e-ISSN 2420-823X

English Literature
Vol. 11 — December 2024

"The Pious Secret of How to Wait for Us" The Adaptation of the Ruskinian Picturesque in Henri James's Venetian Essays

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Abstract The essay examines the Venetian essays included in Henry James's *Italian Hours* (1909) in relation to the aesthetic category of the picturesque, discussing textual revision and the ways in which the writer progressively returned to the concept, transformed it, and blatantly deployed it in a fashion that was consistent with John Ruskin's own ultimate understanding of it in the last volumes of *Modern Painters*. The essay contends that it is indeed in the Venetian essays that one can find significant evidence of James's enduring dialogue with Ruskin and his aesthetic theories. Far from emerging as a trite convention, the revived picturesque in James's essays proves to be a valid means to understand the effects of modernisation in Venice and to remind the reader of its eternal, but fragile, beauty.

Keywords Henry James. John Ruskin. Picturesque. Venice. Travel writing.

Edizioni Ca'Foscari

Peer review

Submitted 2024-08-01
Accepted 2025-10-01
Published 2025-03-07

Citation Francescato, Simone (2024). ""The pious secret of how to wait for us"". *English Literature*, 11(1), 137-154.

DOI 10.30687/EL/2420-823X/2024/01/007

The Venetian essays gathered in *Italian Hours* (1909) are considered among the best ever written by Henry James and stand out from the others in the collection for several reasons. As John Auchard observed, these essays occupy almost one-fourth of the book's length (James 1994, xix), and this demonstrates the extent to which Venice represented a large part of what Auchard called "the Italian metaphor" (xiii) in James's works. In addition, while most of the Italian essays included in *Italian Hours* were written either much earlier (in 1873-74) or specifically for the publication of the book (in 1909), the five Venetian essays cover a more extensive timeframe (1882, 1892, 1874, 1899, 1902) and provide insights into the evolution of James's writing style and his changing perception of the lagoon city in the very decades in which it turned into a modern tourist mecca.

Studying these essays, their textual history and their revision from the original magazine publication also sheds light on James's response to a major and authoritative Venice-lover like John Ruskin. Tamara Follini has eloquently and convincingly argued in favour of a new assessment of the connections between James and Ruskin. She has pointed out that

> scant attention has been paid to [these connections] because many contemporary readers, ignorant of the full complexity of Ruskin's work, have taken [James's turbulent and contradictory responses that Ruskin inspired in him, especially in the period from 1868 to 1882] at face value, or are familiar only with James's most extended comments on Ruskin in *Italian Hours*: the too polite, unruffled, distanced appreciation in the 1882 "Venice" essay; and the edgier, more animated defence of aesthetic pleasure in the face of Ruskin's rigidities that it serves in some ways to resolve the 1877 "Italy Revisited". (Follini 2008, 355-6)[1]

In response to Follini's invitation, I contend that it is indeed in the Venetian essays that one can find significant evidence of James's enduring dialogue with Ruskin and his aesthetic theories. In his illuminating book chapter on the significance of James's revisions of his own travel volumes, which calls for a more careful quoting practice by literary scholars, Oliver Herford has focused on

> an unresolved tension in James's understanding of textual revision between the wish to live back into forgotten states and submit

1 In "Venice" (1882), commenting on *St. Mark's Rest*, James wrote that Ruskin's "queer late-coming prose" was "pitched in the nursery-key, and might be supposed to emanate from an angry governess" (James 1993, 288). In "Italy Revisited" (1977), while visiting Florence, James wrote that he "had lost patience" with Ruskin's judgments (James 1993, 407).

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> once more to outlived credulities, and the contrary impulse to remove their verbal manifestation from his revised and republished texts.[2]

Herford focuses in particular on the experience of "picturesque", reminding us that this "analytical term in the visual arts, architecture, and literature" was "at the same time a clichéd, touristic word with strong (and especially American) associations of simplicity and superficiality".[3] James frequently used this term in his travel essays, but he also "excised the word 'picturesque' in his late revisions; and yet he [was] still referring to the picturesque convention in his very last travel essays, and according it a value confirmed by his mature experience" (Herford 2016, 150). In what follows, I will examine James's Venetian essays in relation to the picturesque – the word and/or the 'forgotten state' associated with it – and discuss the ways in which the writer returned to the concept, transformed it, and deployed it in a fashion that was consistent with Ruskin's ultimate understanding of it.

