Scratching at the Surface: Understanding History through Style in James's Italy

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Ruminating about the relation of satisfactory historical knowledge, which proves "too deep . . . for any ease of intellectual relation" (xxvii), to superficial Italian pleasures, wherein "we hang about in the golden air" (xxviii), Henry James's 1908 preface to *The Aspern Papers* details an interpretive impasse. "So, right and left, in Italy—before the great historic complexity at least—penetration fails; we scratch at the extensive surface" (*AP* xxviii). James's affection for Italian scenes and experiences is legendary. His textually mediated interactions with Italy have furnished material for hundreds of pages of critical analysis, as readers attempt to grapple with the kind of interpretative indeterminacy James invokes in his preface.

Critical approaches to James's love of Italy, and the implications drawn from his Italian writings, of course vary widely, although the late novels *The Wings of the Dove* and *The Golden Bowl* are often pressed into analytic service, especially in arguments about style. Some have turned instead to James's *Italian Hours* to explore intersections of history and style: Angus Brown claims to find a temporal excess in James's Italian essays, "a delicious sense of time to waste that allows James a certain stylistic indulgence" (63), while Steven Salmoni views them as "an experiment of sorts as to the nature of the spectator who . . . attempts to comprehend the enormous cultural spectacle of Italy, past and present" (279). In both cases, *Italian Hours* is noted for a blend of excruciating detail and useless information. As Brown notices,[1] the opening sentences of 1882's "Venice" refuse any pretense of utility, as James claims "I do not pretend to enlighten the reader; I pretend only to give a fillip to his memory" (*IH* 7). Despite this provocation, my argument invests James's fillips with an ability to convey knowledge; it is not the case, after all, that Venice has "no information whatever to offer."

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This essay uses the conceptual associations of James's "fillip" to explore his seemingly purposeless meditations on Venetian scenes. Defined by the *Oxford English Dictionary* as "a trifle," "a short space of time," and "something that serves to rouse, excite, or animate," the notion of "fillip" offers a means to reconcile sentence-level trifles with the excitements of history, even those excitements limited to short spaces of time. My goal is not finally to fix the relation between form and content with a stability James would have resisted[2] but to demonstrate how stylistic and historical representations overlap or align for James. The fillip proves a useful figure for imagining this overlap because of its minor and contingent status. Like the operations of history represented through style, the fillip resists totalized determinacy in favor of the momentary glimpse, association, or excitation.

In what follows, I pay particular attention to passages from *The Aspern Papers* and *Italian Hours* that refuse conformity with the rigors of plot-specific meaning. I argue that an emphasis on stylistic surface illustrates how contemplations of Italy dramatized a distinct struggle of James's writing career: how to balance the perceived necessity of plot, which I read as an historical impulse, with the rich surface of style, understood to represent an embrace of extra-temporal spectacle.[3] Style here refers to writing that is ornamental or wrought, calling attention to itself through complexity or idiosyncrasy. More specifically, my analysis attends to particular linguistic bits traditionally understood as grammatical: the idiosyncrasy or ornamentation I explore often results from excessive or anomolous use of certain parts of speech.

I identify two different meanings for James's sentence that turn on two distinct interpretations of the preposition "before" in the clause set off by dashes: "before the great historic complexity at least." Making reference to exhibitions and spectators, James uses "before" as a spatial preposition in the succeeding sentence: "[Italy] is fortunately the exhibition in all the world before which, as admirers, we can most remain superficial without feeling silly" (*AP* xxviii). If we take the meaning of "before" in "before the great historic complexity" to be a spatial one, the passage in question would seem to argue that the failure of penetration, the condition of "scratch[ing] at the extensive surface," is a consistent and unchanging fact of Italian cultural interpretation: distracted by the beauty of artifacts presented before us, this spectacle can be appreciated without requiring mastery of underlying depth.

If we read James's initial sentence as making a particular historical claim instead of a spatial one—if we understand "before" as marking a contrast to "after"—we might more easily reconcile this sentence with the preface's general observations about historical representation, including James's claim that "I delight in a palpable imaginable *visitable* past" (*AP* xxxi). This second version of Italy depicts a place of depth, of complexity; moreover, it is an Italy of concrete, tangible material. Italy's complexity becomes one of content: the past, imaginable and visitable, is distant from the present in a way that suggests layering. Indeed, James likens this sense of historical sedimentation to a "buried treasure. . . [a] grave unprofaned" (xxxi) where the dramatist may dig without compunction.

