Venice Unveiled

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It was a Venice all of evil that had broken out [...]; a Venice of cold lashing rain from a low black sky, of wicked wind raging through narrow passes, of general arrest and interruption.

Henry James, *The Wings of the Dove*, 397

As James Buzard has pointed out regarding nineteenth-century travel writing on Europe,

> Poems, novels, and travelogues no less than guidebooks tended to supply some blend of mimetic and diegetic – or, in the broader terms then favoured, "prosaic" and "poetic". The "prosaic" task entailed the giving of directions, advice, and description in order to help readers physically to reach certain objects (cities, impressive vistas, works of art, and so forth); the "poetic" involved the prompting of readers in appropriate reactions to them.[1]

Buzard suggests that descriptions of places in novelistic travel literature are often extended because the texts serve not only as story-telling devices, but also as guidelines for a reader's own potential experiences of foreign places – or for the reading of foreign places in other texts.

Henry James, too, in *The American* (1877), suggests how a narrative might develop out of the functions of a guidebook. In a letter written during his travels, James's protagonist Christopher Newman writes to his friend Mrs. Tristram: "the best way to tell you [of his tour], I think, would be to send you my half-dozen guide-books, with my pencil-marks in the margin. Wherever you find a scratch, or a cross, or a "Beautiful!" or a "So true!" or a "Too thin!" you may know that I have had a sensation of some sort or other".[2] A narrative might, James hints, grow out of a "prosaic" guidebook itself, with a structure of psychological events first hinging itself onto place, then arranging itself from the pre-established values of places unfolding as an itinerary. As Chloe Chard explains,

> [A] long-established strategy that the rhetoric of tourism deploys is that of using a sight as a starting point for a deflection to the past. [...] the traveller [...] often greets a visual feature of the topography as an object that in some way facilitates the task of converting historical time into personal time. He or she assumes, in other words, that through contemplating a particular visual feature […] it becomes possible to forge an emotional link with the sight in question. Lady Morgan [*Italy*, Vol. II, p. 452 (1821)], proclaiming the uniqueness of Venice, emphasizes that, in observing its palazzi, she is also "reading" the historical narrative that they yield up. "In gliding along its great canals, its patrician palaces rise on either side from their watery base, in such majesty of ruin, in such affecting combinations of former splendour

[1] J. Buzard, *The Beaten Track: European Tourism, Literature, and the Ways to Culture, 1800-1918*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993, p. 167.
[2] H. James, *The American*, London: Macmillan, 1877, p. 115.

> and actual decay, that their material beauty is heightened by deep moral touches; and in gazing on fabrics, beyond all others, singular and imposing from their peculiar architecture, we feel that we are reading a history! [...]".[3]

Here, a history (or indeed, a story) is read by the act of moving through Venice and viewing its monuments, palaces, canals, and architecture. Travel not only allows one to construct stories from places, but threatens to bring those stories into the traveler's own life, just as reading a novel set in Europe admits the ever-present potential for readers to "live" the place described themselves. This article seeks to tie fictionalized American treatments of Venice to Ruskin's writings on the city. Certainly, there are some very basic similarities: James Fenimore Cooper, for example, uses Venice to warn American readers of the potential political corruption of republics, just as Ruskin uses Venice to warn British readers of the potential aesthetic corruption of their own urban landscapes. I will focus first on a very striking difference between several nineteenth-century American writers and Ruskin's own writing, then examine how their texts use Venice to construct narratives that are similar in their treatment of the city's spaces in one recurring theme – that outlined in the quote that heads this article, appearing when the plot turns on the hero of Henry James's *The Wings of the Dove*, revealing a Venice "all of evil", whose calm surface lifts like a veil to reveal the sinister.

In 1893, Reuben Parsons, in a chapter entitled "Wicked Venice," blamed the sinister image of Venice on the French, as a myth constructed as an excuse for the invasion of the city during the Napoleonic wars: Venice, the "corrupt" republic, counterposing the new French republic. "Evil" Venice in pre-nineteenth century English literature was meanwhile, Parsons argues, the result of a combination of "commercial rivalry"[4] and prejudice against Catholicism. The transference of this stereotype into American literature was marked in the nineteenth century by an emphasis on the hidden – most specifically on hidden intentions and duplicity. Consider perhaps the most familiar classic version, where Poe's narrator of "The Cask of Amontillado" (1846), in an unnamed Italian city during a masked carnival, buries an adversary behind a fresh wall in his cellar. The walling up of his victim veils his screams, while the story's narrator veils his intentions until his deed is accomplished, from his victim as well as from his readers.