In *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* (1849), reprising a by-then classic distinction made earlier by Uvedale Price in *Essay on the Picturesque* (1794), Ruskin argued that the picturesque was inferior to the beautiful and the sublime, as it was a form of "parasitical sublimity [...] dependent on the accidents, or on the least essential characters of the objects to which it belongs" (Ruskin 1903-12, 8: 236). Among such least essential characters, he named "angular and broken lines, vigorous oppositions of light and shadow, and grave, deep, or boldly contrasted colour" (Ruskin 1903-12, 8: 237). Ruskin would give concrete examples of picturesque objects and their parasitical quality in *The Stones of Venice* (1851-53):

> When a highland cottage roof is covered with fragments of shale instead of slates, it becomes picturesque, because the irregularity and rude fractures of the rocks, and their grey and gloomy colour, give to it something of the savageness, and much of the general aspect, of the slope of a mountain side. But as a mere cottage roof, it cannot be sublime, and whatever sublimity it derives from the wildness or sternness which the mountains have given it in its covering, is, so far forth, parasitical. (Ruskin 1903-12, 9: 159)

2 Herford is here employing phrases used by James himself in the Preface to *Roderick Hudson* (James 1984b, 1045).

3 On James and the picturesque, see Winner 1970, 33-5, and, more recently, Johnson 2011, 25-59.

In the fourth (1856) volume of *Modern Painters*, commenting on James Turner's art, Ruskin returned to the notion of picturesque and its supposed parasitical nature, proposing a distinction between two forms that encompassed both the material and the human realms: the surface-picturesque and the noble picturesque.[4] The first and lower form, "the *heartless* one" (Ruskin 1903-12, 6: 19), was "suspicious and questionable" (9) as the pleasure it conveyed derived from contemplating the aesthetic effects of decay and neglect on buildings while "entire[ly denying] all human calamity and care" (15), that is, the implications of such conditions for the social context. Instead, the second, higher form invited human sympathy with expressions "of suffering, of poverty, or decay", conveyed by buildings almost as if these conditions were "nobly endured by unpretending strength of heart. Nor only unpretending but unconscious. If there be a visible pensiveness in the building, as in a ruined abbey, it becomes, or claims to become, beautiful; but the picturesqueness is in the unconscious suffering" (14-l5).

By making that distinction, Ruskin seemed to imply that the different impressions conveyed by the picturesque were the effect of the building's present condition. It also depended on the sensitivity of a perceptive observer, who might detect any "unconscious" beauty and project it onto the building itself. As a condition and a mode of appreciation strongly associated with the human and the social (more than with the natural), the noble picturesque binds together aesthetics and ethics. As George P. Landow recapitulates in his influential study of Ruskin's aesthetic theories,

> the noble picturesque, a form of the gentler sublime, is an associated, subjective aesthetic pleasure which demands the projection of human characteristics upon old buildings. Indeed, old buildings are to be considered as old, noble men. Much of this sad, pathetic sublimity is created by age. There are good reasons for taking Ruskin's definitions of the noble picturesque as the final and representative statement of his aesthetic position. (Landow 1971, 237)

Ruskin's "noble picturesque" returns powerfully in the late Venetian essays included in *Italian Hours*.

In James's Venetian essays, picturesque traits are prominent, although the term is inconsistently used throughout. In the opening

4 Ruskin's appreciation of the picturesque in Venice owed much to his admiration of the works of Samuel Prout (1783-1852), who was the first to extend this mode of representation from country landscape to urban environment. See his essay "Samuel Prout" (1849).