Reading this sentence for conflicting versions of time's passage, a reader must reconcile its semantic intentions with the larger tone and purpose of the rumination in which it appears, a typical interpretive balancing act of stylistic analysis.[4] Evoking

an Italianate mosaic, Mary Cross describes James's style as "a system of relations, a constellated field of verbal properties" (21). Separate bits (an unclear pronoun, an abstract subject, a spatial preposition) work in relation to build something coherent enough to be recognized as a "system." Kevin Ohi and D. A. Miller emphasize a similar relation in more personal terms. Ohi asserts that "[style] marks a tension between particularity and abstraction, personality and impersonality" (20–21), while Miller claims that "behind style's ahistorical impersonality lies the historical impasse of someone whose social representation doubles for social humiliation" (28). Pivoting between ahistorical impersonality and personal "ignominy" (Miller 28), style emerges as a vehicle for exploring individual attachment to history's "system of relations," the ways in which history provokes its dramatizers (a role James saw himself performing) to both identification and analysis.[5]

Cross, Ohi, and Miller propose definitions of style that resemble what James describes as artistic effort. Presented with a clear view and given the ability to take in sufficient detail at a glance, James's ideal author can glean everything necessary for a "perfect" representation, a process characterized in "The Art of Fiction" as "the power to guess the unseen from the seen . . . to judge the whole piece by the pattern" (861). For James, impressions convey quite enough for the thoughtful artist: "the glimpse made a picture; it lasted only a moment, but that moment was experience. . . . If experience consists of impressions, it may be said that impressions *are* experience" (861). James suggests that the glimpse (which is, after all, a visual version of the fillip's "short space of time," much as the impression is an experiential version of what "serves to rouse, excite") provides sufficient material for "reveal[ing] a particular mind" (859). Such revelation is both the goal of James's narrative efforts and the purpose of critical accounts of Jamesian style.

Like the successfully wrought impression, style can encompass almost anything: elements as diverse as syntax, vocabulary, grammar, clause ordering, narrative style, voice (to name a few) can become "idiosyncratic" (Ohi 21) enough to register as particular to an individual author. Critical recognition of James's tendencies toward referential obscurity, his "distinctive kind of vague allusiveness" (Chatman 2), represent a general understanding of his style. Given a loose critical consensus about Jamesian style,[6] the interpretation of a particular preposition becomes an exercise in stylistic analysis to the extent that prepositional obscurity is recognized as one of the many ways James develops his idiosyncratic "allusiveness."

Drawing attention to the immediate beauty of language and the distracting superficiality of ornate expression, James offers style as a means for representing and contemplating Italy. In part, style can offer reprieve from history through its ability to resist mimetic or instrumental representation. For Ohi, one of the most pressing functions of Jamesian style is its insistence on "disrupt[ing] the possibility of understanding representation in mimetic terms" (14). In both his fictional and nonfictional endeavors, the short space of the "glimpse" proves sufficient for James, who converts his experiential impressions into a linguistic surface capable of supporting a range of cultural, ethical, and nationalist questions. James's theory of the glimpse or impression[7] suggests another way to understand history or temporal order: in place of totalized, narrativizable plot, stylistic history presents "a system of relations," a swath of details to be attended to or discarded. This system is not so much neutrally mimetic as it is exhibitionary and performative.

Presenting two versions of Venice in a single passage of *The Aspern Papers*, James uses style to hold both visions of history—the superficial spectacle and layered complexity—in tension. In the novella's closing pages, the anonymous narrator arrives at an ethical impasse. Confronted with a choice between giving up bachelorhood to marry the "ridiculous pathetic provincial old" Miss Tina or sacrificing an unpublished archive of biographical treasure from the hand of Jeffery Aspern, the narrator spends a day wandering Venice (92). Despite its appearance at the tale's moral and narrative climax (Will the narrator trade his dignity for professional glory? Will he damn Miss Tina with an offer of marriage so as to grasp his literary prize?), an extended description of Venetian scenes contains no information that contributes to the plot's resolution, which lies a scant two pages away.

