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The Baroque Appeal of Venice in *The Wings of the Dove*[*]

Venice features prominently in all studies about Baroque and Rococo art, and one might wonder whether that aesthetic dimension could not have some bearing on James's decision to stage the climax of the human drama unfolding in *The Wings of the Dove* in that particular city. If the conscious reason is indisputably, as has already been established by critics,[1] the role of Venice as metaphor for the fatal doom of the heroine Milly Theale, it might also be argued that the novelist's imagination was likely to respond to the artistic background and transport its own intimate conflicts onto that stage.

In his preface to the novel, the author admitted to the failure of balance, the Classical rule of composition he was most attached to, and deplored "the inveterate displacement of his general centre" (13),[2] a characteristic of Baroque aesthetics according to Cuban writer Severo Sarduy.[3] James was thus highlighting his inner struggle between his conscious wish for control and proportion and the dreaded possible excesses of his fancy. The same kind of dilemma confronts his protagonist and main focalizer Merton Densher during the Venetian episode of the book, as well as the doomed heroine Milly Theale, namely the fear of instability and a craving for security and stasis.

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1 I would like to call special attention to Hubert Teyssandier, "Venise dans *The Wings of the Dove* (1902)." *Cahiers Victoriens et Edouardiens, Henry James. Lieux de culture,* 5, 45-59.

2 All quotations from the text will refer to the following edition: Henry James, *The Wings of the Dove*, J. Donald Crowley and Richard A. Hocks ed. (1902; rpt New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1978).

3 Severo Sarduy, *Barroco* (Paris: Seuil, 1975) 64-65. What Sarduy contends in *Barroco* is that the shift from the Classical aesthetics to the Baroque one can be typified as a shift from the geometrical figure of the circle with a single centre, emblematic of unity and harmony, to that of the ellipsis with multiple centres, a disrupted decentred circle.

The shift of the action to Venice precisely coincides with an immersion of the imagination into the troubled waters of anguish, as indicated by Milly's retrospective insight into her past apotheosis at Matcham, significantly proffered from the standpoint of Palazzo Leporelli: "her consciously rounding her protective promontory, quitting the blue gulf of comparative ignorance and reaching her view of the troubled sea" (265). Anxiety then invades the fiction as Densher is finally knocked off his precarious balance by the ban issued from the palace, while on the other hand the concomitant storm outside threatens the sumptuous city with engulfment. It then seems that Venice is a metaphorical locus of instability and that its Baroque style is an appropriate aesthetic expression of emotional insecurity. It should be borne in mind that Baroque art was fuelled by an unsettling anguish bred by the economic and social changes of a transitional period not unlike those which upset James in industrial America, and that it attempted to counteract visions of existential nothingness with an excess of form and movement as well as a lavish display of splendour.

The architecture and interior decoration represented in *The Wings of the Dove*—Palazzo Leporelli with its Tiepolo ceiling, Densher's lodgings and Café Florian—are referred to as being Rococo, an eighteenth-century art, which also expressed anguish born of the awareness of human frailty and largely relied on ornamentation and dynamics. However it was mostly an interior style in quest of intimacy and it was characterized by the extreme refinement of its miniature motifs as well as its ethereal appearance.[4] Avoiding the open tension dramatized by Baroque art, it aimed at a reassuring fluidity transcending difference, thus holding an understandable appeal for James's hero and heroine.

My suggestion therefore is that the Baroque and the Rococo aesthetics associated with the city of Venice as setting are part and parcel of the overall theme of insecure identity in *The Wings of the Dove*, as they give artistic shape to the underlying current of instability and express the author's inner conflict between the self-imposed balance of composition and the appeal of chaotic experience.

