The Concept of "Grace" and Jamesian Heroines *

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One of the recurring issues in the James scholarship is the problem of good and evil in his fiction. The question is, of course, nothing peculiar to James. Yet in James we run up against no easy distinction between good and evil characters, because James had a complex vision of life that life is "all inclusion and confusion,"[1] or that "the tangle of life is much more intricate than [we feel] it to be" (*SP*, 224).[2] Often his view of good and evil is relativistic, and his treatment of good and evil characters is *apparently* neutral. Moreover, in the case of Rose Arminger *(The Other House)*, this murderess of a child is not punished, that is, legally. Hence, some might say, he is immoral.[3] However, James is seldom ambivalent about moral questions; he knows how to deal with the so-called bad heroines in his fiction. The supple Madame Merle *(The Portait of a Lady)* is sent in exile—she decides to go back to the United States; the same fate awaits that wonderful Charlotte Stant *(The Golden Bowl)*. Likewise, Kate Croy *(The Wings of the Dove)* is punished; she has to forgo the man she is passionately in love with. The problem arises, then, with his good heroines, because James is so much devoted to his virtuous heroines—a Milly Theale and a Fleda Vetch—that he often makes them too good to be at all believable.

It is a truism that the virtuous heroines in James are exponents of selfless love and abnegation. Milly Theale *(The Wings of the Dove)* is the

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definite symbol James found to embody his idea of true virtue. Milly has been regarded as a redeemer, or selfless love incarnate, or even equated with Christ.[4] Such emblematic readings, however, turn out to be self-contradictory. At a closer analysis, we are reminded of some disturbing elements in Milly or in Fleda Vetch *(The Spoils of Poynton).* Mrs. Gereth regards Fleda's sacrifices as hideous and monstrous, because they result from "the inanity of a passion that bewilders a young blockhead"—Owen Gereth. (*SP,* 225). Kate points out that Milly is serving nobody but herself in forgiving Merton Densher, for "she had had all she wanted" (*WD,* II, 332).[5] It has been argued, therefore, that if James intends Milly to represent virtue, the author is inconsistent, and that his novel is confused, in a word, a failure. Perhaps, we should leave the issue as it is, since if *The Wings of the Dove* is a failure, it is nevertheless a brilliant failure.[6] Or, we may not need another interpretative study of the novel. Taking these dissensions into consideration, I'd like to propose an answer to solve the ambiguity of his good heroines—namely Fleda Vetch in *The Spoils of Poynton* (1897) and Milly Theale in *The Wings of the Dove* (1902).

I value Quentin Anderson's *The American Henry James.* Anderson treats the later novels by James as a trilogy which dramatizes the redemption of mankind. To associate Milly with Christ as he does, however, is misleading.[7] Besides, James often denied the fact that he was influenced by his father's idea, the elder James's Swedenborgianism. My contention is that James exploits the orthodox idea of "grace" rather than the Swedenborgian "system," and that in his saintly heroines he has secularized the Christian notion of "grace." I mean by secularization that in James the concept of "grace" is stripped of theological meanings; it is diluted, as it were. When we consider Fleda and Milly in this light, the enigma of their goodness and selfless love can be explained.

In his dissertation entitled "The Nature of True Virtue," Jonathan Edwards defines "grace" as a "disinterested benevolence." Grace is a gift freely bestowed; it operates solely for the love of virtue itself:

> True virtue most essentially consists in Benevolence to Being in General... Doubtless virtue primarily consists in something else besides any effect or consequence of virtue. If virtue consists primarily in love to virtue, then virtue, the thing loved, is the love of virtue: so that virtue must consist in the love of the love of virtue—and so on *in infinitum*.[8]

In his dissertation the 17th century theologian is talking specifically about God's grace; and to me Fleda or Milly is a secularized version of such concept of grace as Edwards discusses in the same essay.

