

FOOTNOTING HENRY JAMES'S
THE WINGS OF THE DOVE

The Wings of the Dove is the classic example of a text read and interpreted in countless articles, essays, book chapters. This of course happens to every masterpiece, and is to a degree increasingly multiplied by the institutionalization of literary criticism not only in academia, but also in the media and internet blogs. Yet because of so many readings and re-readings, a text like this Jamesian masterpiece invites the reader to go further, deeper or try an idiosyncratic approach to it. Footnoting it for example.

As Antony Grafton has written in his passionate defense of the footnote,¹ beyond academic validation or controversial reading, the footnote stands for the very paradoxes of literary criticism: it is both marginal and authoritative, and opens up a space for further readings, for residual interpretations, even idiosyncratic or transgressive ones.

Furthermore curiosity claims its part in the pleasure of reading and, as Dorrit Cohn playfully wrote, this is a pleasure fostered by a kind of sublimation of the forbidden wish to know what happens in real life behind the closed doors of our neighbors, or an instance of the close relationship between literature and the reader's life.²

When Vladimir Nabokov translated Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin*, he found it necessary to add 900 pages of notes to the 300 pages of text, and he recorded an infinite number of sources, interpretations and fascinating associations elicited by details in Pushkin's work: "In art and science there is no delight without the detail,"³ he wrote. Footnoting the detail of a text was for him a way to show both the unlimited possibilities of interpretation and the limited scope of each of them.

Footnoting a text moreover may be the practice that most acknowledges the pleasure to be found in the textual resistance to interpretation.

“The enjoyment of a work of art,” James wrote in the Preface to *The Wings of the Dove*, is a “luxury,” “delightfully, divinely great, when we feel the surface, like the thick ice of the skater’s pond, bear without cracking the stronger pressure we throw on it.”⁴ As it happens, an eager young reader, Ford Madox Hueffer, having “perused” *The Wings of the Dove*, found that he had more questions than answers, and wrote directly to the author for enlightenment. This is what Henry James answered:

Nothing [...] is ever more interesting to me than the consideration, with those who care and see, or want to, of these bottomless questions of How and Why and Whence and What – in connection with the mystery of one’s craft. But they take one far, and, after all, it is doing it that best meets and answers them.⁵

The “doings” of a reader are endlessly entangled in questions of *How, and Why, and Whence, and What*, the more so when, as in the case of a novel by James, what James called the “attention of perusal” is prescribed by a text whose implied reader is emphatically fashioned as a scrutinizer often lost in ambiguities and multiplicities of meaning. As James tells Madox Hueffer, there is no source that definitively authorizes interpretation, still critical practice never gives up the hope to find a meaningful “contact” with the text.

Is footnoting then a way to signal a reading-in-progress, the attempt at approaching a distant and elusive literary text?

James, and other Victorians, called “telescoping” their attempt to approach a distant and elusive reality. Is footnoting a reader’s practice of telescoping, to make what is distant appear nearer? Nabokov would have answered positively and added that giving voice to perceptions and associations, to the play of individual reactions, minding the detail that the general view may overlook also means to invite the reader to go further, beyond the text itself, to look back, and forward, to read again and make the intellectual pursuit worthwhile, even if stability of meaning cannot be reached.

1. *Wings, doves*

My first footnote, concerns the novel’s title and its components, the wings and the dove. Notwithstanding its “pretty” or “prettyish”

title, as James defined it, *The Wings of the Dove* has justly been read as a haunting melodrama by Peter Brooks,⁶ since it is a death-and-life story which develops around the impending extinction of Milly, an immensely rich, sensitive, and mysteriously sick, American girl who fails to live, and falls, because of what appears a tremendous plot waged against her by the man she loves, Merton Densher, and the woman he loves, Kate Croy, who is also her dear friend. The novel appears to sum up James's lifelong fascination with "crimes" and the "fine" distinctions to be drawn in people's personal involvement in them. It embodies as well the reflections of an odd moralist on the effects of things illicit, divided as he is between an American hope for righteous salvation and a modern imagination of disaster, of a biblical "angry tempest" befitting his time and place.