> I was standing before the church of Saints John and Paul and looking up at the small square-jawed face of Bartolommeo Colleoni, the terrible *condottiere* who sits so sturdily astride of his huge bronze horse on the high pedestal on which Venetian gratitude maintains him. . . . The western light shines into all his grimness at that hour and makes it wonderfully personal. . . . I don't know why it happened that on this occasion I was more than ever struck with that queer air of sociability, of cousinship and family life, which makes up half the expression of Venice. Without streets and vehicles, the uproar of wheels, the brutality of horses, and with its little winding ways where people crowd together, where voices sound as in the corridors of a house, where the human step circulates as if it skirted the angles of furniture and shoes never wear out, the place has the character of an immense collective apartment. (93–94)

The first sentence, describing the statue of a notorious Venetian mercenary (*condottiere*), is, though long, straightforwardly expository. Not constructed of the embedded and qualificatory clauses notorious as late Jamesian style, it moves forward with the aid of simple prepositions followed by short descriptive clauses. While the sentence has the slightly lurching effect of all exuberantly prepositional writing, the phrases in question do not introduce interpretive complexity through unclear pronoun reference, descriptive contradiction, or abstraction. Built of a series of prepositional phrases, the sentence is one long declarative, a single independent clause featuring a connected series of modifiers offering an impression of a stone-faced, sturdily mounted soldier.

The third and fourth sentences, describing Venice as "an immense collective apartment," more closely resemble the syntactic complexity associated with late James. The entire last sentence, until the final independent clause "the place has the character of an immense collective apartment," is a series of conceptually coherent but loosely related clauses modifying the late-arriving subject. Prepositions again abound, organizing connected dependent clauses such as "*without* streets and vehicles," or "*with* its little winding ways *where* people crowd together." Even more complexly, embedded clauses often include layers of prepositional subordination further complicated by weak conjunctions, as in "*where* the human step circulates *as if* it skirted the angles of furniture." Certainly, the effect of this layering is consistent with the sense of "immense" collectivity James attributes to Venice. As description, however, this final sentence is quite unlike the first.

In this example, conflicting descriptive modes—long but straightforward as opposed to long and embedded/dependent—develop two distinct senses of Venice and of historical knowledge. In the passage's first sentence, we have ornate artworks, historically situated and available for contemplation, identification, appreciation. The sentence describing Colleoni, structured as a connected series of descriptive phrases, might be said to mimic progressive historical understanding: first this detail, then that one, then a third, together advancing a single picture. Like the "wonderfully personal" grimness with which Colleoni confronts the piazza visitor, a totalizing temporal order (performed by the sentence's grammatical development, symbolized by the conquering figure of the condottiere) interpolates the spectator into a noble, and "sturdy," Venetian history. Invoking the specter of intimate attachment with the descriptive phrase "wonderfully personal," this characterization of condottiere history represents the relational object of this fleeting attachment as national history, not individual specificity. Without erasing the spectator's sense of the statue as distant, the wonderfully personal impression suggests that even grand history, even long-held national "gratitude," occasionally presents a singular aspect with which the humblest admirer might momentarily identify.

Against this condottieri Venice, James sets a collection of complex, interwoven dependent clauses whose looping movement suggests a dense constellation of canals. Together, they offer a sense of crabbed, crushed confusion as the character of Venice. Refusing progressive development, the sentences present a collection of impressions conveying the sense of tableaux all glimpsed at once as from above: the absence of loud wheels, the absence of brutal horses, the winding crowded ways and echoing corridors and unworn-out shoes. None of these alone convey the Venice James wants us to understand, nor can they be coherently connected into a single image. This version of Venice refuses ultimate meaning or mastery: not only is the picture dimly comprehensible, it reflects but "half the expression of Venice" (*AP* 93).

This analysis of two descriptive approaches in one textual interlude, which holds in tension two distinct versions of historical understanding, begins to suggest how style might illuminate alternative modes of historical identification. Condottiere history is progressive, building details upon one another until an ostensibly complete picture emerges. Through its close association with military action and Venice's grateful memorializing, this version of Venice is institutionally sanctioned and presumes a coherent entirety. The alternative takes shape as a circular knowledge, where details overlap occasionally but aggregate in an information assemblage instead of in linear fashion. The vision resembles the collective Venetian apartment: divergent ideas (forms of historical understanding, relations between plot, description, and style) jostle together in an effort to picture Venice, the narrator's historical-ethical dilemma, the writer's own Venetian associations. The distinctions between individual and collective histories are imprecise in ways that echo Smit's contention about style: style is always present, Smit argues, and what it means in any given study depends on the individual interpreter (5). Like the observer of a detailed mosaic or the stylistically inclined critic, those representing history participate in a series of choices, unconscious or aware, that determine the story being told. We might even suggest, following James's narrator, that history's recorders make such choices based on what strikes any one of them, at any moment, as the most "wonderfully personal" elements of a given historical account.