Grace is a beautiful word in English with its adjectival forms "graceful" and "gracious."[9] At the same time it also connotes "favor" and "favoritism," and theologically, as R. C. Zaehner observes, the latter is much closer to its real meaning.[10] Grace *is* a gratuitous gift. Also grace has the function of purgation, which penetrates through the surface of things and reveals the truth, bringing a just punishment to those who cannot receive grace. T. S. Eliot offers such idea of grace in his poem, "Little Gidding." Since Eliot's poem helps us understand the denouements of the nouvelle and the novel in question, it is worth quoting the following stanzas from the poem here:

> The dove descending breaks the air
> With flame of incandescent terror
> Of which the tongues declare
> The one discharge from sin and error.[11]
> The only hope, or else despair
> Lies in the choice of pyre or pyre—
> To be redeemed from fire by fire.
> Who then devised the torment? Love.
> Love is the unfamiliar Name

Behind the hands that wove
The intolerable shirt of flame
Which human power cannot remove.
We only live, only suspire
Consumed by either fire or fire.

—"Little Gidding," *Four Quartet*—

The image of the dove in Eliot's poem above quoted and in the title of James's novel is no mere coincidence; in the Bible God's grace is associated with the dove.

Before we examine Milly Theale as a secularized version of grace, first we need to consider Fleda Vetch in *The Spoils of Poynton*. In a word, the *nouvelle* is about a warfare over the precious spoils waged by Mrs. Gereth-Fleda on one hand and by Mona Brigstock-Owen on the other. The relation between Fleda and Owen Gereth is similar to that which exists between Milly and Merton Densher in the later novel. James presents Fleda as an exponet of "free spirit" (*SP*, xv), who loves truth. Fleda renounces the materialistic world and its comforts—she gives up Owen and the spoils—for her love of virtue. She thereby becomes a saving grace in the ugly world the comedy unfolds.

Unlike Mona Brigstock who exploits her sexual power to claim the spoils of Poynton which are "nobody's," Fleda freely offers the best of herself without expecting any reward. She loves Owen because she recognizes in him a sense of fair-mindedness and freedom from greed (*SP*, 47). Fleda wants to save whatever good there is in Owen, or rather she sees to it that the good qualities in Owen have their full play. "You offered her marriage. It's a tremendous thing for her" (*SP*, 197),Fleda tells Owen, because she knows that "he cares for [Mona] too much" (*SP*, 127). And thanks to Fleda's exercise of grace—which is freely given—Owen is able to stick to his pledge. As has been mentioned above, Fleda is an

apostle of free spirit, which in James is synonymous with virtue. In James's world good is "the ability to restrain egotism in our relations with others so that they may fulfill their own souls."[12] And Fleda is ready to give an instance of that virtue, "an instance of which the beauty indeed would not be generally known" (*SP*, 107). (So Mrs. Gereth unduly accuses Fleda of "the inanity of a passion that bewilders a young blockhead... with hideous and monstrous sacrifices.")[13] But unlike Milly, Fleda is aware of her avidity; she confesses to Mrs. Gereth that she *tries* not to think of herself (*SP*, 239. My italics), but she at last consents to take the Maltese cross as a momento of the kindness Owen has shown her. Fleda wins our admiration *because* she tries to resist her self-interest. She tries to efface herself and covers up Mona's ignorance, when she takes the latter about the house at Poynton (*SP*, 25).

Thus, Fleda works primarily for the love of virtue; therefore she is happy that the spoils have crept back to where they belong, that her love has "gathered them in":

> Yes, it was all for *her;* far round as she had gone she had been strong enough; her love had gathered them in... Thus again she lived with them, and she thought of them without a question of any personal right. That they might have been, that they might still be hers, that they were perhaps already another's, were ideas that had too little to say to her. They were nobody's at all—too proud, unlike base animals and humans, to be reducible to anything so narrow. It was Poynton that was theirs; they had simply recovered their own. The joy of that for them was the source of the *strange peace that had descended like a charm* (*SP*, 235. My italics).

Since Owen and Mona would not forfeit their claim on the spoils which are, as Fleda says, "nobody's," the treasures have to be taken away from them. The spoils are destroyed in the flame—even that small piece which Fleda consents to take, as if to spare Fleda the last vestige of her greed.

Hence, in *The Spoils of Poynton* Fleda is both an agent of grace and the recipient of that grace.