The sensational subject had haunted James's imagination for quite a time, almost ten years earlier in November 1894 he had recorded a detailed plot line in his notebook, and a year and a month later gave it a provisional title, "La Mourante." The first title has nothing to do with wings and doves, it suggests instead the coming of death in French and in the feminine, a literary echo perhaps of a novel he had read many years before, Edmond About's *Germaine* (1858), the melodramatic story of a dying young girl, chosen as a wife for the advantages her death would bring to an illicit and scheming couple. *Germaine* is set in Corfu and James also recorded in his notebook as possible settings for his new novel "Nice – or Mentone – or Cairo – or Corfu [...]"

No mention of Venice. But of course Venice and death are strictly allied, and in the canon of western literature Venice represents the perfect gothic setting with its unspeakable crimes; yet, at the same time, its beauty suggests an active nostalgia for living, for an unattainable future of the past. "La Mourante" and Venice may lead to Constance Fenimore Woolson whose death in Venice may appear as both a tragic repetition and a commentary on all romantic literary demises. James's 1894 note may be associated to *Mentone, Cairo, Corfu*, the title of a posthumous book by Constance Fenimore Woolson. "I can't think of Venice for the present," James had written to John Hay on January 28, 1894, four days after Woolson had committed suicide, jumping at one a.m. from a window of Casa

Semitecolo, the small palace on the Grand Canal where she lived. The nature of the relationship between James and Woolson has been the subject of much biographical and fictional speculation. According to Lyndall Gordon, Fenimore's death revived in James an ancient grief and an ancient sense of guilt, due perhaps to a syndrome of withdrawal, of shunned responsibilities. Guilt might have stung more than ever because of his having "predated" on Woolson and her work as a "resource" for his insatiable appetite for "life" and art.⁷ We know that James never fully admitted that Woolson committed suicide, in the gossip circles of the Venetian expatriates, however, nobody apparently doubted it. Lady Layard, for example, who had visited ailing Woolson just 10 days before her death, received the news in Naples, and on January 28 wrote in her diary:

I received a letter today from Ola [Ola Du Cane] [...] She tells me of the tragic end of Miss Fennimore Woolson at Venice. How she has committed suicide by throwing herself out of her bedroom window in the street. Cini [Venetian doctor] was attending her & she had Miss Holas to stay with her by day & a nun by night. One night at 12 she asked for milk. The nun offered it her in a glass. She said she wished for it in another glass in wh she had flowers in the next room – the nun went to fetch it & on her return the patient was gone, the window open – & the poor thing was found in the street with broken spine & thigh & died in an hour. She had asked Cini to give her a narcotic that mornig & to inject morphine in the afternoon both of wh he had refused to do. When I saw [her] last week she had told me that she had occasion to remake her will & had told Cini that he must not let her die till she had done so or else she wd "haunt him haunt him by day & by night." I told her to make her will in her own hand & sign it without witnesses & that wd hold good in Italian law. She said "I will do so at once" – but Ola writes word that she made no will at all – poor thing.⁸

James did not find the strength to attend her funeral, in April 1894, however, he went to Venice, offering his help for sorting her papers and personal belongings. Nobody knows what happened in the days James spent in Constance Woolson's apartment in Venice. It took him five weeks to dispose of her things and apparently he conscientiously carried out his task, according to witnesses such as Claire Benedict, Woolson's younger sister, or mutual friends such as Zina Hulton or Mercede Huntington. The pain and regret, he had felt in January - when from London he wrote of "this nearness of emotion," experienced at the loss of a woman "with whom I was

extremely intimate” – might have deepened into what James himself would call a “crisis.”

James’s “crisis” at Woolson’s death might have been triggered by a short circuit in the neat continuity between life and art: his personal emotional life apparently would not be properly reined in, an obscure passionate malaise would resist composure. This is the time in his life when young boys start appearing as beloved correspondents, and doubts about his nature and desires are played out in the game of surfacing and repressing of his homoeroticism.