Earlier, James Fenimore Cooper, in *The Bravo* (1831), used Venice as a setting for a story of intrigue, in which an innocent Venetian is coerced into becoming an assassin, seemingly by the mood of the city itself. Cooper begins by telling his purpose in writing the book – to compare other republics to the Union: "[...] a government which is not properly based on the people, possesses an unavoidable and oppressive evil of the first magnitude".[5] Cooper constructs a moral tale out of an already symbolic landscape. Here, government is symbolized by "[a] massive rustic basement of marble […] seated as solidly in the element as if it grew from a living rock, while story was raised on story, in the wanton observance of the most capricious rules of meretricious architecture [...]",[6] echoing the solid foundations of democracy perverted by vanity, while the "precious but

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[3] C. Chard, C., *Pleasure and Guilt on the Grand Tour: Travel writing and imaginative geography 1600-1830*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999, pp. 232-233.
[4] R. Parsons, *Some Lies and Errors of History*, Notre Dame, Indiana: The Ave Maria, 7th edition 1893, p. 245.
[5] J.F. Cooper, *The Bravo*, New York: Hurd and Houghton, 1868 (1831), p. vii.
[6] *Ibid*., p. 26.

useless little columns that" "load the front" of St. Mark's give it "a character of melancholy and mystery".[7] Here, Venice's ornate and complex architecture masks the inner workings of sinister plots. *The Bravo* sends a warning message on the dangers of political corruption to a young republic by "Europeanizing" Cooper's more familiar American landscape with capricious architectural settings and manners.

If *The Bravo*, peppered with epigrams from Byron, presents a Venetianized portrait of American politics, Henry James's *The Aspern Papers* (1888) is, in effect, an Americanized portrait of Byron's mistress Claire Clairmont. James gives us a tale of intrigue centered on one of Venice's rare spaces – a walled garden, creating it as a space opposing that of the house, access to whose innermost chambers proves a series of extending baffles. The narrator, an editor in search of the lost letters of fictional Romantic poet Jeffrey Aspern, hopes to coerce the poet's aging mistress into handing them over. His quarry, Miss Bordereau, herself embodies the image of Venice – a vain, formerly beautiful mistress, now aged, veiled, calculating, with a lust for money, and, never leaving her house, effectively veiled to the outside world. The narrator, seeking entrance to Bordereau's home, finds means through "a high blank wall which appeared to confine an expanse of ground on one side of the house. […] The place was a garden, and apparently it belonged to the house. It suddenly occurred to me that if it did belong to the house I had my pretext".[8] Convincing Bordereau he wants to rent a room in her home because of its garden, he will try to pass through her door by offering her the flowers he will grow there. The garden, a long-standing metaphor for American space in European cities,[9] allows the protagonist his foothold in Bordereau's world. But though she and her niece Tita are American in their origins, they are now mostly "nothing":

> I had known many of my country-people in Europe and was familiar with the strange ways they were liable to take up there; but the Misses Bordereau formed altogether a new type of the American absentee. Indeed it was plain that the American name had ceased to have any application to them – I had seen this in the ten minutes I spent in the old woman's room. You could never have said whence they came, from the appearance of either of them; wherever it was they had long ago dropped the local accent and fashion. There was nothing in them that one recognized, and putting the question of speech aside they might have been Norwegians or Spaniards.[10]

His main impression once inside the house, meanwhile, is of its doors: "It was gloomy and stately, but it owed its character almost entirely to its noble shape and to the fine architectural doors – as high as the doors of houses – which, leading into the various rooms, repeated themselves on either side at intervals," and with darkness: "the want of light".[11] Bordereau interviews him wearing a veil, a "baffling green shade [that]

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[7] *Ibid*., p.11.
[8] H. James, *The Aspern Papers*, New York: Macmillan, 1888, p. 5.
[9] For some examples, see C.R. Anderson, *Person, Place, and Thing in Henry James's Novels*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1977; J.G. Kennedy, *Imagining Paris: Exile, Writing, and American Identity*, New Jersery: Yale University Press, 1993; L. Lutwack, *The Role of Place in Literature*, Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1984; J. Méral, *Paris in American Literature*, trans. L. Long, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1989; J. PARKER, "Symbolic Geography in the Novels of Henry James", *Urbana*, 8, Autumn 2006, p. 11.
[10] James, *The Aspern Papers*, cit., p.27.
[11] *Ibid*., p. 9.

continued to cover her attitude".[12] The green veil and the green garden are at once their means of connection and, for each, a means of deceit.