The Wings of the Dove is the most fairy-tale like of the three novels completed in James's major phase. This is partly due to the fact that after his experiments in realistic novels, James in his later years goes back to the allegorical mode of Hawthorne.[14] And the idea of "grace" has passed over into a symbol—Milly Theale who is called a "dove." As we recall, Mrs. Gereth points out to Fleda: "Don't try to make yourself out better than you are... You're not quite a saint in heaven yet"(*SP*,205). Her observation is true of Fleda, as we have seen, but Milly literally becomes "a saint in heaven." The triangle relation among Fleda-Owen-Mona repeats itself in the novel among Milly-Densher-Kate. But in the later novel Milly dies leaving a fortune to the man she loves. Not only that, Milly *forgives* Densher who conspires, though unwillingly, against her. That Milly takes a revenge on the lovers, therefore, is wide of the mark. So is Kate's accusation that Milly is self-serving.

James presents Milly without any plausible identity of her own; she is a dove, and a Renaissance princess—Lord Mark sees a striking resemblance between Milly and the Bronzino painting. Milly the "heiress of all ages" is a "vice-queen of an angel" who reigns at the court of seraphs, where it pays (*WD*, II, 211). There Milly distributes her royal favors, as it were; the concept of grace in relation to the "divine right of kings" is pertinent here. The images of dove and princess combine to enhance the idea of grace and to explain the strange phrase James uses in the novel: "the pink dawn of an *apotheosis* coming so curiously soon" (*WD*, I, 220. My italics). As early as at the garden party at Matcham, where she sees the wonderful Bronzino, Milly takes on the character of "a saint in heaven."

Milly likes her friends at Lancaster Gate, especially she likes Kate Croy and Merton Densher. But her friends regard her as a means and appropriate her; for them Milly is no more than a fabulous fortune. As Milly is aware herself, that she is a dove is the matter with her. The implication is: Milly only gives and she cannot take. With the power she enjoys Milly can choose anybody as a recipient of her favor. But she refuses to accept Lord Mark's offer to "take care of" her. She explains to him with all her mildness that she cannot "make a bargain":

> "No, I must n't listen to you—that's just what I must n't do. The reason is, please, that it simply kills me. I must be as attached to you as you will, since you give that lovely account of yourselves. I give you in return the fullest possible belief of what it would be—" And she pulled up a little. "I give and give and give—there you are; stick to me as close as you like and see if I don't. Only I can't listen or receive or accept—I can't *agree*. I can't make a bargain" (*WD*, II, 160-61).

Milly chooses Merton Densher for a good reason: he alone among her friends is redeemable. Just Fleda has only to do with Owen's good nature and his good name (*SP*, 105), so Milly "likes" Densher because he does not "make a bargain" with her.

From the very beginning James makes it clear that Densher is different from Kate. Kate's desire for material things—ribbons and silk and velvet—is contrasted with Densher's interest in "the world of thought." So when he first visits Mrs. Lowder at Lancaster Gate, the things in her room strikes him as "a portentous negation of his own world of thought —of which, for that matter, in presence of them, he [becomes] as for the first time hopelessly aware" (*WD*, I, 79). Densher agrees to play Kate's game of squaring Aunt Maud for the fun of it. But the joke becomes a serious matter when Kate involves Milly into her "design."

It is true that Densher evades the moral issues and moral decisions[15] —until the very end. But even before that, he begins to feel uneasy as they go further in their scheme. For unlike Kate, who can do what she does not like (*WD,* II, 226), Densher is not that unscrupulous. He knows that it is an infamy that he can do nothing but back up Kate "in her mistakes." Milly fully understands his predicament, simply because she is in the same boat as he is—Milly "likes" Densher very much, which means she is over head and ears in love with him. She, too, understands "the inevitabilities of the abjection of love" (*WD,* II, 77).