Woolson’s death, guilt, and the choice of Venice may have inspired Merton Densher’s thought at a crucial passage in the novel, when, exposed as a confidence man and a traitor to Milly, the American girl, he faces her honest *confidante*, Mrs Stringham, in a pang of emotion, anguish and shame:

For honesty too - that is for his own words - he had quickly colored: he was sinking so, at a stroke, the burden of his discourse with Kate. His visitor, for the minute, while their eyes met, might have been watching him hold it down. And he had to hold it down - the effort of which, precisely, made him red. He couldn’t let it come up; at least not yet. She might make what she would of it. (*Wings*, vol. 2, p. 282)

Blushing, is the consequence of the effort to hold down a certain “discourse:” Densher sinks, and holds down, “the burden of his discourse with Kate”, his secret fiancée, or the truth of his sharing in a predatory scheme, aiming to exchange Milly’s dream of love with her money, through the agency of which, after the American girl’s death, the scheming couple could “rightfully” marry. His coloring - blushing is one of his recurrent traits - is the telltale sign of the breach to honesty, the awareness of guilt, burning with the almost compulsive necessity to sink and conceal it for ever. “Seen” in the active effort to “hold it down,” Densher swerves, if only metaphorically, from what he believes is his moral compromise between awareness and denial, or his choice of passivity: not to move, not to act, to keep “quiet,” and “silent,” while letting things happen, or letting others devise action and set it to purpose.

As Mrs Huntington, among others, reports, with a similar effort Henry James tried to hold down the “horrible balloons” of

Woolson's black dresses he was resolved to sink in the lagoon. Here is the "strange story" James told in Florence, soon after he left Venice, and Fenimore's "things," behind:

Some very famous person died in Venice and left him executeur administraire [...] in her will she left that he had to bring all her belongings out in a gondola and throw them in the water, in the laguna, and he made a frightfully funny story, I thought, of it because he said he took all these things out into the laguna and there were lots of clothes, a lot of her black dresses, so he threw them in the water and they came up like balloons all round him, and the more he tried to throw them down , they got all this air, the more they came up and he was surrounded by these horrible balloons [...] he kept on saying he [...] tried to beat these horrible black things down and up they came again and he was surrounded by them [...]

To add a further haunting note, Milly Theale's desire in Venice is to "float on and on" on its waters: "Ah, not to go down - never, never to go down!" she strenuously hopes, all dressed in black and encaged in the "great gilded shell" of her Venetian palace. "I float; and float; and float." Woolson had written from Venice in 1889 to Dr. Baldwin, whose friendly offices were bestowed equally on herself and on Henry James.

Sinking and floating are constant metaphors in *The Wings of the Dove*, a novel reflecting the "whirlpool movement of the waters produced by the sinking of a big vessel or the failure of a great business." And as Henry James wrote in the Preface to the novel:

[...] our young friend's existence would create rather, all round her, very much that whirlpool movement of the waters produced by the sinking of a big vessel or the failure of a great business; when we figure to ourselves the strong narrowing eddies, the immense force of suction, the general engulfment that, for any neighbouring object, makes immersion inevitable. (*Wings*, vol. 1, p. ix)

In Milly's tragic progression the "whirlpool movement" is eminently rendered: Art does justice to life as James had written in his *Art of Fiction* (1884), it even "makes {his own} life."

The Venice of death, crime and guilt, the city of water is symbolically represented by her doves, an apparently weird choice. It may be a coincidence but in Woolson's diary, among the last entries, there are these annotations: "The water of a pearl and dove colour." The associ-

ation between Venice and her doves however was very common among nineteenth century writers and visitors to the city. For example Horatio Brown, a well-known British expatriate in Venice wrote in his extremely popular book of 1884, *Life on the Lagoons*:

There is a certain fitness that the dove should be the sacred bird of the sea city. Both English “dove” and Latin Columba mean the diver; and the dove uses the air much as the fish uses the sea. It glides, it dives, it shoots though its airy ocean; it hovers against the breeze, or presses its breast against the scirocco storm, as you may see fish poised in their course against the stream; then with a sudden turn it relaxes the strain and sweeps away down the wind. The dove is an airy emblem of the sea which Venice and the Venetians live. But more than that; the most permanent quality in the colour of the lagoons, where the lights are always shifting, is the dove-tone of sea and sky; a tone which holds all colours in solution, and out of which they emerge as the water ripples or the cloud flakes pass; just as the colours are shot and varied on a young dove’s neck.¹⁰

For Brown doves shoot through the airy ocean and the second title James gave to his novel was: *The Flight of the Dove*.