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one entitled "Venice" (1882),[5] which celebrates the enduring charm of the lagoon city while also lamenting its transformation into a "great bazaar" (James 1993, 292) for foreign tourists and collectors, there are no occurrences of the term. Yet, James's appreciation of Venice largely draws on this aesthetic category and echoes Ruskin's, as his writings are explicitly evoked in the text.[6]

However, whereas Ruskin mostly focuses on picturesque elements or details, James emphasises that picturesqueness is ubiquitous and offers the observer an uninterrupted aesthetic stimulation originating from the material and the human realms. James writes:

> It is charming to wander through the light and shade of intricate canals, with perpetual architecture above you and perpetual fluidity beneath. It is charming to disembark at the polished steps of a little empty *campo* – a sunny shabby square with an old well in the middle, an old church on one side and tall Venetian windows looking down. Sometimes the windows are tenantless; sometimes a lady in a faded dressing-gown leans vaguely on the sill. There is always an old man holding out his hat for coppers; there are always three or four small boys dodging possible umbrella-pokes while they precede you, in the manner of custodians, to the door of the church. (James 1993, 304-5)

By conflating material and human elements as parts of a single spectacle of shabbiness and poverty, passages like this seem to recall the surface picturesque deplored by Ruskin. James was indeed aware of the social implications of this mode of enjoying the city ("The misery of Venice stands there for all the world to see; it is part of the spectacle – a thorough-going devotee of local colour might consistently say it is part of the pleasure"; James 1993, 288). Yet, his attention seems to have been drawn not so much by the particular character displayed by these elements (shabbiness, poverty) but by the pleasurable effect of their mutual relation as if they were part of a harmonic and uninterrupted *continuum*, to which he strives to give expression.

5 Originally published in *The Century* in 1882 and re-published one year later as the opening piece of the collection *Portraits of Places* dedicated to various European and American travel and tourist destinations. On the history of James's travels to Venice and his appreciation of the city, see Mamoli Zorzi 2005. In "Venice", James deploys a rhetorical technique that eschews objective information while lingering on subjective impressions, in order to restore interest in a city whose image has been saturated by overexposure. As Anna De Biasio argues, this and other Venetian essays offer a "reshaping of the collectively consumed body of Venice as an intimate, protected space: [here] exposing the private and privatizing the public become complementary gestures" (De Biasio 2008, 311).

6 On Ruskin, Venice, the picturesque, and the tension between formalism and aestheticism in his prose, see Whiteley 2020, 64-82.

For James, any clear distinction between exteriors and interiors is impossible in Venice from a strictly material viewpoint. The city itself and its masterpieces seem to reflect one another seamlessly: "You don't go into the churches and galleries by way of a change from the streets; you go into them because they offer you an exquisite reproduction of the things that surround you" (James 1993, 303-4). But far from representing thematic consistency (i.e., paintings representing the city), the contiguity between the works of art and their context can be found in the distinguishing picturesqueness that characterises them. James points out that

> many a masterpiece lurks in the unaccommodating gloom of side-chapels and sacristies. Many a noble work is perched behind the dusty candles and muslin roses of a scantily-visited altar; some of them indeed, hidden behind the altar, suffer in a darkness that can never be explored. The facilities offered you for approaching the picture in such cases are a mockery of your irritated wish. […] You do everything but see the picture. You see just enough to be sure it's beautiful. You catch a glimpse of a divine head, of a fig tree against a mellow sky, but the rest is impenetrable mystery. (James 1993, 305)

As is evident in this passage, the obstructed view of the art objects located in many Venetian churches and side chapels contributes to producing an impression of adventurousness and vagueness that both frustrates and intrigues the visitor, leaving him with the sense of an incomplete 'encounter' with the object of his interest.[7] This condition can be described as "picturesque" because both the objects being inspected and the conditions under which they are examined exhibit a similar level of irregularity or fragmentation. The similarity fosters a distinct type of appreciation that, while only partially fulfilled, evokes a sense of pleasurable frustration.

Much like in the first essay in the collection, in the third one, the earlier "Venice. An Early Impression" (1873), James never employs the word 'picturesque'. Instead, it appears only in its early versions. The essay is mainly dedicated to comments on the city's famous paintings but, as in "Venice", the picturesque figures prominently as a defining trait of the city itself. James goes so far as to write that light, in Venice, is a "greater artist" than the great masters because of the "material with which it deals – slimy brick, marble battered and befouled, rags, dirt, decay" (James 1993, 337), which are typically

7 On the evolution of lightning techniques in (Venetian) museums and their impact on travelers, see *From Darkness to Light*.