On the protagonist's next interview with Bordereau, "The old woman was sitting in the same place in which I had seen her last, in the same position, with the same mystifying bandage over her eyes".[13] Bordereau, in the *sala*, parries with the protagonist, asking him to prolong his lease by showing him Aspern's portrait. At this point, the narrator is able to gain deeper access to her chambers by pushing her wheelchair across the floor into her parlor, there noticing the secretary he thinks holds the papers. Having gotten this far, he thinks, "a simple panel divided me from the goal of my hopes".[14]

As Bordereau approaches death, the narrator opens the door to her parlor, and sees the further door to her bedroom open, a candle burning within. He reaches toward the secretary holding his ultimate goal, but turns to see Bordereau standing behind him: "in her nightdress, in the doorway of her room, watching me; her hands were raised, she had lifted the everlasting curtain that covered half her face, and for the first, the last, the only time I beheld her extraordinary eyes".[15] Here she seems to be his own doppelganger: as he has revealed his own intentions, her face is also now, for the first time, revealed. The narrator, embarrassed, flees the house and, on his return, finds Bordereau has died. When her niece proposes marriage in exchange for the papers, he flees the house again and returning, has a momentary vision of the niece as a great beauty, before she reveals that she has burned the papers he sought. He returns home with nothing but the portrait for his troubles.

Venice as a place of hidden intentions is here underlined not only by the narrator's repeated fixation on Bordereau's veil, but by the dimness of her house and the series of closed doors within. Yet Bordereau's intentions are no more veiled than are the narrator's from her. Their two baffles echo each other: the narrator's use of the garden as a pretext to gain entry to the house, and Bordereau's "baffling green shade," which obscures the eyes the poet Aspern once lauded. At each step in progress toward his goal, James's narrator meets with new barriers blocking his view, which are lifted one by one until he comes tantalizingly close to seeing the documents he seeks: first the wall of the garden, then the door of the house itself, next the door to the parlor and beyond it the door to the bedroom, and, finally, the panel of the secretary which hides Bordereau's papers. As the story progresses, each veil but the last is lifted, but the content behind the veils themselves is unreachable, burned by her niece, who presents him instead with the portrait of Aspern, a flat image whose smile reveals as little as if it were another veil itself. The narrator receives an image of exactly the thing he sought – but without being able to reach beyond its flattened surface.

A slightly earlier American literary exploration of Venice again suggests tantalizing stories hidden beneath an unbroached surface which is itself, again, an unsatisfying image of the content it hides. Venice first appears to the travellers in Samuel Clemens's *The Innocents Abroad* (1869) as they approach the city by water: "[…] afloat on the placid sea a league away, lay a great city, with its towers and domes and steeples drowsing in a golden mist of sunset".[16] Clemens's Venice, too, is immediately described veiled, though not immediately in sinister terms. Like Miss

[12] *Ibid*., p. 16.
[13] *Ibid*., p. 41.
[14] *Ibid*., p. 63.
[15] *Ibid*., p. 75.
[16] S. Clemens, *The Innocents Abroad*, Hartford: American Publishing Company, 1869, p. 216.

Bordereau, she curtains her own ruin and desolation from view, and it would be rude for the viewer to disturb this concealment: "It seems a sort of sacrilege to disturb the glamour of old romance that pictures her to us softly from afar off as through a tinted mist, and curtains her ruin and her desolation from out view".[17] Yet the curtained city quickly turns vaguely sinister once it has been entered: "[...] everywhere there was a hush, a stealthy sort of stillness, that was suggestive of secret enterprises of bravoes and of lovers".[18]

Having described toured Venice's attractions and seen no "bravoes with poisoned stilettos, no masks, no wild carnival",[19] Clemens's final destination is "the state archives of Venice", with which he finishes his itinerary:

> We did not see them, but they are said to number millions of documents. [...] The secret history of Venice for a thousand years is here – its plots, its hidden trials, its assassinations, its commissions of hireling spies and masked bravoes – food, ready to hand, for a world of dark and mysterious romances. Yes, I think we have seen all of Venice.[20]

And so, to see Venice seems to be not to have seen it, but simply to have the knowledge that its secrets lie hidden beneath its own mask. Like James, Clemens completes his narrative with a description of paintings.