That the city of Venice should have been elected as a centre of Baroque and Rococo art is certainly not a coincidence, since it uncommonly dramatizes

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4 Philippe Minguet, *Esthétique du rococo* (Paris: Librairie Philosophique J. Vrin, 1966) 177-201.

the notions of mutability and instability, which are at the core of those two styles. Sumptuous, arrogant palaces were erected on the most unlikely unsteady soil, resting on posts immersed in the water, a typically Baroque assertion of grandeur in the face of fragility. The city is constantly battered by the sea and threatened in its midst by the rising tide, which gives it "its general Deluge air," "its resemblance to a flooded city" as recorded by James in *Italian Hours*.[5] Besides, the play of the dazzling sunlight or of sudden weather changes on the omnipresent water turns the whole setting into a vast pictorial composition of shimmer and reflections, which inspired Rococo painters like Canaletto and Francesco Guardi, and endow the city with an ever-changing physiognomy. James was thus prompted to note:

> The creature varies like a nervous woman, whom you know only when you know all the aspects of her beauty. She has high spirits or low, she is pale or red, grey or pink, cold or warm, fresh or wan, according to the weather or the hour. (IH 11)

Therefore, besides its overall "sense of doom and decay" (IH 62), Venice also impressed the novelist with its essential instability, and according to an art critic, it is doubtlessly the feature that appealed to the imagination of the Baroque artists who settled there.[6]

As Densher experiences increasing insecurity in Book VIII of *The Wings of the Dove*, the perception of the city through his focus changes, and after a marked emphasis on the splendour of Milly's metonymical palace, the antithetical hidden aspect of instability comes to prevail. Signalled by a marked alteration in the weather that leaves the proud city a prey to the storm, the degradation affects the vision of space, which is no longer kept within reassuring boundaries and suddenly opens onto the unknown. The difference can be measured by comparing two successive descriptions of Piazza San Marco. When Densher feels safe in his successful suit of Milly and under Kate's

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5 Henry James, *Italian Hours*, John Auchard ed. (1909, University Park, Pa: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1992) 46, abbr. IH.

6 Yves Bottineau, *L'Art baroque* (Paris: Editions Mazenod, 1986) 53: "Venice is a city that stands out, owing to features entirely of its own. Between buildings erected on a ground laboriously claimed from the sea and stabilized, vistas which are alternately majestic or unexpected, the changing waters, the moving skies and the shimmering light, which is also in a state of perpetual fluctuation, the colourful reflections of the natural setting and of the buildings create a profusion of changes in form that in their very essence can be felt as akin to the Baroque aesthetics." Translated from the French by my colleagues Louise and Guy Serratrice from the University of Savoie.

firm guidance, the famous square reflects his sense of security by presenting the characteristics of enclosure of an indoor apartment, reminiscent of the palace chambers in which the sick heroine has found refuge: "This colloquy had taken place in the middle of Piazza San Marco [...] a smooth-*floored*, blue-*roofed chamber*," "they had in front the vast empty space, *enclosed* by its arcades, to which at that hour movement and traffic were mostly *confined*" (288, emphasis mine).

However, once the protagonist is deprived of both female supports, the Piazza to which he returns for comfort in his bewilderment has lost its boundaries, and the ominous "vast empty space" kept under control in the earlier passage is shown to lie dangerously close to the abyss and to be open to the unknown beyond: "on the Molo, at the limit of the expanse, the old columns of the Saint Theodore and of the Lion were the frame of a door wide open to the storm" (326). Open space expanding beyond limits behind the useless *trompe-l'œil* framework of the gate-like columns is typical of Baroque art as opposed to the closed, self-contained compositions of Classical art. The anguish in the face of nothingness that it reveals at this point can be viewed as the underside of the magnificence displayed in Palazzo Leporelli, whose purpose is to fill the dreaded void through an excess in form.

It is to be noted by the way that Milly, though briefly tempted by open space as she gazes at the succession of old palaces from her window in Lord Mark's company, finally decides against it and recoils to the safety of her protective chambers: "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" (267). Open space ("open," "broad," "invitation") combines with motion ("sweep," "flutter") to create instability ("loose" and the image of the abyss briefly glimpsed in the word "overhung") in keeping with the Baroque aesthetics, while the motif of repetition, another constitutive element, joins in: "the *sala* corresponding to the *sala* below and fronting the great canal with its gothic arches." Opting for the Classical stance of stasis, the heroine takes refuge in closure, a canonical rule of composition: "but after a minute, and before she answered, she had closed her eyes to what she saw."

