Chapter Five

Conclusion

If, as I had fondly noted, the little world determined for her [Milly] was to ‘bristle’ [. . .] with meanings, so, by the same token, could I but make my medal hang free, its obverse and its reverse, its face and its back, would beautifully become optional for the spectator. (James, Preface xxxvi-xxxvii)

In the preface to The Wings of the Dove, James expounds his conceptions of writing before the composition of this work, which, for the author, is centered on the American heroine. While James has granted Milly Theale the central position among other characters, he suggests that “an equal salience” (Preface xxxvii) should be given to other characters except the heroine. In the novel, he displays both sides of a medal, namely, both the perspective of Milly and that of the Londoners whose society Milly seeks to enter. In so doing, James preserves the possibility of reading the heroine, or reading the novel, either by focusing on Milly or by stressing the characters in the novel. With the double sides of the medal provided in the text, the interpretation of the novel also becomes a fluid one when the reader shifts focus from one perspective to the other.

Like the various perspectives James attempts to show the reader, the gift exchanges in The Wings of the Dove also demonstrate the double bond of the gift. As discussed in Chapter Two, it can be seen that gift giving, which is supposed to show the giver’s generosity in making a gratuitous offer, initiates an exchange by obligating
the gift receiver to return another gift. The marriage of Kate assigned by her elders reflects such a paradigm of exchange. Kate, to be married to Lord Mark, is assigned to the position of a gift given from one family to another. Kate’s father and Kate’s Aunt Maud, as gift givers, intend to gather from Lord Mark, the gift receiver, social power brought by his rank of nobility. The social power gained through marriage is a sort of “symbolic capital” (Bourdieu, *Logic* 112) which circulates in the market by earning one’s credit and finally brings an increase of material capital. It is clear that the gift Kate’s elders prepare to offer is no more than a part of an exchange through which the two families share their property separated before the marriage.

Gift giving as a way to exchange for money, together with the power of wealth that dominates the London society, further generates a system of exchange where each individual in the social circle is incorporated. Kate, for instance, is a gift giver in her plan to work on Merton’s marriage with Milly. With Merton’s love to give and Milly’s money to take, Kate duplicates the marital exchange of her elders and reflects her internalization of the social code—that money brings social power—accepted by the Londoners. Meanwhile, the duplication aims to resist the elders’ gift exchange in her own marriage, and from her duplication-as-resistance can be perceived that she does not look for a mere repetition. Rather, her strategies vary with the conditions she is confronted with and in this way shows a dynamic interplay between an individual and the social structure.

Besides Kate, Milly also strives to enter the system of exchange by acquiring a position in the London society. In quest of life and love, Milly easily adopts the dove image Kate imposes on her. For Milly, the dove is an image with which she can
identify herself to receive the recognition of the Londoners. In return, she is ready to connive on their reaping money from her, but in so doing she gradually assumes the position of the gift receiver in Kate’s exchange. In this regard, the exchange between Kate and Milly is not a unilateral exploitation but an exchange in which both heroines willingly participate.

In the system of exchange, the gift exposes the paradox that being a gratuitous offer in appearance, the gift initiates an exchange for the countergift. The paradox embedded in gift giving, furthermore, is projected onto the double bond of the gift. On the one hand, as discussed in Chapter Three, the exchange derived from gift giving shows a blurred boundary between the gift exchange and the transaction in the market. In Lionel’s and Maud’s manipulations of Kate’s marriage, Kate’s value is estimated so carefully that she resembles a commodity to be sold in the market. Kate’s appearance is taken as her exchange-value with which her elders, like investors, seek to obtain the greatest profit. Similarly, Kate in her exchange with Milly is like a trader aiming at money reaping without sacrificing Merton’s love. Their mode of exchange is close to that in the capitalist market where less expense and maximized profit are encouraged.

On the other hand, the similarity between gifts and commodities is what the gift givers strain their efforts to conceal with strategies of gift-wrapping. The uncertainties of Milly’s illness and of Lionel’s scandal are manipulated to cover Kate’s own interests in money, and the interpersonal relations among the characters, including their friendships and familial ties, also help constitute a “common misrecognition” (Bourdieu, “Marginalia” 232) under which the exchangers maintain the gift’s seeming
disinterestedness. The double bond of the gift can therefore be seen from the fact that the gift is offered with interest and wrapped in the interpersonal relations. As the interest and disinterestedness are irreconcilable, it is never easy to articulate the gift with any congruous meanings.

Chapter Four endeavors to explore the gift’s double bond in the temporal structure of the gift exchange. As gift giving and gift returning are not performed at the same moments, it requires a period of time for the exchange to be completed. But the lapse of time between gift giving and gift returning has dual effects on Kate, Merton, and Milly. For Kate, the diachronic exchange not only detains the arrival of the countergift but also necessitates her waiting in patience. And Merton, during the time of waiting, has to put the exchange into practice. Yet during the lapse of time between gift giving and gift returning, Kate and Merton are constrained by their lack of patience. Before long they are weary of waiting, breaking step with each other and undermining the other’s actions in the exchange.

In contrast to its constraints on the gift giver and her collaborator, the deferral of the countergift allows the gift receiver to perform temporal maneuvers. For one thing, the belated arrival of Milly’s bequest keeps Kate and Merton in suspense. Receiving no words from Milly during the prolonged time of waiting, Kate and Merton find a marked discrepancy between the actions they are going to take. Kate suggests that the exchange should continue, whereas Merton attempts to terminate it before Milly’s gift returning. Their disagreement is furthered when Milly’s letter comes at Christmas Eve. The timing carefully chosen is able to utter for Milly that her money, as a countergift in the system of exchange, is not gratuitously offered but which Kate and Merton are
obliged to return. However, Milly’s bequest can be given only after her death, the moment of which has precluded the possibility of the couple’s refusing it or repaying with another countergift. With the temporal maneuvers, Milly successfully parodies the logic revealed in Kate’s gift exchange and further undermines the intimacy between Kate and Merton.

Kate’s loss of love and her gains in fortune can now be calculated, but more essential to the thesis is how to define the gift after the discussions of the exchanges in *The Wings of the Dove*. As revealed in the give-and-take among the characters, the meaning of the gift is in constant fluctuation. The gift’s double bond is first perceived from the manipulation of gift giving as an exchange for money. But when the manipulation of the gift betrays a paradox that it is similar to a commodity exchange, the paradox is soon wrapped in an illusion of the gift’s disinterestedness. When Kate after gift-wrapping is ready to receive the countergift she desires, she is confronted with the temporal limitation which confines her to a rigid circulation of the gift. In this perspective, it seems impossible to say that the gift bears any fixed and congruous meanings, for what the gift displays is its capriciousness and elusiveness.

The elusiveness of the gift, to put it differently, may account for its fluidity and undecidability. As Mark Osteen makes clear in the Introduction to *The Question of the Gift* (2002), “the fact that the gift beckons us to think about value both in terms of money and beyond money demonstrates not its incoherence but its elasticity” (34). In the circulation of the gift, an offer is always oscillating between the binary oppositions—gift giving/exchange, gratuitousness/recompense, generosity/interest, loss/gain, etc. Refusing to anchor to any side of the dichotomies, the gift challenges
them by blurring the boundary between the oppositions. Hence, the characters in *The Wings of the Dove* can somehow manipulate the gift but they are unable to possess both money and love with the gift, which, being undecidable and ever-changing in its movement, enables the concurrence of the logically conflictive concepts in the exchange.