If Venice, in Clemens's account, can be read as a metaphor for that which is interior and hidden, veiled or covered, Ruskin's metaphors of veiling differ – in a very fundamental way – from those of Clemens, Cooper and the earlier James. Below I cite some passages in his *The Stones of Venice* and *Modern Painters* which deal with the idea of veiling. The comparison I want to draw is between how often when Ruskin mentions things being veiled, they are statues, views, paintings, etc. whose visual value is only enhanced by their being obscured, while his American counterparts so often describe what Venice, as a veil itself, hides as being mysterious, or more especially criminal, and thus what veils them, too, as sinister.

An early passage in *The Stones of Venice* describes the tomb of Doge Tomaso Mocenigo as:

> […] a sarcophagus with a recumbent figure above […]The face is emaciated, the features […] deeply worn away by thought and death; […] the curve of the lips just veiled by the light mustache at the side; the beard short, double, and sharp-pointed: all noble and quiet; the white sepulchral dust marking like light the stern angles of the cheek and brow. (IX, 48)

Here, a veil seems to silence both voice and outward expression by covering the lips of the Doge, while the dust that veils the tomb serves to make his image more clearly visible – not hiding, but instead *revealing* by "marking like light." Veils appear again as Ruskin describes the interior of San Marco:

> At every hour of the day there are […] solitary worshippers scattered through the dark places of the church, evidently in prayer both deep and reverent, and, for the most part, profoundly sorrowful. […] hardly a moment passes, from early morning to sunset, in which we may not see some half-veiled figure enter beneath the Arabian porch, cast itself into long abasement

[17] *Ibid*., p. 217.
[18] *Ibid*., p. 219.
[19] *Ibid*., p. 243.
[20] *Ibid*., p. 235.

> on the floor of the temple, and then rising slowly with more confirmed step, and with a passionate kiss and clasp of the arms given to the feet of the crucifix, by which the lamps burn always in the northern aisle, leave the church, as if comforted. (X, 89)

Here, veiled figures' emotions are revealed to the reader by Ruskin's use of words like "passionate" and "comforted" and the obvious change in attitude that comes from praying in the church. This veil doesn't hide the inner life of its wearer. Instead Ruskin uses the veiled figure to illustrate the church's relation to human life in the city, in a very intimate scene depicting daily life.

In the same way, Ruskin's description of veils on the Ducal Palace's statuary creates no impasse to his vivid interpretations of the statues. The veil is an ambiguous feature in these two descriptions – one implies a graceful humility, the other accompanies avarice: "Humility; with a veil upon her head, carrying a lamp in her lap. […] This virtue is of course a peculiarly Christian one […] which at this day it would be well if we were to imitate […]".[21] And "Avarice. An old woman with a veil over her forehead, and a bag of money in each hand. A figure very marvelous for power of expression. The throat is all made up of sinews with skinny channels deep between them, strained as by anxiety, and wasted by famine; the features hunger-bitten, the eyes hollow, the look glaring and intense".[22]

Ruskin next compares the sculptures adorning the stone walls of the palace to the "veil" of plant-life mantling the mountains seen beyond it:

> [...] walking at evening on the Lido, whence the great chain of the Alps, crested with silver clouds, might be seen rising above the front of the Ducal Palace, I used to feel as much awe in gazing on the building as on the hills, and could believe that God had done a greater work in breathing into the narrowness of dust the mighty spirits by whom its haughty walls had been raised, and its burning legends written, than in lifting the rocks of granite higher than the clouds of heaven, and veiling them with their various mantle of purple flower and shadowy pine (X, 438).

Here, the veil is clearly a decoration, not a means of making opaque. This same metaphor reappears frequently in Ruskin's "The Earth Veil" from volume five of *Modern Painters* (1856), of which the frontispiece itself quotes from the Bible, giving man's purpose on the earth as "to dress it and to keep it." Ruskin here writes of plants and flowers as veiling the earth, but at the same time as providing humans their only means of connection with it. "Vegetation," he writes, is "the means by which the earth becomes the companion of man—his friend and his teacher!