In 1894, the year of Woolson’s death, Horatio Brown had published two volumes of excerpts of letters and diary entries of John Addington Symonds who had recently died in Rome and who had been Woolson’s neighbour in Venice. On Dec. 27 1894, only a month after he had recorded the plot of his future novel, James wrote to Edmund Gosse:

“I have been reading with the liveliest – and almost painful – interest the two volumes on the extraordinary Symonds. They gave me an extraordinary impression of his ‘gifts’ – yet I don’t know what keeps them from being tragic.”¹¹ One of Symonds’s diary entries in particular might have stayed with James. It reads: “a great storm will come over us... tomorrow they open the cathedral. ‘o for the wings of a dove.”¹²

Any reader would have recognized Symonds’ reference to “Hear my Prayer” an 1844 soprano solo anthem by Felix Mendelssohn, enormously popular among Victorians. The text is taken from Psalm 55:

My Heart is sore pained within me: and the terrors of death are fallen upon me. Fearfulness and trembling are come upon me, and horror hath overwhelmed me. And I said, Oh that I had wings like a dove! [for then] wuld I fly away, and be at rest. Lo [then} would I wander far off, [and] remain in the wilderness. Selah.
I would hasten my escape from the windy storm [and] tempest.

And here is the text of Mendelssohn's anthem:

Oh for the wings, for the wings of a dove
Far away, far away would I rove
Oh for the wings, for the wings of a dove
Far away, Far away, Far away, Far away would I rove
In the wilderness build me a nest
And remain there forever at rest
In the wilderness build me, build me a nest
And remain there forever at rest
In the wilderness build me a nest
And remain there forever at rest
Forever at rest
Forever at rest
And remain there forever at rest
And remain there forever at rest.¹³

The two texts stress differently the wish either to fly away or to build a nest (and remain forever at rest). Does this suggest the ambiguity of Merton Densher's attitude towards Milly, *la mourante*?

Famously another Victorian, John Ruskin, had focused on resting, nestling doves when comparing Saint Mark's with an English cathedral:

Between the grim cathedral of England and this what an interval! There is a type of it in the very birds that haunt them; for instead of the restless crowd, hoarse voiced and sable-winged, drifting on the bleak upper air, the Saint Mark's porches are full of doves, that nestle in the marble foliage and mingle the soft iridescence of their living plumes, changing at every motion, with the tints, hardly less lovely, that have stood unchanged for seven hundred years!¹⁴

Ornithology provides Ruskin with metaphors for the restlessness and bleakness of modern England and for its opposite, the harmonious poetry of the past of Gothic Venice and the persistence there of the sense of value. In his revulsion to the immorality of a time driven by greed and egotism, he sees in Saint Mark the shrine of those who do not "sell doves," – an echo of Matthew (21:12-3):

And Jesus went into the temple of God, and cast out all them that sold and bought in the temple, and overthrew the tables of the moneychangers, and the seats of them that sold doves, // And said unto them, It is written, My house shall be called the house of prayer; but ye have made it a den of thieves.

Venice and her doves are Milly's choice, and Palazzo Leporelli her nest, a "great moulded and figured concavity," a "gilded shell" – James's version of Ruskin's favorite metaphor for Saint Mark, a "radiant shell," – which is also the "the ark of her deluge," an echo of Noah's ark and of its dove, the messenger of the hope for conclusion of the time of the flood.

She made now, alone, the full circuit of the place, noble and peaceful while the summer sea, stirring here and there a curtain or an outer blind, breathed into its veiled spaces. She had a vision of clinging to it; that perhaps Eugenio could manage. She was IN it, as in the ark of her deluge, and filled with such a tenderness for it that why shouldn't this, in common mercy, be warrant enough? She would never, never leave it--she would engage to that; would ask nothing more than to sit tight in it and float on and on. (*Wings*, vol. 2, p. 143)