Milly's withdrawal into a heavily decorated Rococo palace further enhanced by her own American sense of lavish display is a move to counteract the anguish bred by human mortality, to oppose the beautiful intensity of the present moment to impending nothingness. It is part of the undercurrent of

ontological insecurity which underlies the whole novel and reaches greater intensity in Densher's dilemma, as the protagonist is torn between the things of the spirit and the pull of the flesh. The climactic party of Book VIII suggests how typically Baroque elements appealed to James's imagination to tackle the issue and attempt to find a resolution.[7] Like any Baroque work of art, the scene rests on grandeur and make-believe. Before the dazzled eyes of her friends reduced to the role of spectators, Milly carries out the performance of life brought out by the luxury of innumerable candles and the play of music.[8]

She thus manages to temporarily negate the frightening immensity of eternity with the intensity of the moment, an alternative usually dividing the Baroque mind according to Eugenio d'Ors: "Between life and eternity, he has got to choose. It is either the intensity of the present moment, passionately enjoyed, or the expectation of the impassive future existence."[9] As she brings her life to the height of perfection during her luxurious festival, the American girl provides a perfect illustration of what Georges Poulet describes as the Baroque mind's countermove to mutability: "the act by means of which the mind, instead of waiting resignedly to be caught up in the relentless march of time, forestalls it and captures it in order to freeze it"[10] (translation mine). In her desperate attempt to oppose her doom, Milly impresses all present with the pathos of her situation even though she heroically strives to suppress it beneath the display of splendour, thus blending the two components of Baroque aesthetics—grandeur and pathos.[11] Significantly the heroine is shown

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7 Jean Rousset identifies the Baroque as the historical period going from 1580 to 1670 and "characterized by a number of themes entirely of its own: change, fickleness, *trompe-l'œil* and ornament, funeral celebrations, transience and the instability of the world." Its main features are "metamorphosis and ostentation, dynamics and setting." In Jean Rousset, *La littérature de l'âge baroque en France. Circé et le paon* (Paris: José Corti, 1954) 8.

8 Densher notes the unusual profusion of candles: "the great saloon, where even more candles than their friend's large common allowance [...] lighted up the pervasive mystery of Style" (295) and hails the enhancing effect produced by music: "The girl's idea of music had been happy" (303). That the scene is meant by the heroine as a performance for the benefit of her guests is indicated by the emphasis put on the activity of gazing which Densher and Kate are engaged in throughout: "Kate again watched her. 'To-night she does want to live.' [...] Densher had been looking too" (305).

9 Eugenio d'Ors, *Du baroque* (Paris: Gallimard, "Idées," 1935) 104.

10 Georges Poulet, *Les métamorphoses du cercle* (Paris: Plon, 1961) 37.

11 Milly especially means to impress the London doctor Sir Luke Strett as noted by Kate: "'She isn't better. She's worse.' 'To-night she does want to live.' 'It's wonderful. It's beautiful.' 'She wants to be for him at her best. But she can't deceive him'" (305).

to stem the Baroque surge of feeling with a truly Classical control over inner agitation, thus dramatizing the very dilemma of her author.

At the same time the scene is also meaningful to the main focalizer of the Venetian episode, Densher. The emphasized presence of the candles and the ultimate consecration of white-clad Milly as a dove establish the occasion into a moment of communion with the sacred, at a time when the male character is about to surrender to the force of physical desire and to the mercantile duplicity forced upon him by his lover Kate. For the protagonist as for his author, the event seals the later choice of spirituality over profanity, of sanctity over the restlessness of desire and the pull of the flesh. The Baroque style of the performance[12] therefore underscores and dramatically magnifies the issue at stake, as suggested by the reflexive quality of the following narrative statement: "The effect of the place, the beauty of the scene, had probably much to do with it; the golden grace of the high rooms, chambers of art in themselves, took care, as an influence, of the general manner" (301).