e-ISSN 2420-823X

picturesque elements.[8] James's 1909 revision excised the three occurrences of the term "picturesque" from the original version to replace them with different expressions, almost as if the term might generate some confusion in the reader and bring back the sense of the lower picturesque:

> I do not mean, however, to follow the traveller through every phase of his initiation, at the risk of stamping poor Venice beyond repair as the supreme bugbear of literature; though, for my part, I hold that, to a fine, healthy **appetite for the picturesque**, the subject cannot be too diffusely treated. (James 1875, 89; bold added here and elsewhere)

> I do not mean, however, to follow the traveller through every phase of his initiation, at the risk of stamping poor Venice beyond repair as the supreme bugbear of literature; though for my own part I hold that to a fine healthy **romantic appetite** the subject can't be too diffusely treated. ("Venice. An Early Impression" 1993, 336).

The second one refers to the possibility that the "urchins" in Torcello might lose their beauty with some future advancement of their condition:

> Verily, nature is still at odds with **fortune**; though, indeed, if they ever really pull together, I am afraid nature will lose **her picturesqueness**. (1875, 89)

> Verily nature is still at odds with **propriety**; though indeed if they ever really pull together I fear nature will quite lose her **distinction**. (1993, 338)

A third occurrence is related to the stairway leading to the upper choral plane of San Zenone in Verona, of which James says:

> [A]n upper choral level into which you mount by broad stairways of the **most picturesque** effect. (1875, 97)

> [A]n upper choral plane reached by broad stairways of **the bravest** effect. (1993, 346)

8 Originally titled "From Venice to Strasbourg" (1873; firstly published anonymously in *The Nation*; later reprinted in *Transatlantic Sketches*, 1875), it was probably postponed, being more focused on paintings and other places, such as Munich (my emphasis). James also often excises the word "picturesque" in his 1880s revision of earlier fiction; see Francescato 2010, 40, n.19.

The second lengthy essay of the collection, "The Grand Canal", testifies to James's blatant return to a category that he earlier seemed to have dismissed. Initially published in *Scribner's* (1892) and providing a heartfelt tour of the city by following the route from St. Mark to the train station via its most celebrated historical waterway, the essay makes explicit use of the word "picturesque". "It is in Venice", James affirms, "that the picturesque fact has best mastered the pious secret of how to wait for us". He indicates the picturesque as the element that might help travellers catch "any freshness that may be left in the world of photography", which has saturated their imagination with thousands of replicas of what Venice has to offer (James 1993, 315).

James here seems to resort to the kind of the picturesque that Ruskin had described as "noble" in the fourth volume of *Modern Painters*, understanding it as the appreciation of expressions "of suffering, of poverty, or decay, nobly endured by unpretending strength of heart" (Ruskin 1903-12, 6: 14) revealed by old buildings upon which human characteristics have been projected.[9] More specifically, in "The Grand Canal", James turns the noble picturesque into a powerful and modern metaphor which, by conflating the material with the human, is best fit to capture the plight and the endurance of Venice's buildings in the face of modern degradation into tourist facilities.[10] In other words, such inanimate objects are thus invested with human dignity and nobility meant to elicit the observer's sympathy with their present condition.[11] The old Venetian palaces of the Grand Canal – many of which are now "mainly expensive hotels" that have the "appearance of sitting, across the water, at the receipt of custom, of watching in their hypocritical loveliness for the stranger and the victim" (James 1993, 316) – display their "moods and […] hours and […] mystic voices and […] shifting expressions" (322), appearing as old survivors who

> have each in their degree so effectually parted with their pride. They have lived on as they could and lasted as they might, and we hold them to no account of their infirmities, for even those of them whose blank eyes to-day meet criticism with most submission are far less vulgar than the uses we have mainly managed to put them to. We have botched them and patched them and covered

9 On James's deployment of the noble picturesque in his fiction works, see Francescato 2010, 33-9; see also Johnson 2011, 52, on James's "noble picturesque" as related to the human and the racial in his travel writings.

10 On James's debt to Ruskin for his own understanding of the picturesque, see Herford 2016, 160-3.

11 The first example of humanisation is the Church of the Salute, which appears to the observer as "some great lady on the threshold of her saloon" (James 1993, 315).