Dorothea Krook's observation that Densher is one of Jamesian heroes who "consecrate by their appreciation"[16] is perceptive. For his "incapacity for action" (*WD,* II, 226) is rather to his credit in the context of the novel. Densher promises Milly nothing; he does not and cannot conceal his passion for Kate. He is only kind to Milly. Moreover, he does the most important thing of which other Lancaster Gate people are incapable. They see Milly "as a princess, as an angel, as a star" (*WD,* II, 173), but for Densher she remains as "the little American girl who had been kind to him in New York and to whom certainly—though without making too much of it for either of them—he was perfectly willing to be kind in return" (*WD,* II, 174). Thus, Densher appreciates (not appropriate) Milly for what she is, the kindness which Milly in her turn appreciates. So he is right in thinking that *he* has not deceived Milly. And it is Milly who helps Densher making "nothing of the fact that [he] loves another" (*WD,* II, 25). Hence, it is left for him to accept *her* kind of love.

What Milly does for Densher, then, is to right *his* way of loving, as Fleda gives an instance of "the different manner of loving." In their last interview at her Venetian palace, Milly shows "nothing but her beauty and her strength" (*WD,* II, 329); she asks him nothing, because she has

understood all along. Back in London Densher recapitulates the scene and sees himself "hushed, passive, staying his breath, . . . dimly conscious of something immense and holding himself painfully together not to lose it" (*WD,* II, 342). Obviously, this "something immense" indicates the descent of the dove, which effects his "conversion": "The essence was that something had happened to him too beautiful and too sacred to describe. He had been, to his recovered sense, forgiven, dedicated, blessed: but this he couldn't coherently express" (*WD,* II, 343).

Symbolically, the incident takes place on Christmas Eve—the "season of gift." But the gifts Densher and Kate have in mind are of a different order. To Kate the gift is nothing but Milly's money; to Densher it is "a gain to memory and love" (*SP,* 235), a new perspective on life. Matthiessen justly observes that Densher arrives at the moral perception of the meaning of what has befallen him.[17] Densher *sees* that Kate is wrong in claiming both his love and the money. Now at last he takes a moral decision and acts it out. He urges Kate to forfeit the money and marry him *without* it, but he fails to "save" Kate.

Objection has been raised: if Densher has seen the truth of love, why does he not extend that bliss to Kate he still desires as his wife?[18] The question is valid enough but not relevant to the central drama which takes place in the novel. Densher is cruel to Kate who has taken such trouble for his sake and for hers. To comply with Kate who wants both the money and his love, however, is to go back to the old way, and this he cannot do. Another objection is that Densher's conversion is accomplished too suddenly and too easily.[19] But that is exactly the way grace works—the point I have been making in this paper. As has been mentioned earlier, grace is a gratuitous gift; and it works in an inscrutable way. Krook is insightful as usual, who writes: the denouement of the

novel illustrates "the characteristic effect of the irruption of the divine order into the natural."[20] In the poem we have quoted earlier, Eliot portrays the descent of the dove: "The dove descending breaks the air / With flame of incandescent terror / Of which the tongues declare / The one discharge from sin and error." God's grace pierces through the appearance and exposes to the view the reality that lies beneath. And it demands an absolute obedience of those who receive it.[21] Kate sees, with clarity, that Densher is no longer what he was, while she is still what she was.

Thus, Kate receives a just punishment for the wrong she has done to Milly, to Densher, and if you like, to herself. That they are what they "were" is the best punishment for those who cannot receive grace. In other words, grace has no power over the Lancaster Gate entourage who regard Milly as a means. As Edwards explains in the essay to which we have alluded earlier, "it is impossible that any one should truly *relish* this beauty, consisting in general benevolence, who has *not* that temper himself." He continues further: "For how should one love and value a *disposition* to a thing, or a *tendency to promote* it, and for that very reason, when the *thing* itself is what he is regardless of, and has no value for, nor desires to have promoted."[22] One must do something first after all (*WD,* II, 211), that is, one has to receive grace, not to make a bargain with it.

The notion of grace is the hall-mark of Christianity. At the same time, it is the most inscrutable of mysteries about the Christian religion. The way it works is mystifying as Milly is "funny" and "weird" in her mercy, to borrow Densher's words (*WD,* II, 39); all the same those who have gone through the experience are made a new man, "forgiven, dedicated, and blessed." In the meantime, it is part of the mystery, too, that the divine grace cannot efface the justice of God.[23] Hence, Kate goes unforgiven, unchanged, and condemned.