In *The Aspern Papers*, James presents the literary historian—his unnamed narrator—as a condottiere of the romantic age.[8] Grimly pursuing his desired objects, the narrator wants to capture a suppressed history of private documents so as to enjoy a more consistent relation with the literary past: "After all they were under my hand—they had not escaped me yet; and they made my life continuous, in a fashion, with the illustrious life they had touched at the other end" (*AP* 28). James's novella represents (though it does not necessarily condone) a fantasy of historical wholeness that the narrator imagines as the inevitable result of his dogged pursuit. By discouraging our sympathetic attachment to the narrator—that calculating and self-absorbed American—the novella undermines its preface's investment in the pleasures of historical continuity, what James describes as the "value of nearness" (xxxi).

One way James combats his aversion to "political actuality" (an aversion Ross Posnock also calls his "escape from authority and history" [117]) is through his theory of impression. Essential for its success are the stylistic choices involved in appropriate rendering, a process James describes as "catching the very note and trick, the strange irregular rhythm of life. . . . Art is essentially selection" (*AF* 865). The job of the literary artist, according to James, is to select the notes, bits, or fillips that offer the most identifiable version of "the whole piece" (861). Turning briefly to *Italian Hours*'s "Venice," we can begin to see how this principle of selection might be applied to history. As early as 1882, James's appropriately personal history, a stylized history, could more often be accessed through the glimpse or impression than the totalizing view of the historian-condottieri.

Like so many other subjects to which he was attracted, James wrote often of Venetian artwork—especially the paintings of Tintoretto and Veronese—despite an awareness that he had nothing new to add: "everything has been said about the mighty painters" (*IH* 20), James asserts. In his writing about Venetian art, James expresses his appreciation for the concurrence between representation and experience: "Nowhere. . . do art and life seem so interfused and, as it were, so consanguineous. All the splendour of light and colour, all the Venetian air and the Venetian history are on the walls and ceilings. . . . you live in a certain sort of knowledge as in a rosy cloud" (21). Although James professes a deeply moral appreciation for Tintoretto, it is Veronese, that "happiest of painters" (25), who offers the version of Venetian history James finds most pleasurable. Moreover, Veronese may offer James a way to reconcile his two opposing impulses in writing about Italy: to highlight Italy's "great historic complexity" or to appreciate its "extensive surface" (*AP* xxviii) without need of historical reference. In writing about Veronese, as in the descriptions of Venice from *The Aspern Papers*, James attempts to hold both impulses in tension while maintaining their distinction.

For James, the best Venetian art has an ability to change or condition Venetian history, perhaps even distracting James from "the big depressing dazzling joke" of the city's decrepitude (*IH* 38). While James never goes so far as to refute history as such, passages about Veronese offer a different kind of spectacle than that of the "dazzling joke." Amid the confusing demonstrations of Italian modernity and the deeply compelling sights of Italian aesthetic history, Veronese is a consistent source of joy and diversion.

In an initial description, James's experience in Ducal Palace and his experience in front of the Veronese merge into one grand aesthetic moment:

> All the history of Venice, all its splendid stately past, glows around you in a strong sea-light. Every one here is magnificent, but the great Veronese is the most magnificent of all. He swims before you in a silver cloud; he thrones in an eternal morning. . . . the white colonnades sustain the richest canopies, under which the first gentlemen and ladies in the world both render homage and receive it. (25)

In this highly adjectival interlude, not much time is spent on pictorial details, nor, it should be noted, on historical ones.[9] A sense of beauty absent stable referent is perhaps the most striking feature of this entire passage, which moves from describing the room and its effects on James to a free-floating appraisal of Veronese that collapses a distinction between the painter and his works, ending with a clause that performs a similar collapse of spectator and painting. Distinctions blur at the edges: while unclear referents establish this confusion, sentence order exacerbates it until we are not quite sure what James is showing us. We know it is beautiful, sun-dappled, and glowing from the sea's reflection. We know, in short, that it is all Venice.

The grammar of these sentences seems intentionally to obscure who is acting and what is being evoked, eschewing situating pronouns or interpretive information that might help the reader place herself in the scene. Nevertheless, the impression this passage offers encourages her identification with a lovely vision hazily imagined. This scene's grammatical peculiarity—the aggressive indeterminacy of its bits, its fillips—can be said to represent James's Venetian experience and his aesthetic theory of representing reality through complexity of style, which erases hard distinctions between art objects and experiential reality.