> them with sordid signs; we have restored and improved them with a merciless taste, and the best of them we have made over to the pedlars. (James 1993, 320)

James's deployment of the noble picturesque in "The Grand Canal" reminds one of the New York section of his celebrated travelogue *The American Scene* (1907),[12] where skyscrapers, the "tall buildings", appear as "giants of the mere market" with "thousand glassy eyes" (James 1994, 61), baffled by the impossibility of achieving some sort of historical durability under the constant pressure of the march of industry, interest, and finance.[13] Yet, unlike the New York buildings, the Venetian palaces along the Grand Canal – turned into hotels or antique shops – appear to James as paradoxically

> happy, because even their sordid uses and their vulgar signs melt somehow, with their vague sea-stained pinks and drabs, into that strange gaiety of light and colour which is made up of the reflection of superannuated things. (James 1993, 316)

Once again, it is the fact that they still are part of a picturesque continuum that saves them, at least in the eye of the observer, from being hopelessly compromised or doomed.

The transformation of many buildings on the Grand Canal into hotels and shops testifies to the city's ongoing reconfiguration into a modern international mecca for tourists. The shops, in particular, which seem to be incorporated as novel tourist sights are symbols and evidence of the progressive dismantling of Venice into a lifeless array of items available for sale and consumption.[14] Although an enthusiast art critic himself, James was very suspicious of those appreciative practices that merely valued decontextualised art objects (connoisseurship) and their possession (collecting). In "Venice", for instance, he writes that the ideal traveller should not judge art objects "as a connoisseur", whose "cold curiosity" seems to him as the only "vitality" left in the place, "but as a man of the world, and you

12 *The American Scene* was published on 30 January 1907. In June of the same year, James spent his last two weeks in Venice. See his letter to Jessie Allen from Palazzo Barbaro of 24 June 1907 (James 1984a, 451).

13 Bill Brown argues that in *The American Scene*, James's "vivification of the inanimate world [is] a thoroughgoing indulgence in the pathetic fallacy [which] might be read, in Benjaminian terms, as the effort to combat the coldness of the material world by infusing it with human warmth" (Brown 2003, 186). The personification of these buildings, in other words, would mirror the commodification of human life in America. For recent readings of James's representation of the American space, and New York in particular, in relation to the picturesque, see Johnson 2011, 155-88, and Whiteley 2020, 206-18.

14 "Some of the most striking objects in the finest vistas at present are the huge advertisements of the curiosity-shops" (James 1993, 321).

enjoy them because they are so social and so true" (James 1993, 304, 315). In another passage from the same essay, he writes that the time spent in Venice "should be devoted to collecting impressions" (James 1993, 298), a phrase that, by emphasising the insubstantiality of such acquisitions (if compared to material ones), also hints at, and criticises, the greed of many wealthy, unscrupulous collectors who robbed the city of its priceless treasures. In the 1909 revision of that essay, James extends the ironic use of such a phrase. In the passage "[t]here are certain little mental pictures that rise before the sentimental tourist at the simple mention, written or spoken, of the places he has loved" (James 1882, 12-13), he replaces "sentimental tourist" with "collector of memories" (James 1993, 297).

The problem of the erosion of Venice's beauty by the collecting market obliquely returns in a passage dedicated to the pictures displayed in the Gallerie dell'Accademia, one of the city's most important art institutions. James writes:

> whether or not we go back to them on any particular occasion for another look, it is always a comfort to know that [the pictures] are there, as the sense of them on the spot is a part of the furniture of the mind – the sense of them close at hand, behind every wall and under every cover, like the inevitable reverse of a medal, of the side exposed to the air that reflects, intensifies, completes the scene. (James 1993, 327)

The metaphor of the medal and its "inevitable" two sides – the masterpieces themselves and the exterior walls of the building – is nothing but a rephrasing of the picturesque continuum that we encounter elsewhere in the Venetian essays. Rather than in proper observation, James finds the very essence of a truly rewarding enjoyment of the city in the mere "sense" of the joint presence of the pictures and what surrounds them outside. This combination represents a part of the visitor's "furniture of the mind": another expression that, once again, evokes, by contrast, the acquisition and commodification of art objects displayed in the houses of wealthy collectors as furniture items.[15]