> In [the earth's] […] rocks, there could only be seen preparation for his existence;--the characters which enable him to live on it safely, and to work with it easily--in all these it has been inanimate and passive; but vegetation is to it as an imperfect soul, given to meet the soul of man. The earth in its depths must remain dead and cold, incapable except of slow crystalline change; but at its surface, which human beings look upon and deal with, it

[21] X, 396.
[22] X, 403.

> ministers to them through a veil of strange intermediate being: which breathes, but has no voice; moves, but cannot leave its appointed place; passes through life without consciousness, to death without bitterness; wears the beauty of youth, without its passion; and declines to the weakness of age, without its regret. (VII, 14-15)

This veil of nature is voiceless, yet it serves as an essential intermediary between humans and the "dead" depths of earth itself. It is surface and impermanent – but surfaces, Ruskin suggests, "imperfect" as they are, are man's true soul mate. As in James's "Aspern Papers," what lies beneath the surface has already long been buried, just as James's narrator fears Bordereau may bury her papers with her. It may hold, like Clemens's archived documents, "a world of dark and mysterious romances," but they are romances with which we cannot directly connect and can "see" only in the flat surfaces of paintings or the frivolity of contemporary Venetian life.

Ruskin next mentions a veil in pastoral terms, as emotions which, ephemeral, are themselves like clouds obscuring the sun, without changing or "sullying" it:

> […] the Greeks […] were as familiar with blue sea, clear air, and sweet outlines of mountain, as we are with brick walls, black smoke, and level fields. This perfect familiarity rendered all such scenes of natural beauty unexciting […] but there was another kind of beauty which […] seemed more glorious than any of this wild loveliness--the beauty of the human countenance and form. This, they perceived, could only be reached by continual exercise of virtue […] So they set themselves to reach this, and having gained it, gave it their principal thoughts, and set it off with beautiful dress as best they might. […] They had indeed their sorrows, true and deep, but still, more like children's sorrows than ours, whether bursting into open cry of pain, or hid with shuddering under the veil, still passing over the soul as clouds do over heaven, not sullying it, […] not becoming one with it […] leaving the man unchanged; in no wise affecting, as our sorrow does, the whole tone of his thought and imagination thence-forward. (V, 232-233)

Here, a veil is used to describe superficial emotions passing across a background of virtue as clouds pass over the sun. Ruskin next uses a veil to describe Northern Europe, rainy and occluded as compared to Italy and Greece – but also, precisely because of this, the inventor of Gothic architecture. Here, Ruskin attributes the Gothic style itself partly to a lack of clear visibility caused by mist and other elements of weather, which veil builders' sight. Ruskin moves his reader across Europe, from the sunny mosaic of Asia Minor and the Mediterranean northward, where we see:

> […] a vast belt of rainy green, where the pastures of Switzerland, and poplar valleys of France, and dark forests of the Danube and Carpathians stretch from the mouths of the Loire to those of the Volga, seen through clefts in grey swirls of rain-cloud and flaky veils of the mist of the brooks […] [The northern European] smites an uncouth animation out of the rocks which he has torn from among the moss of the moorland, and heaves into the darkened air the pile of iron buttress and rugged wall […] creations of ungainly shape and rigid limb, but full of wolfish life; fierce as the winds that beat, and changeful as the clouds that shade them […] put forth only the more energetically because the fine finger-touch was chilled away by the frosty wind, and the eye dimmed by the moor-mist, or blinded by the hail […]. (X, 186-187)

The "energy" of this stone architecture, "changeful as […] clouds," is a direct result of its builder's eyes being dimmed by mist, or blinded by hail. Veiling likewise adds to aesthetic experience in an early Turner drawing of Lake Geneva, in which:

> [t]he old city is seen lying beyond the waveless waters, veiled with a sweet misty veil of Athena's weaving […] between the folds of a white cloud that rests upon the grass, but rises, high and towerlike, into the zenith of dawn above. There is not as much colour in that low amber light upon the hill-side as there is in the palest dead leaf. The lake is not blue, but grey in mist, passing into deep shadow beneath the Voirons' pines; a few dark clusters of leaves, a single white flower--scarcely seen--are all the gladness given to the rocks of the shore. […]What made him take pleasure in the low colour that is only like the brown of a dead leaf? in the cold grey of dawn--in the one white flower among the rocks--in these--and no more than these? (VI, 312).