Since the Ruskinian "nesting" of the dove is bound to be fatally disturbed by the outbreak of a storm on Saint Mark Square, where the "thieves" Densher and Kate Croy seal their illicit pact and the Venice of crime is finally revealed to Milly with the evidence of their betrayal, the echo of Mendelsohn "Hear my prayer" gives the novel its definitive title: the wings and not the flight are chosen to suggest a perpetual wish of flying not an accomplished action. Venice is no longer a nest and

[...] on the Molo, at the limit of the expanse, the old columns of the Saint Theodore and of the Lion were the frame of a door wide open to the storm. (*Wings*, vol. 2, p. 260)

2. *Britannia of the Market-Place*

Her niece had a quiet name for her she kept it quiet: thinking of her, with a free fancy, as somehow typically insular, she talked to herself of Britannia of the Market Place Britannia unmistakable but with a pen on her ear and felt she should not be happy till she might on some occasion add to the rest of the panoply a helmet, a shield, a trident and a ledger. It was not in truth, however, that the forces with which, as Kate felt, she would have to deal were those most suggested by an image simple and broad [...] (*Wings*, vol. 1, pp. 29-30)

Mrs Lowder, the Londoner par excellence, is connoted by James's explicit Ruskinian reference to the "Britannia of the

Market-Place.” In the exchange between London and Venice, both cities appear to be “authorized” by the British writer, this image taken from his lecture “Traffic”:

You know we are speaking always of the real, active, continual, national worship; that by which men act, while they live; not that which they talk of, when they die. Now, we have, indeed, a nominal religion, to which we pay tithes of property and sevenths of time; but we have also a practical and earnest religion, to which we devote nine-tenths of our property, and six-sevenths of our time. And we dispute a great deal about the nominal religion : but we are all unanimous about this practical one; of which I think you will admit that the ruling goddess may be best generally described as the 'Goddess of Getting-on/ or 'Britannia of the Market'. The Athenians had an 'Athena Agoraia / or Athena of the Market; but she was a subordinate type of their goddess, while our Britannia Agoraia is the principal type of ours.¹⁵

As Jonathan Freedman has convincingly argued this and the other numerous Ruskinian echoes in *The Wings of the Dove* testify to James's “social critique” of his time and places, Britain, Europe or America. “It is precisely this Ruskinian fusion of aesthetic and social criticism [...] that James seeks to recapitulate [...] Indeed this moment in the novel suggests that James has crafted a precise historical position for himself, and envisions a specifically engaged role for his art.”¹⁶

Ruskin delivered his lecture “Traffic” in the Town Hall in Bradford on April 21, 1864, to a public of merchants. While pleading for ethics to be reflected in the architecture of temples, Ruskin mocked his audience, ironically suggesting its ideal form for a Britannia's monument:

[...] I could carve something for you on your exchange worth looking at. But I can only at present suggest decorating its frieze with pendant purses; and making its pillars broad at the base for the sticking of bills. And in the innermost chambers of it there might be a statue of Britannia of the Market, who may have, perhaps advisably, a partridge for her crest, typical at once of her courage in fighting for noble ideas; and of her interest in game; and round its neck the inscription in golden letters, 'Perdix fovit quae non peperit.'^{*} Then, for her spear, she might have a weaver's beam; and on her shield, instead of her Cross, the Milanese boar, semi-fleeced, with the town of Gennesaret proper, in the field and the legend 'In the best market,' and her corslet, of leather, folded over her heart in the shape of a purse, with thirty slits in it for a piece of money to go in at, on each day of the month. And I doubt not but that people would come to see your exchange, and its goddess, with applause.

**Jerem. xvii. 11 (best in Septuagint and Vulgate). "As the partridge, fostering what she brought not forth, so he that getteth riches, not by right shall leave them in the midst of his days, and at his end shall be a fool."*¹⁷

In Victorian Britain, statues of Britannia were copiously appearing in monuments and as building decorations (especially banks), celebrating the power of the British Empire. Their most common iconography would include a helmet, a shield, a spear, a trident, and a lion, while variants would present Britannia holding a sword or an olive twig. James's Mrs Lowder is also given a ledger, the same that appears in a 1885 Punch cartoon showing an irate Britannia, a hand on a ledger, scolding a purser for not keeping the ships' accounts right.¹⁸

