What, for a novelist or a novel reader, is a proper degree of interest in mortality? Is *The Wings of the Dove*, with its protracted and convoluted story of Milly Theale’s death, an unhealthy novel – one that only morbid readers would choose as their favourite among James’s works? By what techniques does this novel aim to fascinate readers in its heroine’s demise?

Death is so pervasive in *The Wings of the Dove* that almost anything you can say about the novel can also be developed into saying something about how it represents death. However, whereas Shoshana Felman can identify fairly readily the ways in which death enframes ‘The Turn of the Screw,’ death is pointedly underspecified in *The Wings of the Dove*. The novel’s representations of death are more complex, more obscure, and less popular than those in the tale, even though written only a few years later. The novel tends to avoid overt references to its contemporary setting, so that the connections between aspects of turn-of-the-century modernity and how the novel represents Milly’s death are difficult to discern. Her death is filtered through both a dense, elliptic style and an array of responses to cultural continuity and change at the start of the twentieth century.

Because death is so deliberately unnamed for most of *The Wings of the Dove*, it seems to flood out across the novel and to become accessible as an almost existential awareness and a morbid fascination with the idea of sickness and dying. *The Wings of the Dove* inhabits a very different philosophical worldview from that of *Roderick Hudson* (though the revisions to the latter in the New York Edition bring the two novels somewhat closer stylistically). In *Roderick Hudson*, death
comes suddenly, as if with a blow delivered from outside human experience; in *The Wings of the Dove*, violence has been internalised. Whereas Roderick falls from a cliff and dies instantly, Milly does not leap from the Alp where Susan Stringham discovers her early on, but instead makes a gradual descent towards her death as if following steps into Hades. Whereas Roderick seems to participate in his death only partially – his suicidal motives are cloudy – Milly and her friends actively explore the approach of her death, even though this eventuality is for the most part never named. Whereas Roderick seems to crumple with insufficient resistance to external pressures, prompting James in his New York Edition Preface to bemoan ‘the rate at which he falls to pieces’ (*RH* xiv), Milly apparently fights to the end, so that in the Preface to *The Wings of the Dove* ‘the last thing in the world [the idea for the novel] proposed to itself was to be the record predominantly of a collapse’ (*WD* 1: vii). The shame of Roderick’s disintegration becomes in the character of Milly a proud resistance: ‘my offered victim [...] had been given me from far back as contesting every inch of the road, as catching at every object the grasp of which might make for delay, as clutching these things to the last moment of her strength’ (*WD* 1: vii). Nevertheless, Milly’s death is as surely the generative centre of *The Wings of the Dove* as Roderick’s is of the earlier novel. At the end, Milly turns to the wall as if, finally, embracing death.

Roderick’s fall cauterises the woundedness of the characters in *Roderick Hudson*; it figures and seals them once and for all. Milly’s woundedness, by contrast, circulates on and on as an open secret; it is virtually a medium of exchange between the characters and between the text and the reader. The narrative seems to be one great wound, fascinated with itself and never condensing into a single, definite form, though the novel implies that consumption – the privileged metaphor for illness as a sign of artistic sensitivity in the nineteenth century⁴ – is the primary diagnosis of Milly’s unspecified ailment compared with other diagnoses, such as neurasthenia and cancer. *The Wings of the Dove* has been much studied as a novel about medicalisation and gender. Diana Price Herndl suggests that James’s experiences of his sister’s illness and relationship with doctors made vivid to him a cultural shift in discourses on illness around the turn of the century. Milly Theale is a transitional figure between the victimised innocents of earlier, sentimental fiction, whose illness represents