Repeatedly in his novels and tales, James upholds the virtue of selfless love, provided such is given freely and cheerfully. He is aware too that to practice an unselfish love is by no means an easy task. So he often becomes sentimental about his good heroines who choose "the straight" way; they are too generous, humble, and unselfish to the point of perversity. For all their vulnerabilities Fleda and Milly are still James's best tributes to true virtue. It seems, however, that James was not satisfied with Milly or Fleda as a character. We recall the accusation made against Fleda's inane passion that "bewilders a young blockhead. . . with hideous and monstrous sacrifices," which I take is James's own, if unintended.

In *The Golden Bowl* (1904) James goes beyond the notion of a "gratuitous gift of love" and creates a heroine who bears all for love and who employs whatever strategy she can muster to gain her happiness. Milly is preposterous in her love, but Maggie Verver is believably human in *her* manner of loving. If that is the case, *The Wings of the Dove* is James's criticism, subtly done, of the arbitrary Christian idea of grace or of unselfish love with its attendant inhuman (or superhuman) pride. In order to save the world, that is, to make good at all, one must use the serpent's subtlety as well as the dove's meekness. Maggie is James's answer (and mine) to the opposition raised against "the ethical absolutism" of a Fleda[24] or against the morbidity of a Milly. (That Milly does not smell of medicine is an ironic statement). Maggie's world is the familiar world we know, Milly's court of seraphs in the Venetian palace, where it pays, is "weird" and beyond our comprehension, for it is not of this world. There Milly stays—and Densher joins her—but Maggie comes down to the world, as it were, in order to love and live.

Notes

1. Henry James, "Preface," to *The Spoils of Poynton, The Novels and Tales of Henry James* (New York: Scribner's, 1908), X, v.

2. Henry James, *The Spoils of Poynton, The Novels and Tales of Henry James* (New York: Scribner's, 1908), X, 224. The subsequent references which appear in this form following quotations are to the same edition.

3. The most out-spoken indictment of James's work in this respect is made in the chapter on James in Frank O'Connor's book, *Mirror in the Roadway* (New York: Knopf, 1956).

4. Quentin Anderson, *The American Henry James* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1957), pp. 233-280.

5. Henry James, *The Wings of the Dove, The Novels and Tales of Henry James* (New York: Scribner's, 1908), Vols. XIX and XX. All the subsequent references in this form are to the same edition.

6. Charles Thomas Samuels, *The Ambiguity of Henry James* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1971), p. 61.

7. F. O. Matthiessen, *Henry James: The Major Phase* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1963), p. 65.

8. Jonathan Edwards, "The Nature of True Virtue," *Complete Works of Jonathan Edwards,* ed. Henry Rogers (London: Ball, Arnold, and Co., 1834), Vol. I, pp. 122-23.

9. Here I am not suggesting a bad joke that James is playing with the word "grace," for he frequently uses the epithet "graceful" or "gracious" for Madame Merle, Kate Croy, and Charlotte Stant, to describe the beautiful façade they assume to conceal their odious cupidity, passion, and egotism. (Such ironic writer as he is, James may well have intended it that way, since the concept of grace is an arbitrary one.)

10. R. C. Zaehner, *Concordant Discord: The Interdependence of Faith* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1970), p. 31.

11. Dorothea Krook, too, cites the first four lines of the poem at the beginning of her chapter on *The Wings of the Dove* in her book, *The Ordeal of Consciousness in Henry James* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1967), p. 195.

12. Samuels, p. 81. Also see F. O. Matthiessen, p. 146.

13. See p. 2 in this article.

14. Milly somewhat resembles Hawthorne's dove, Hilda in *The Marble Faun,* in temperament and in appearance.

15. Krook, p. 223.

16. *Ibid.* , p. 221.

17. Matthiessen, p. 77.

18. Sallie Sears, *The Negative Imagination: Form and Perspective in the Novels of Henry James* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1968), p. 94.

19. *Ibid.* , p. 97.

20. Krook, p. 229.

21. *Ibid.*

22. Edwards, p. 124.

23. Zaehner, p. 32.

24. Samuels, p. 79.

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