Ruskin answers by explaining that Turner "had in him the wonder and sorrow concerning life and death, which are the inheritance of the Gothic soul from the days of its first sea kings".[23] Here, the cloudy veil which for the Greeks was passing sorrow itself, temporary emotion moving across the face of unchanged virtue, also concerns itself with death, just as his layer of vegetation veiling the earth is, like us, mortal, and thus temporary; it covers and conceals that which is cold and dead beneath, and with which we can have no intercourse without vegetation serving as our intermediary. Ruskin's "sweet misty veil" occludes, while referencing what lies beneath it. His argument for Turner's brushwork is an argument for the sorrow and subtlety of surfaces, underlining the fact that surfaces always belie the fundamental unspeakable and unspeaking stillness of the firmament.

James's own dilemma of finding "the thing itself" beneath surfaces leads him to describe his heroine's palazzo in *The Wings of the Dove* as a "great gilded shell"[24]– an outer surface which at once protects (and decorates) Milly, a stoic American heiress dying of an unnamable disease, and provides the other characters' only means of intercourse with her. James struggles throughout his novel to differentiate the shell and the unnamable thing beneath it, appearance and reality, deception and true motives. Arriving in Venice, Milly immediately secludes herself, hiding her impending death behind the façade of her rented palazzo, while fending off suitors who, in turn, mask their true intentions toward her. The final symbol of the novel is also of a covering – the envelope sent to the protagonist Densher by Milly's lawyers on her death, which he finally refuses to open.

As in *The Aspern Papers*, Venice here is a space where a male protagonist awkwardly plays the role of deceiving a woman to get the object of his desire but fails in his object, unable to press his advantage in the end. Densher and Kate, secretly engaged but without the means to marry, plot for Densher to seduce the dying Milly to gain her fortune. Here again the protagonist nearly loses sight of his object to fall for his dupe, who begins to radiate her own allure. And each dupe, in the end, provides, as a gift, not the object of the protagonist's desire, but instead an object symbolizing his loss of it: the portrait of Aspern and the envelope containing Milly's monetary gift. Meanwhile, the protagonist's role is also, in part, to kill the dupe to reach his goal. Each has a direct part in the dupe's death, as his plan requires him to hope for it.

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[23] VI, 312.

[24] H. James, *The Wings of the Dove*, New York: Barnes & Noble, 2005 (New York Edition, 1907), p. 327.

Veils here serve even more strongly as metaphors for hidden intentions, but are also protective: "[...] Milly herself, who was, while she talked, really conscious of the enveloping flap of a protective mantle, a shelter with the weight of an Eastern carpet" –[25] the "protective mantle" being her "friends" from London, yet more than a protective envelope surrounding her, these people turn out to be hiding secrets from her, while Milly veils her illness from them, as James does from his readers. Milly's first described actions in Venice take place as if behind a veil: "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 spaces".[26] Milly dreams of never leaving her rented palace, and, indeed, as in *The Aspern Papers*, is a woman who never leaves the seclusion of her Venetian home, the potential dupe of a plot that backfires on its schemers. From the open casements and balcony, she sees 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 to what".[27] Densher, meanwhile, separated from Milly's palazzo by the Grand Canal, recognizes his own hotel first by its "green shutters".[28]

When Milly's second suitor, Lord Mark, comes to unmask Densher's plan, the city becomes, suddenly "a Venice all of evil […] a Venice of cold lashing rain from a low black sky, of wicked wind raging through narrow passes, of general arrest and interruption".[29] Densher, his plan discovered, is visited by Milly's companion Mrs. Stringham, who comes to him wearing a veil insistently mentioned during their exchange: "her face, under the veil, richly rosy with the driving wind, was – and the veil too – as splashed as if the rain were her tears"; "She looked vaguely about through her wet veil";[30] "Her eyes, through her veil, kept pressing him".[31] Even the rain outside serves as a veil in this scene: "he moved to the other window and looked at the sheeted canal, wider, like a river, where the houses opposite, blurred and belittled, stood at twice their distance",[32] as Stringham reveals what Lord Mark had come to Venice for (to tell Milly Kate and Densher are secretly engaged). Densher reacts: "he unmasked?" Densher offers to light the light, but Stringham tells him not to bother, and this, Densher feels, gives him some cover from her, providing a veil for himself.

