in her situation that inspires pity. Even her enormous wealth is not enough to cancel out the facts of her orphaned state and ruined health.

The nature of Milly Theale's malady is a matter of speculation.¹ In his *Notebooks* James thinks of the girl as stricken with "consumption, heart-disease, or whatever", but nowhere in the novel is her sickness specifically named. Her first interview with the great Sir Luke gives her little information; beyond taking a certain medicine he prescribes, she is to do nothing except enjoy herself to the fullest extent. But she has a shrewd sense of coming disaster. After all, she reasons to herself, one wasn't treated as if it were in one's power to live unless there was danger of dying! From her very first talk with the doctor comes her conviction of grave danger. Her disease is not what she had thought it might be, but something is wrong.

Not only the reader but also the people about the girl are kept in the dark, though all can see that she is not well. On several occasions she must be absent from a dinner-party, or appear late, or cancel a sight-seeing trip. Merton Densher wonders

if she is really as sick as she appears. Kate, discussing it with him, says she is sure it is not consumption; it is some other very grave sickness, but just what she does not know—Milly has such a "ferocity of modesty" about it. This leads the reader to speculate upon the possibility of its being cancer. After all, even today we are not too far from the time when the very name was whispered, as if some stigma adhered to it.

But this much is certain: there is about Milly no odour of drugs (as about Henry James, Sr., there was so little of the sickroom). There is just a gradual lessening of activity, a greater number of hours devoted to rest. There is the physician's watchfulness, but apparently no professional nursing. Death comes gradually.

Though it would have come soon in any event, it is James' intention to show that it is stayed a little by the love Milly bears Densher, and the belief that her love is reciprocated. When knowledge of treachery is brought to her she, in Mrs. Stringham's picturesque phrase, turns "her face to the wall." In other words, the will to fight off death has gone.

And here it is not difficult to see James' remembrance of his father who simply gave up living. The word "psychosomatic" was not in use at the time the novel was written, but it comes to mind. For Sir Luke had told Milly to live, to live all she could, to have a good time. Yes, she is to keep in touch with him, but she is above all things to be *happy*.

It is not for nothing that Sir Luke Strett is the most eminent physician in England. He has, ahead of his time, come to the conclusion that even the most serious illness may be slowed or halted (if not cured) by an abundance of satisfactory *living*. His patient has been through some shattering experiences in her few years: she has seen all her family swept away, found herself alone with no one to guide her. In addition she is oddly immature, unawakened. If she could know the fulfilment of love and the richness of many friendships, might her case not be alleviated at least a little? He is anxious that something of the sort be attempted, even though he knows her to be doomed.

Here, incidentally, is one of the finest portraits of a doctor in all literature. Though very little is told us of his actual appearance, we have no trouble visualizing him with his high, broad bishop's face. We know he is large and usually very quiet; we are sure his voice is deep and slow and resonant, his words few and careful. As for his eyes—is there anything that they cannot see? Milly, sitting before him, has a sense of being examined, probed, appraised, as never before. And because of that

searching examination and the answers to certain pointed questions, he evolves his unique treatment.

His theory is, of course, borne out in the story. Death comes to Milly when the fulfilment of life falls short. And yet, as Kate says, she really has had her happiness: she has loved deeply. The depth of her love for Densher is shown by her last act of supreme forgiveness. In her extremity any temptation to pettiness is not tolerated: she rises, this dove, far above the cold cruelty of her friends. In their last, terrible interview, Kate and Densher together acknowledge it: she has unfurled her wings. "‘They cover us.’"

Poe's theory that the death of a beautiful woman is the most poetic theme imaginable seems clap-trap beside the mortal sickness of Milly Theale. For that sickness, and the death that ensues, have certain impressive effects on her as well as on those about her. One result is to cause her to feel herself, as she never has before, a part of all mankind. It is strikingly reminiscent of the effect of his invalidism on the young James. We see how it comes to Milly: after her second searching interview with Sir Luke, she walks about London until, very tired, she comes to Regent's Park. There she observes those about her in various negligent attitudes of play and fatigue. A sense of kinship comes over her: "their great common anxiety, what was it, in this grim breathing space, but the practical question of life?" Her abrupt sense of having a part in this "common anxiety" makes her want to stay there, to sit on a bench in the midst of the others. As her creator did, Milly gains in maturity by reason of physical disability.

More importantly, James has shown here how disease can be the means of cleansing for its victim, of retribution for those who have betrayed her. Milly Theale, by means of her illness, is seemingly purged of any flaw of weakness or resentment; on the brink of death she absolves Kate and Densher. As for them, though they gain the prize for which they have worked (that long, legal-appearing envelope from New York!), it seems to dissolve. For something precious between them is gone forever, and they are left with shadows, ghosts of memories which can never be dislodged.

James has moved forward from the time of Minny's passing, has come to a full realization of the potentiality of sickness and death, their power to purify and clarify—agents of Aristotle's catharsis. *The Wings of the Dove* is almost a tragedy in the classic sense, none the less poignant that its protagonists live in a Victorian world that shudders at the names of disaster.

NOTES

1. See F. W. Dupee's discussion of this point in *Henry James* (New York: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1956), pp. 41-42.
2. If it is accurate, the story of the first stroke presaging his own death is both impressive and in keeping. He is said to have related that as he sank to the floor he heard a voice exclaim, "So here it is at last, the distinguished thing!"

THE ARIZONA MEMORIAL

Sanford Sternlicht

They have built a ship's bridge atop your tomb
but it is no bridge of sighs.
You, whose salt-laundered bones long since
have revolted one from another,
cannot see the repellent boarders—

Old schoolmarms pricked by the presence
of the long out-lived death of their first progeny—
College girls slight-bosomed with shorts taut
over thick thighs and tittering,
slyly scouted by boot cruisers who but
for a Sunday morning massacre might have been
the sons of your dissolved flesh and your diluted blood—
Shutterbugs shooting with new Cannons, Yashikas and Contafflexes,
happy to be safe in the wash of history—

But one could do worse than man battle stations
to Armageddon when even the old *Arizona*
may sound from the sea like a wounded whale.
And as for me—my sea-garland for you
on the ship's shadow has only a simple saying:
Why, in a hundred years
shall we not all be the same age?