This "simple image and broad" is further intensified by other Ruskinian echoes:

There was a whole side of Britannia, the side of her florid philistinism, her plumes and her train, her fantastic furniture and heaving bosom, the false gods of her taste and false notes of her talk, the sole contemplation of which would be dangerously misleading. She was a complex and subtle Britannia, as passionate as she was practical, with a reticule for her prejudices as deep as that other pocket, the pocket full of coins stamped in her image, that the world best knew her by. (*Wings*, vol. 1, p. 30)

As Ruskin believed, his people's worship of "false gods" could be traced in their bad taste and "false notes," in "prejudices as deep as that other pocket, the pocket full of coins stamped in her image." Britannia's effigy is indeed engraved on coins (even today), and money is the obvious energy that sustains the novel's plot, at the center of which there is Kate Croy. She is the American millionaire's penniless antagonist and the source of the Ruskinian reference. The American ladies deem her to be a pure type of the English process of evolution: Susan Stringham notes she is the "handsome English girl," the "wondrous London girl" "the chosen daughter of the burgesses" who has "all the marks of the product of a packed society who should be at the same time the heroine of a strong story." And to Milly she is one "of English, of eccentric, of Thackerayan character." A subtler mystifier than Becky Sharp, Kate divines, uses and manages, even more than Mrs Lowder does, the effects of the "falsifying" power attributed by Ruskin to money. In his analysis of the "idolatry of

money” Davil M. Craig points out that for the British author “unhealthy imaginations” do not “pursue the task of moral imagination in economic life” and therefore “money falsifying power emerges with destructive force.” Victorian economy is exposed: its “standards, ideals, and ends [...] are the ‘making-believe’ of a people devoted to false gods.”¹⁹ Whether Kate Croy’s imagination is unhealthy or not is left to the reader to determine, but her “making believe” is relevant in the novel, as is the “falsifying power of money,” both contributing to make Kate “the heroine of a strong story.” As such, however, she is also responsible for the critique of the contemporary British society to which she so completely belongs. Her almost allegorical presentation of Mrs Lowder, who, “with a pen in her ear,” is strongly identified with trading “Britannia,” extends her “florid philistinism” to the use of the British spear, joining the warpath in “the roar of the siege, the thick of the fray.” *The Wings of the Dove* was written when Britain was engaged in the second Boer War and a distraught James had felt the impending end of a world order, in 1900 he had written to A.C.Benson: “This eminently disreputable old rag of time is borne away into the dark background on the wings of an angry tempest that befits it.” (Again the wings...) ²⁰

Extended metaphors such as those displayed here may support a reading of *The Wings of the Dove* as a transatlantic allegory whose types reflect mercantile and imperial Britain on one side, and wealthy and democratic America on the other, respectively embodied by Mrs Lowder and Milly, the lioness and the dove. The allegorical rendering of British and American confrontations through lions and doves were not unknown in American culture as it is shown by Noah Worcester, a friend of Channing and one of the founders of the Unitarian movement in New England, who wrote:

Great Britain has for her Representative, not the EAGLE, but the LION, the king of the beasts of prey; and that it might be more appropriate, it is the “Lion rampant” – that is, reared in the posture of defiance, or the attitude for fighting. All who are well acquainted with the history of that nation must admit, that she amply supported the character which she has assumed... May we not indulge the animating hope that the time is not very distant, when the United States will prefer the Dove to the Eagle and when Great Britain shall prefer the Lamb to the Lion?²¹

3 . “Mental annexation of her country”