In addition to its imaginative association with instability and inner fragility, the Venetian setting reflects the novel's oscillation between the two poles of repose and restlessness, of Classical stasis and Baroque imbalance. The splendour of Milly's palace emphasized in the first part of the episode until Densher's disgrace is linked with an underlying aspiration to immobility and control. In the first description of her new surroundings, the heroine is presented as "sink[ing] into possession" (257) and her conception of personal control is later on defined as endurance in the face of instability: "as in the ark of her deluge" (264), "my great gilded shell" (269), "to sit there for ever, through all her time, as in a fortress" (266). She then confides her fears to Lord Mark on the gentleman's first visit, evincing the Baroque anguish of mutability, the despair of being unable to suspend the present moment: "an image of never going down, of remaining aloft in the divine dustless air, where she would hear but the plash of the water [transience] against stone [endurance]" (266). The image of ethereal lightness calls to mind Tiepolo's ceilings. If the Rococo style differs from the Baroque in being an art of interior decoration

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[12] In his essay discussing the Baroque as an expression of anomia, Jean Duvignaud emphasizes the lavish display of material splendour characteristic of that art as well as its fondness for performance, for the creation of illusion. He specifically mentions Venice as "a privileged place" with its architecture and munificent decoration, its festivals and music. In Jean Duvignaud, *Hérésie et subversion. Essais sur l'anomie* (Paris: La Découverte, 1986) 156.

expressive of a quest for intimacy, as contended by Philippe Minguet,[13] then James's choice of a Rococo palace as final abode for his doomed heroine is particularly significant. The building is indeed a refuge to withdraw into and feel comfortable in, for a sick girl who will not set foot outside anymore, and the scalloped motifs of its ceilings emphasized in the first descriptive passage[14] are metaphorical of the "shell" the place is meant to be for its owner.

The fixed centre which Palazzo Leporelli represents to both Milly and Densher, is contrasted with the tortuous alleys of Venice through which the banned suitor aimlessly wanders in an attempt to stay his inner agitation: "He had to walk in spite of weather, and he took his course, through crooked ways, to the Piazza" (326). Restlessness climaxes when the realization that Lord Mark has interfered destroys the precarious balance achieved by the hero after his unsettling exclusion, a wishful stasis which is symmetrical to Milly's earlier on. At that point the lexical field of motion is strikingly profuse.[15] This conflict between restlessness and the yearning for immobility and control over space can shed some additional light to the significance of the Veronese painting conjured up by Mrs. Stringham before the party as well as to Densher's relation to it.

Veronese was a painter of the High Renaissance, whom James greatly admired for his ability to convey vital energy and his enjoyment of life in his work without departing from the canonical rules of proportion and harmony. His direct relevance to the purpose of Milly's party is the "blaze of worldly pomp"—to use Ruskin's words about *The Marriage in Cana*—which the novelist meant to impress on the reader, but his appeal may also lie in what the Victorian critic praised as the "tenderest balance" in which the Italian artist held all the elements of his canvases and the way he "restrain[ed], for truth's sake,

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13 For Philippe Minguet in *Esthétique du rococo*, Rococo is "above all a style of interior decoration" (154), "in which privacy is experienced as cut off from the exterior world" (173). The critic further stresses the prominent role of shells in Rococo decoration: "The shell is suggestive of hollows and cavities [...]. The shell is not dynamic: it induces, to refer again to Bachelard, 'dreams of refuge'" (196), my translation.

14 "[...] the splendid ceilings—medallions of purple and brown, of brave old melancholy colour, medals as of old reddened gold, embossed and beribboned, all toned with time and all flourished and scolloped and gilded about, set in their great moulded and figured concavity" (258).

15 "he continued to circulate," "It kept him going and going—it made him no less restless," "Densher went round again twice" (328), "He walked up and down his rooms," "he was in circulation again," "he strolled about the square," "shuffling about in the rain" (330).

his fiery strength."[16] In this perspective, Veronese is the model Densher—and beyond him his author—feels unable to attain as he is about to yield to the "fiery strength" of physical passion, and this accounts for his impression of not being "in the picture" (298). The hero deplores his lacking "the highest style, in a composition in which everything else would have it" (297).