This tendency to collapse boundaries between art and life proves the most important and salutary aspect of Venice for James. "The great Venetians," James writes, "recognised that form and colour and earth and air were equal members of every possible subject; and beneath their magical touch the hard outlines melted together and the blank intervals bloomed with meaning" (*IH* 257–58). The "melt[ing] together" of "hard outlines"—between people and painting, between sunlight and historical personages—is what our passage set in the Ducal Palace performs. This delighted indeterminacy emerges as an antidote to the decrepitude and historical density of Venice, even the density of James's entire Italy. In such melting, meaning might finally "bloom," spilling out from once-hard edges in a promiscuous and compelling spectacle that refuses hard outlines like those dictating linear historical form or circumscribing the appropriate limits of collective affiliation. That this desired effect is achieved, for James, through aesthetic—by which I mean stylistic—effects suggests that historical meaning might in fact be a matter for style instead of a matter of plot.

NOTES

[1]Brown's analysis of the essay's opening lines finds James "absolving himself of any responsibility toward plot, or narrative, or even content" (63).

[2]Critics who explore Jamesian style in order to make an argument about James's rejection of determinate, singular meaning include Cross, Kurnick, Poole, and Smit.

[3]The term "surface" as a signifier for "style" is a common substitution for James and his critics. Recent commentators who employ such language include Blackwood and Otten. In his revised preface for *The Wings of the Dove*, James writes: "The enjoyment of a work of art. . . . is greatest, it is delightfully, divinely great, when we feel the surface, like the thick ice of the skater's pond, bear without cracking the strongest pressure we throw on it" (xlvi).

[4]Miller claims that "Absolute Style" is often noticeable in small moments that conflict with the larger tenor of the plot, the "tension, everywhere visible in Austen, between her typical subject . . . and

her characteristic voice (the exclusiveness of Absolute Style)" (25). Smit makes a similar point about how we decide what counts as style when confronted with language as such: "Among all the ways in which we may explain the language of a literary work of art, the most common is . . . that it is appropriate to the subject matter" (80). That is, schematizing the relation between linguistic part and subject-matter whole may assist the critic in making stylistic assessments.

[5]For James, these oppositional but inextricable impulses—for historical intimacy and historical distance—suggest metaphors like those of the table and the garden invoked in the preface to *The Aspern Papers*: "I delight in. . . the nearer distances and the clearer mysteries, the marks and signs of a world we may reach over to as . . . we grasp an object at the other end of our own table. . . . With more moves back the element of the appreciable shrinks—just as the charm of looking over a garden-wall into another garden breaks down when successions of walls appear" (xxxi).

[6]Smit's catalogue of "late Jamesian style" records several features that contribute to the indeterminacy and ambiguity considered hallmarks of late James, including "the use of intangible nouns as the subjects of sentences," "the use of semi-colons to signal loosely attached participials or supplemental phrases," "the use of ambiguous conditionals" (39–40). Cross's own list offers a more rhetorical focus than Smit's grammatically organized features. Cross notes James's preferences for "the rhetorical word patterns of chiasmus, oxymoron, antitheses and irony," "the rhetorical schemes of repetition and of parallel structure," as well as "a marked preference for periodicity in his sentences, suspending their resolution" (30). Ohi highlights James's "elusive and multivalent effects of syntax, figure, voice, and tone" (2) throughout his study of James's "queerness of style."

[7]In presenting a theory of "the fillip," then, this essay uses a different term from those offered in James's own theories of artistic inspiration and endeavor. My theory of the fillip allows linguistic particulars (those stylistic "trifles" I explore here) to inform James's existent ruminations on the importance of the glimpse or impression.

[8]The narrative is filled with militaristic metaphors and figures of speech. At one point, the narrator avers his participation in a "tradition of personal conquest" (14), only to lament, a few pages later, the futility of trying to "batter down a dead wall. . . . when I ought to have been carrying on the struggle in the field" (*AP* 25).

[9]The detailed notes to the Penguin Classics edition of *Italian Hours* is careful to record many of the references or possible sources for James's art assessments. James himself also makes note of influential texts in the essays themselves. Perhaps the most well-known are the many writings of John Ruskin (James's essays record an uneasy relation to this particular author's Italian pronouncements and provocations) and the work of Théophile Gautier, especially his 1860 *Italia*.

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