James's later essay "Two Old Houses and Three Young Women" (1902) shows a novel approach to the representation of Venice. Relying on what he calls "a necessary indirectness […] in short, a little art" (James 1993, 347), James meticulously avoids description as if to counterbalance the obsolescence of well-known "attractions", which

15 The metaphor of the two faces of the medal yields elsewhere to a complete merging of place and object into one single item. James writes that the "universal privilege of Venetian objects […] consists of being both the picture and the point of view" (James 1993, 317).

are often copied and reproduced. At the same time, in this text, Venice shifts from being represented as a repository of great art to being celebrated as a place where the very act of appreciation is enhanced and stimulated. James, however, often and intentionally lingers on the very moments that precede and lead to this act, which, unlike in the former essays, remains entirely unrepresented, as is evident in the passage below:

> Hold to it fast that there is no other such dignity of arrival as arrival by water. Hold to it that to float and slacken and gently bump, to creep out of the low, dark *felze* and make the few guided movements and find the strong offered arm, and then, beneath lighted palace-windows, pass up the few damp steps on the precautionary carpet—that these things constitute a preparation of which the only defect is that it perhaps really prepares too much. It's so stately that what can come after?—it's so good in itself that what, upstairs, as we comparative vulgarians say, can be better? Hold to it, at any rate, that if a lady, in especial, scrambles out of a carriage, tumbles out of a car, she alights from the Venetian conveyance as Cleopatra may have stepped from her barge. Upstairs—whatever may be yet in store for her—she still, for her entrance, has the benefit of the support most opposed to the "momentum" acquired. The beauty of the matter has been that there is no momentum at all, and that, as the elements of slowness doubtless thus all hang together, the last of all dangers is to enter a great Venetian room with a rush. (James 1899, 2407; emphasis added)

By repeating the exhortation "hold to it", James urges his readers to trust him. He describes a sequence of distinctive Venetian elements that, beautiful on their own, slow the journey to the object of interest. That sequence creates what he calls a "preparation [that] perhaps prepares too much", deferring the final revelation and eliminating any "momentum at all".

In the 1909 revision, the distinctiveness of such Venetian elements is made stronger by the fact that they are paired with contrasting details typical of the modern Anglo-American metropolis:

> Hold to it, at any rate, that if a lady, in especial, scrambles out of a carriage, tumbles out of a **cab, flops out of a tram-car, and hurtles, projectile-like, out of a "lightning-elevator",** she alights from the Venetian conveyance as Cleopatra may have stepped from her barge. Upstairs—whatever may be yet in store for her—her entrance shall still advantageously enjoy the support most opposed to the "momentum" acquired. **The beauty of the matter has been in the absence of all momentum—elsewhere so scientifically applied to us, from behind, by the terrible life of our**

e-ISSN 2420-823X

> **day**—and in the fact that, as the elements of slowness, the felicities of deliberation, doubtless thus all hang together, the last of **calculable** dangers is to enter a great Venetian room with a rush. (James 1993, 349; emphasis added)

More prominently than in "The Grand Canal", where the rapid transit of the vaporetti is blamed for urging a somewhat rushed consummation of the city,[16] the symbols of frenzied modernity (the tram car, the lightning elevator) are here seen as conspiring to thwart, or significantly limit, the chance for appreciation. The smooth transition between the outside and the inside, the canal and the palace, which recalls by opposition the harsher one between the traffic-filled, chaotic streets and the richly furnished interiors of museums or wealthy houses in modern cities like London or New York, invites readers to reflect on the rigid separation between the realms of life and art, or civilisation and culture, which is absent in the Venetian space.[17]

James was very sensitive to the effects of modernisation in Venice. In the last decades of the nineteenth century, many buildings that used to be churches or hosted civil institutions, such as the Doge's Palace and the Academy, were transformed into museums and were no longer part of the communal life of the city.[18] The creation of modern museums often required substantial changes to the buildings that were to perform this new service. James, for instance, responded unenthusiastically to the 1899 relocation of the Museo Civico from Palazzo Correr to the recently restored Fondaco dei Turchi.[19] James thought that renovations such as this were questionable from both a social and an aesthetic viewpoint. Although impressive ("clever and costly a fashion"), they were done at the expense of those who were employed and exploited there: "Wonderful indeed today are the museums of Italy, where the renovations and the *belle ordonnance* speak of funds unlimited, even though the numerous custodians frankly look starved". Moreover, James saw in the pretentious and anonymous

16 "[The vaporetti] have placed 'rapid transit', in the New York phrase, in everybody's reach, and enabled everybody—save indeed those who wouldn't for the world—to rush about Venice as furiously as people rush about New York. The suitability of this consummation needn't be pointed out" ("The Grand Canal"; James 1993, 334).