When Milly's doctor arrives, Densher meets him at the train station, without accompanying him to Milly's palazzo, and it is only at the train station, when leaving, that the doctor tells Densher Milly wants to see him again. This central scene of their last meeting, like Lord Mark's "unmasking" visit, is itself masked from the reader; the next chapter switches the action back to London, where Milly's legacy to Densher, concealed in an envelope, remains there, its amount undisclosed. Here, a refusal to look inside the envelope is in itself a heroic act, for to open the letter, or to ask openly what, exactly, is Milly's medical condition, is indelicate. Densher decides to refuse the money, send it back, and be satisfied with the existence of the envelope itself. As in Clemens's description of the archive, to know that there is something beneath the veil and to leave

[25] *Ibid*., p. 165.
[26] *Ibid*., p. 320.
[27] *Ibid*., p. 324.
[28] *Ibid*., p. 343.
[29] *Ibid*., p. 397.
[30] *Ibid*., p. 404.
[31] *Ibid*., p. 406.
[32] *Ibid*., p. 410.

that something unspoken, untouched and merely imagined is exactly what it means to "see" Venice.

In the novel's final scene, Kate comes to Densher wearing a veil, which she removes: "he had failed a little to push up her veil symmetrically and he had said she had better take it off altogether, she had acceded to his suggestion before the glass".[33] Densher, disappointed that Kate has opened the seal of the letter containing his inheritance from Milly, finally refuses her because of her inability to relinquish the money inside the envelope. Kate, in turn, refuses Densher because they have been changed by what lies beneath another surface – the content of his relationship with Milly, which remains unspeakable, and can only be alluded to by the concealing envelope holding an unspecified sum.

James's novel itself reads almost like a veil, its oblique conversations and dense description working to obscure essential narrative facts and the characters' intentions and situations from the reader, just as James obscures the cause of Milly's death - and Kate and Densher's plans for her - from the reader. If Clemens concludes his description of Venice with the collection of records that remains unseen, yet "seen" at the same time, James, too, finally, seems to be, through his own writing, underlining not what lies hidden beneath the surface of things, but the profound message of the surface itself.

While Mumford theorizes that cities first arose from cemeteries,[34] and if the slow, "crystalline movement" of the earth Ruskin describes is perhaps, finally, a metaphor for our own inevitable movement toward death itself, Simmel writes specifically of Venice's surfaces, death, and ambiguity of foregrounds and backgrounds:

> Ambivalent is the double-life of the city, here in the connection of its alley-ways, there in the connection to its canals, so that the city belongs neither to land nor to water. Instead, each appears like a body in a protean gown, behind which one tries to entice the other as if genuine. And ambivalent are the small, dark canals whose water restlessly eddies and flows – although no direction can be discerned in this flow, since it always moves without moving anywhere. The one certainty is that life is only a foreground behind which stands death. This is the final reason that life, as Schopenhauer notes, is 'ambivalent through and through'. For if appearance does not grow from a root, whose juices sustain it in *one* direction, then it may be exposed to any arbitrary interpretation".[35]

Which of Venice's elements is surface, finally? Which is depth? In which does the essential message lie? In 1872, describing his first experiences in Venice, James had described an artist he met working inside San Marco, mentioning that he himself dreamed of being "a young American painter unperplexed by the mocking, elusive soul of things and satisfied with their wholesome light-bathed surface and shape".[36] Thirty-seven years later, he echoes the sentiment in his maturity.

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[33] *Ibid*., p. 487.
[34] L. Mumford, *The City in History*, San Diego: Harcourt, 1961, p. 7.
[35] G. Simmel, "Venice", trans. Ulrich Teucher and Thomas M. Kemple. *Theory Culture Society*, 2007 (SAGE, Los Angeles, London, New Delhi, Singapore), Vol. 24 (7-8): 45.
[36] H. James, "Venice: An Early Impression", *Italian Hours*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1909, p. 60.

If the veil for James at first symbolizes the barriers to joining elite circles of wealth, poetry and society, while what is finally hidden by the veil in both his texts is a dying American, then perhaps what earlier writers sought to portray through the "evil" of Venice was not really the corruption of the Venetian republic, but the potential corruption (and perhaps the potential temporality) of the American republic. If so, perhaps these descriptions of Venice are guides for Americans as, in a sense, Ruskin's writings were for the English, to their own unfolding history – a story whose future is always veiled.

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