## Six Songs and an Epilogue

from The Wings of the Dove

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## Texts for Six Songs and an Epilogue from The Wings of the Dove

He heard her out in stillness, watching her face, but not moving. Then he only said:

- 1. Hung about with pictures and relics, the rich Venetian past, the ineffaceable character, was here the presence revered and served: which brings us back to our truth of a moment ago--the fact that, more than ever, this October morning, awkward novice though she might be, Milly moved slowly to and fro as the priestess of the worship. Certainly it came from the sweet taste of solitude, caught again and cherished for the hour; always a need of her nature when things spoke to her with penetration. It was mostly in stillness that they spoke to her best; amid voices she lost the sense. Voices had surrounded her for weeks, and she had tried to listen, had cultivated them and had answered back; these had been weeks in which there were other things they might well prevent her from hearing.
- 2. 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 places. She had a vision of clinging to it. . . She was in it, as in the arc 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 itshe would engage to that; would ask nothing more than to sit tight in it and float on and on.
- 3. [They were at the window.] The casements between the arches were open, the ledge of the balcony broad, the sweep of the canal, so overhung, admirable, and the flutter toward them of the loose white curtain an invitation to she scarce could have said what. But there was no mystery, after a moment; she had never felt so invited to anything as to make that, and that only, just where she was, her adventure. . . .

They were at the window, pausing, lingering, with the fine old faded palaces opposite and the slow Adriatic tide beneath; but after a minute, and before she answered, she had closed her eyes to what she saw and, unresistingly, dropped her face into her arms, which rested on the coping. She had fallen to her knees on the cushion of the window-place, and she leaned there, in a long silence, with her forehead down. She knew that her silence was itself too straight an answer, but it was beyond her now to say that she saw her way.

- 4. She found herself, from the first moment, looking at the mysterious portrait through tears. Perhaps it was her tears that made it just then so strange and fair. . . . The lady in question, at all events, with . . . her eyes of other days, her full lips, her long neck, her recorded jewels, her brocaded and wasted reds, was a great personage, but unaccompanied by a joy. And she was dead, dead, dead.
- 5. It was a Venice all of evil that had broken out for them alike, so that they were in it together in their anxiety . . . . a Venice of cold, lashing rain from a low black sky, of wicked wind raging through narrow passes, of general arrest and interruption, with the people engaged in all the water-life huddled, stranded and wageless, bored and cynical, under archways and bridges.
- 6. [Her] turn had possibilities that somehow, by wondering about them, his imagination had extraordinarily filled out and refined. It had made of them a revelation the loss of which was like the sight of a priceless pearl cast before his eyes--his pledge given not to save it--into the fathomless sea, or rather . . . it was like the sacrifice of something sentient and throbbing, something that, for the spiritual ear, might have been audible as a faint, far wail. This was the sound that he cherished, when alone, in the stillness of his rooms. He sought and guarded the stillness, that it might prevail there.
- 7. (Epilogue.) But she turned to the door, and her headshake was now the end. "We shall never be again as we were."

## Program Note

The song cycle as a genre makes something novelistic by adding music to a series of semi-independent poems. I have sometimes wondered what it would be like to do the reverse: to start with an actual novel and break it down into a small series of semi-independent fragments. Henry James seemed like an ideal choice for the purpose because his novels have so many passages that can stand almost alone as if they were prose poems. *The Wings of the Dove* in particular seemed rich with these. It is perhaps James's most sensuous text and the sensuality, even eroticism, of much of its prose has the paradoxical effect of heightening its introspective power.

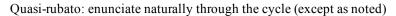
The cycle is based on six passages, which with small exceptions are extracted verbatim and without internal ellipses. The texts are generally sung without repetition of words or phrases; the voice treats them as narrative. This rule, however, is proved by its proverbial exception: songs two and five feature condensed repetitions of their entire texts, acts of re-narration that open the question of what drives narration as such. The question is compounded by the piano, which frames the text with cyclical, lyric forms, the familiar shapes of traditional song, to which the voice, which never repeats itself musically, poses an alternative understanding.

James's novel concerns an especially dark romantic triangle. In love with the impecunious Kate Croy, Merton Densher woos a dying heiress, Milly Theale, in hopes of becoming her heir. He does, but at the cost of both the money and his mistress, neither of which his conscience will let him keep. The first three songs evoke Milly's experience of Venice, where she has gone in vain to recover her health; the fourth is a flashback to the moment that Milly, looking at a Venetian portrait, realizes that she is doomed; the next two take up Densher's discovery of the enormity of his actions; and the last sets the famous close of the novel, Kate's exit and parting words.

Although the songs interpret the moods and meaning of the novel, they are also independent of it. They treat the extracts as a free sequence of evocative moments: an open invitation to imagine a narrative pattern of one's own, a possible story of which the extracts and music together form the expression. The cycle explores what it feels like to do that, and to do it because a great deal depends on the story to be told and the means of telling it.

Six Songs and an Epilogue from The Wings of the Dove was composed for baritone Michael Halliwell from October 2006 through March 2007 (as five songs; the sixth, number four in the sequence, was composed in May 2008.) Duration: about twenty minutes.

## 1. "Hung about with pictures . . ."





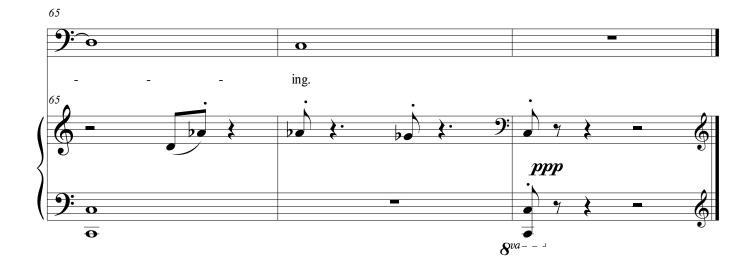
























3. "They were at the window . . . "









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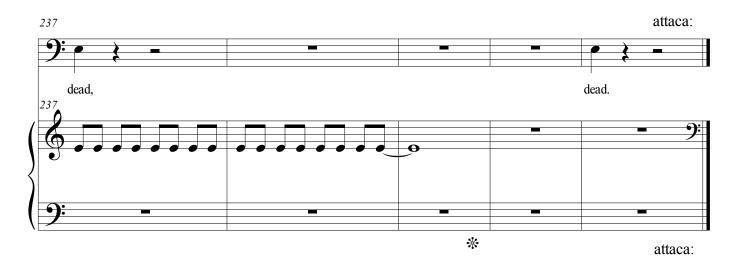












5. "It was a Venice all of evil . . ."



\* Ta