17 As John Pemble observes, in the late nineteenth century, Venice was "shifted from the frontier between civilization and barbarism to the eminence where civilization and culture intersected", providing consolation to those who were disappointed with the brutalities of modernity (Pemble 1995, 10).

18 Contemporary guidebooks keep track of the fast pace of Venice's museification. In the 1870 *Baedeker's Guide to Northern Italy*, the only museum mentioned is the Archeological Museum in Doge's palace (Grimani Collection). In the 1899 edition we find the Museo Correr, the Museo Archeologico, and the Museo dell'Arsenale.

19 Until 1923 when it was moved back to St. Mark's Square. For a history of the Fondaco dei Turchi, see Pilutti Namer 2016.

e-ISSN 2420-823X

space of the modern museum, where Venetian objects were displayed as if detached from their context, "a glare of white marble without, and a series of showy majestic halls within, where a thousand curious mementoes and relics of old Venice are gathered and classified" ("The Grand Canal"; James 1993, 334). Venice was becoming a site for appreciation that was at odds with the city's distinctive picturesque continuum and dismantled it.

As he had done in his previous essays, in "Two Old Houses", James relished the chance he was being given in Venice to discover and contemplate an art object in a specific picturesque situation, with the object hidden behind an "old curtain that isn't much more modern than the wonderful work itself" (James 1993, 352). "Two Old Houses" reaches a further level of experimentation with the picturesque continuum of the city by insisting on the inseparability of the material and the human. Instead of humanising old buildings as he did in "The Grand Canal", James here seems to explore – as evident from the very title of the essay, which associates and contrasts "old houses" with "young women" – the fate of Venetian objects 'as mirrored' in the lives and eyes of members of the decaying Venetian aristocracy. The three mysterious sisters[20] he encounters stand out as "spectators of their simplified state and their beautiful blighted rooms, the memories, the portraits, the shrunken relics of nine Doges", showing to curious foreign visitors the "resigned cosmopolite state" derived from their awareness of the progressive spoliation of their ancient city. These women are a sort of human correlative of their "despoiled *decaduta* house [...] [a] space so out of scale with actual needs, the absence of books, the presence of *ennui*, the sense of the length of the hours and the shortness of everything else". In underlining the fact that one of the sisters "was perhaps old enough, none the less, to have seen [a precious family painting] taken down from the wall" of one of the rooms and "carried away for ever" to be displayed in the National Gallery of London, James is not pathetically deploring the vanishing of the Venetian aristocracy (James 1993, 355). Instead, he is fictionalising the effects of a modern *translatio imperii* on an individual and personal scale, suggesting the brutality with which private history is turned into a spectacle for public consumption. In this part of the "Two Old Houses" essay, a Ruskinian noble picturesqueness describes the condition of the sisters, as they convey the same sense of beauty and dignity in the face of the injustice of history displayed by the profaned palaces on the Grand Canal. James imagines

20 For real-life details on these three women see Byrd. Anna De Biasio has argued that in this and other Venetian essays James "favor[s] a shift of tourist attention from the outside to the inside" with the aim to "re-establish a jeopardized tradition of taste and sensibility" (De Biasio 2008, 311-13).

the spoliation of the house as experienced by one of the sisters and her elders while they "looked at each other with the pale hush of the irreparable". He does not fail to notice that such a spoliation "put a great deal of old, old history into sweet young Venetian faces" (James 1993, 355-6).