This is what Merton Densher thinks at the beginning of book 6, ch. 5 in his face-to-face encounter with Milly. It is for Densher the result of his visit to the US, and an apt metaphor for a journalist at a time when “annexation” was much talked about within the political debate on empires, British or American. It is tempting to suggest that James, the social critic, was indeed reflecting on the future of empires while writing *The Wings of the Dove*. The historical climate would support such suggestion: renewed annexation to the British Empire of the Boer Republics was the outcome of the 1899-1902 Anglo-Boer war. In 1899 the US had annexed the Philippines and in 1900 the Hawaiian Islands, and talks about the annexation of Canada were supported by the spreading belief in Anglo-Saxonism as a unifying force for all “the English-speaking people,” Theodore Roosevelt’s favorite definition, while engaged in supporting Anglo-Saxon alliances and avoiding the risks of a more crudely racialized language. The “English-speaking people” were also the protagonists of William T. Stead’s drive for a federation between Britain and the United States in his *The Americanisation of the World* (1901). The British journalist and reformer made a strong plea for the annexation of Canada by the US, and imagined that a unified New World would provide the best chance for both Britain and the United States to maintain a durable and peaceful empire. On the other side of the Ocean, John Dos Passos’ father, John Randolph Dos Passos, published in 1903 *The Anglo-Saxon Century and the Unification of the English-speaking People*, strongly supporting annexations policies and the opportunity of an alliance between Britain and the US. A whole chapter of the book, is dedicated to excerpts of writings by many illustrious Americans and Britons (including Stead) supporting his argument.

Given the heated debate on annexation, the metaphorical field of Densher’s “adventure” may have been chosen for political irony, but it is also consistent with his “colonial” character: the son of a father who “had been, in strange countries, in twenty settlements of the English, British chaplain, resident or occasional, and had had for years the unusual luck of never wanting a billet. His career abroad

had therefore been unbroken, and as his stipend had never been great he had educated his children, at the smallest cost, in the schools nearest, which was also a saving of railway-fares.” (91) According to Hilary M. Carey: “Colonial chaplains had a reputation for being second-raters who would have not been able to secure ordination in the ordinary way.”²² Densher’s family origin, though strictly embodying the pervasiveness of the English-speaking people, demands of him an immersion into genuine national education, a renewed identity fashioned within British society: he too is “annexed” to the mainland:

He had come round, he had come back, he insisted abundantly, to being a Briton: his Cambridge years, his happy connection, as it had proved, with his father’s college, amply certified to that, to say nothing of his subsequent plunge into London, which filled up the measure. But 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 – he had been exposed to initiations indelible. Something had happened to him that could never be undone. (Wings, vol. 1, p. 92)

Is Densher’s colonial education enabling him both to understand other cultures and deceive their representatives? Is his or any “mental annexation” a modern menacing imperial attitude, or a sign of weakness eroding the power to morally face the dilemma of divided loyalties and personalities? The “ruffle on his wings” may help prefiguring his role in the novel, his wavering between acceptance and betrayal, his dependence on Kate’s judgment as well as his recognition of Milly’s strength and sacrifice. Or explain why even Densher’s mother, a lady copyist, is presented as somebody able at “annexing” great painters’ works: “Mrs. Densher had had a sense and a hand of her own, had arrived at a perfection that persuaded, that even deceived, and that made the “placing” of her work blissfully usual”(92), able indeed even to deceive, and to make a living thanks to this ability.

Aviva Briefel distinguishing the forgerer from the copyist suggests that the former is able to construct “alternative identities” while the latter cannot. In nineteenth century representations lady copyists were inferior doubles, “a copy of a copy,” Briefel maintains, their ability to deceive never reaching a mystifying artistic

perfection.²³ This kind of imperfect “annexation” in Densher’s case results in an imperfect deception, at least Lord Mark’s eyes, if not in Milly’s. And Milly, seeing the lady copyists at work during her momentous visit to the National Gallery, thinks:

She should have been a lady copyist--it met so the case. The case was the case of escape, of living under water, of being at once impersonal and firm. There it was before one--one had only to stick and stick. (*Wings*, vol. 1, 287)

This of course calls for a new footnote. I will stop here though, temporarily closing my footnoting with an endnote: Borges’s Pierre Menard deems “historical truth” not what has happened, but what “we judge to have happened.” Though Menard’s project may be absurd, Borges has shown with his own footnoting, that if footnotes may not be true to the facts of history, they may still become true because fashioned and refashioned in the mind of authors and readers alike, or at least footnotes may help entertain us literary critics and keep our textual curiosity alive.

NOTES

¹ Anthony Grafton, *The Footnote: a Curious History* (Cambridge: Harvard U. P., 1999).

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³ Bryan Boyd, *Nabokov: The American Years* (Princeton: Princeton U. P., 1993), p. 340.

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