Significantly his feeling of alienation is expressed by a dismissed Classical image of closure, "not all with the result of making him feel that the picture closed him in" (297), which is inadequate considering the protagonist's state of emotional agitation. Whereas Milly will later on in the evening prove to be a mistress of self-control capable of overcoming her formidable inner tension between her will to live and her awareness of impending doom, thus deserving to be the key figure of a Veronese painting, her unworthy suitor fails to come to terms with his own tension and therefore to be integrated into the picture. He can then rightly object to the wishful representation of Mrs. Stringham, who holds out to him the inverted reflection of what he is not, "the grand young man who surpasses the others" (298), a definition of the Classical hero as opposed to the Baroque one filled with self-doubt, which he more closely resembles. Quite logically, the paragraph of introspective musing and self-justification following the exchange with the American chaperon is fuelled by the dialectics of control and instability: "the artificial repose," "his anxiety," "his restlessness," which define Densher are opposed to "smooth ladies [...] housed in Veronese pictures" (298).

Moreover, the character's inner insecurity is twice related to the flight of time. His failure to be framed in the picture is partly ascribed to his being subjected to time, "engaged in an unprecedented sacrifice of time," and the idea is further down taken up by Mrs. Stringham in a truly Baroque strain: "No one knows better than I how they haunt one in the flight of the precious deceiving days" (298). Three typical elements are interwoven here, anguish contained in the verb "haunt," transience suggested by "flight" and "days" and illusion conveyed by "deceiving," that is the illusory character of man's ephemeral existence. As Mrs. Stringham's demand of emotional commitment increasingly unsettles Densher, his anguish finds expression in yet another Baroque staple, the theme of multiplicity and of the protean nature of the self: "never had a man been in so many places at once" (299). Therefore it seems

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[16] John Ruskin, *Modern Painters*, David Barrie ed. (1856, London: André Deutsch, 1987), vol. V, part IX, 536 and vol. III, part IV, 302.

that the allusion to the Renaissance Veronese painting calls forth an antagonistic countercurrent of instability of Baroque inspiration.

Interestingly enough, the protagonist's restlessness is mentioned in relation to the process of writing, which rouses some suspicions of the subject's relevance to the author himself. What is more, it is directly linked with sterility: "almost for the first time in his life, stricken and sterile" (298), the [s] alliteration underscoring the emotional stake. It can be inferred then that the Veronese model proposed by Mrs. Stringham reflects the novelist's aesthetic aspirations and reveals his fears that he might be unable to check the forces of desire in order to achieve perfect artistic control, that he might be carried away by an unstable imagination of the Baroque kind, worse even, that he might doom his art by failing to attain the sacred beauty of disembodied passion.

The suggestion crops up again later on, when Densher nervously paces round Piazza San Marco in the brewing storm after his expulsion: "it was to Densher precisely as if he had seen the obliteration, at a stroke, of the margin on a faith in which they were all living. The margin had been his name for it" (326). The crowding of words related to the act of writing within a single sentence is too striking to be accidental. "Obliteration" or erasing the letter, "stroke" calling forth the stroke of the paintbrush or of the pen, and "margin" referring to the page converge to write the subtext of the author's fear of sterility, while the act of naming mentioned in the next clause, that is of putting reality into words is the privilege of the writer. Here again the anguish is closely linked to the instability of the weather and the protagonist's physical restlessness.

The Venetian episode of *The Wings of the Dove* may then be read as the artist's immersion into the turmoils of the Baroque imagination and a temporary surrender to the appeal of its excesses. However, the inclination is to be sacrificed to the worship of disembodied beauty and to the reign of Classical control as foreshadowed during Milly's climactic party. No wonder the action should leave the dazzling yet unstable city once Densher has seen the way to renunciation, and return to the dreary but familiar universe of London.

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