The theme of touristification as a denial of human dignity also pervades the essay that ends the Venetian section of *Italian Hours*. The essay is a revised version of the opening piece James wrote for Katharine de Kay Bronson's volume "Browning in Venice" (1902), which he retitled "Casa Alvisi". This essay presents another angle or a new treatment of the Venetian subject by focusing, this time, on an American expatriate whose life had been exemplary for other lovers of the lagoon city. Katharine de Kay Bronson (1834-1901) was a central figure in Venice's international and local social circles. She was the host of a variety of figures who sojourned in her house, located at the very entrance of the Grand Canal, the Palazzino Alvisi, whose balcony was deemed by James Abbott MacNeill Whistler, a protégée of Bronson's, a privileged viewpoint for enjoying the city. James depicts Bronson as an exemplary cosmopolite, underlining her openness and generosity towards the city of Venice and the local population.[21] She was very discrete and abhorred ostentation, and while very fond of collecting objects, she only gathered "small treasures" (James 1993, 364) that allowed her to understand better and blend in with the local context.[22] James writes:

> These things, on her part, had at all events the greater appearance of ease from their having found to their purpose—and as if the very air of Venice produced them—a cluster of forms so light and immediate, so pre-established by *picturesque* custom. (James 1993, 362; emphasis added)

These objects surface in the text as the counterpoint to the items favoured by wealthy collectors and speak of their owner's respect for the Venetian culture ("the philosophy of their patroness was as Venetian as everything else" as well as of her embracing the distinctive 'mode' of the place itself ("picturesque custom"; James 1993, 363). In other words, these objects are remarkable as they allow Bronson to *merge* with the beautiful, picturesque continuum so characteristic of the place. What Bronson found was, for James, "the true principle of

21 On 17 December 1909 James made a sketch of "K.B. (Venice) idea" about a youngish New York widow and her predicament, which was to become the unfinished *The Ivory Tower* (see James 1999, 489).

22 Bronson's "delicacy" is always associated with the unintrusive and the non-threatening, as shown by the repetition of the adjective "small" associated with her character throughout the essay.

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fusion, the key to communication" (James 1993, 363), which primarily showed in the care she had for the little images of the *madonnina* which presided over the traghetti stops. As John Auchard observes, it is impossible not to read this essay intertextually with the earlier "The Grand Canal", where James wrote:

> I would go into the *traghetti*, which have their manners and their morals, and which used to have their piety. This piety was always a *madonnina*, the protectress of the passage—a quaint figure of the Virgin with the red spark of a lamp at her feet. The lamps appear for the most part to have gone out, and the images doubtless have been sold for *bric-a-brac*. […] One of the figures has been left, however—the Madonnetta which gives its name to a *traghetto* near the Rialto. But this sweet survivor is a carven stone inserted ages ago in the corner of an old palace and doubtless difficult of removal. *Pazienza*, the day will come when so marketable a relic will also be extracted from its socket and purchased by the devouring American. ("The Grand Canal"; James 1993, 326)

> [Bronson instead] cultivated [the Venetians'] dialect, she renewed their boats, she piously relighted—at the top of the tide-washed *pali* of traghetto or lagoon—the neglected lamp of the tutelary Madonnetta; she took cognizance of the wives, the children, the accidents, the troubles, as to which she became, perceptibly, the most prompt, the established remedy. ("Casa Alvisi"; James 1993, 363)

Unlike the ubiquitous greedy and "devouring American", indifferent to the organic dimension of Venice's beauty and involved instead in its (literal) dismantlement, Bronson surfaces here as a true daughter of the place in her ability to appreciate both its material and human dimensions – a disinterested figure who, although a foreigner, subordinated herself to the needs of the city, as someone "settling in it and treating it, cherishing it, as a sort of repository of consolations" (James 1993, 364).

Taken together, the five Venetian essays in *Italian Hours* show the originality and versatility of James's approach to a complex subject like Venice. The category of picturesque, defined, in Ruskin's fashion, as a particular interplay between the material and the human, which is both a condition and a mode of appreciation, seems to play an increasingly essential role in these essays, being applied in varying ways to the inanimate (objects, buildings) and the animate (local people, and even the sympathetic expatriates). Far from being a trite convention, the revived picturesque displayed in these essays proves to be a valid means to understand the effects of modernisation on Venice and to remind the reader of its eternal but fragile beauty.

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