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Henry James and Vittor Carpaccio: The Horizontal and the Vertical in Art

There is something ridiculous in talking of Venice without making him [Carpaccio] almost the refrain. (27)

This is what Henry James wrote in the "Venice" essay (1882) in *Italian Hours*, arousing many expectations in any reader approaching his Venetian writings for the first time. All the more so, since the above statement was introduced by another enthusiastic expression of praise:

Memories of Carpaccio, the magnificent, the delightful — it's not for want of such visitations, but only for want of space, that I haven't said of him what I would. There is little enough need of it for Carpaccio's sake, his fame being brighter to-day — thanks to the generous lamp Mr. Ruskin has held up to it — than it has ever been. (27)

As is well known, when James first visited Venice he had Ruskin's writings on his mind (Tanner 157-209, Edel 301), so his linking Carpaccio's name to Ruskin's comes as no surprise. It was, in fact, a way of acknowledging his personal debt to him, while at the same time recalling a body of work that needed no further introduction.

Carpaccio was one of the five painters whose "excellency and supremacy" Ruskin claimed to have been the "first to discern, and then to teach, so far as in this hurried century any such thing *can* be taught."¹ Ruskin's earliest mention of Carpaccio was in *The Stones of Venice* (1853), although it was during a later stay in the Veneto that he fell in love with him completely. "There's nothing here like Carpaccio!" he wrote in a letter to Burne-Jones in 1869.² From that moment on he devoted many pages to the painter, notably in his *Guide to the Academy at Venice* (1877)

and in *St. Mark's Rest* (1877-1884), paying special tribute to the cycle of St. Ursula (at the Accademia museum)³ and to the paintings in the Guild of St. George of the Slaves.⁴

It was popular, for the educated traveller of the time, to see Carpaccio in the light of Ruskin's descriptions. We find interesting evidence of this, for instance, in the Venetian journal of Lady Layard.⁵ In the entry for 22 September 1882 (one of many in which Carpaccio's name appears) we read that she

Went out in gondola with Henry, Mrs. Burr and Alice to S. Giorgio dei Schiavoni to look at the pictures by Carpaccio. We took with us Ruskin's little book on them & amused ourselves vastly reading it on the spot.⁶

Like many of his contemporaries, James visited the Chapel of St. George of the Slaves with Ruskin in his pocket, and absorbed both the critic's words and Carpaccio's colors at the same time. This is how he described the place:

[It] is small and incommensurable, the pictures are out of sight and ill-lighted, the custodian is rapacious, the visitors are mutually intolerable, but the shabby little chapel is a palace of art. Mr. Ruskin has written a pamphlet about it which is a real aid to enjoyment. (27)

After reading "Venice," one might anticipate several references to Carpaccio's paintings in the fiction James set in the sea city. And one might expect to meet Carpaccio's name especially in his earlier works, written when his personal exposure to the city was still limited, and his reliance on Ruskin's vision of it conceivably stronger.⁷

Such an early work is "Travelling Companions," published in 1870, only one year after his first Venetian trip. The presence of Ruskin's work is indeed marked in this story. One only needs to read the following passage on St. Mark's Basilica — and compare it to Ruskin's descriptions of the same⁸ — to realize this:

Within the church, the deep brown shadow-masses, the heavy thick-tinted air, the gorgeous composite darkness, reigned in richer, quainter, more fantastic gloom . . . From those rude concavities of dome and semi-dome, where the multitudinous facets of pictorial mosaic shimmer and twinkle in their own dull brightness; from the vast antiquity of innumerable marbles, incrusting the walls in roughly mated slabs, cracked and polished and triple-tinted with eternal service; from the wavy carpet of compacted stone, where a thousand once-bright fragments glimmer through the long attrition of idle feet and devoted knees; from sombre gold and mellow alabaster, from porphyry and malachite, from long dead crystal and the sparkle of undying lamps — there proceeds a dense rich atmosphere of splendor and sanctity which transports the half-stupefied traveller to the age of a simpler and more awful faith. ("Travelling Companions" 192)

As any devotee of Ruskin's visiting Venice would do, the protagonists of the story linger "in charmed devotion" before the canvases of Titian, Veronese, Bellini and, above all, Tintoretto, whose *Crucifixion* in the church of San Cassiano plays an important part in the story.⁹

And yet, readers come across no mention of Carpaccio. The travellers look at no picture of his, and there is nothing in the narrative recalling Carpaccio's work. The circumstance is surprising, not only because, as we have seen, this is a very Ruskinian story, but also because James himself closely linked Carpaccio's name to Tintoretto's. He thought that the two painters were

the two great realists, and it is hard to say which is the more human, the more various. The Tintoret had the mightier temperament, but Carpaccio, who had the advantage of more newness and more responsibility, sailed nearer to perfection. (27)

Seeing their art as cognate, James might have used memories of Carpaccio to weave feelings similar to those evoked by Tintoretto into the story — a device one could have anticipated from a young writer still exploring

the use of art, and his intimate response to it, in fiction.

But actually James chose not to do so. Nor did he change his position in the following years, while Ruskin's engrossment in the painter became more and more earnest. James kept on using the feelings and meanings associated to Venetian works of art — and Ruskin's interpretation of them — at key moments of his fiction set in Venice, notably in "The Aspern Papers" (1888), "The Pupil" (1891), "The Chaperon"¹⁰ (1891), and *The Wings of the Dove* (1902). But Carpaccio continued to be conspicuous by his absence.

It is astonishing that the very painter James describes as "the refrain" of Venice should never appear in his Venetian fiction: one is soon persuaded that this strange silence must point to something deep. As, indeed, it does: it points to James's discovery of a vertical, transcendent dimension in the horizontal, joyously mundane world of Carpaccio. A discovery that accompanied the growing importance of the role played by the art of writing in his life.

The best way to solve the Carpaccio enigma is to go on reading what James wrote about him in "Venice":

Here and there he quite touches it [perfection], as in the enchanting picture, at the Academy, of St. Ursula asleep in her little white bed, in her high clean room, where the angel visits her at dawn; or in the noble St. Jerome in his study at S. Giorgio Schiavoni. This latter work is a pearl of sentiment, and I may add without being fantastic a ruby of colour. It unites the most masterly finish with a kind of universal largeness of feeling, and he who has it well in his memory will never hear the name of Carpaccio without a throb of almost personal affection. Such indeed is the feeling that descends upon you in that wonderful little chapel of St. George of the Slaves, where this most personal and sociable of artists has expressed all the sweetness of his imagination. (27)

James has gained his own unmistakable voice here, and yet his description of Carpaccio's work coincides again with Ruskin's, whose recurring

terms, when writing about the painter, are very similar to those chosen by James. Here is, for instance, Ruskin's comment on the portrayal of the Saracen king and princess in the chapel of St. George.¹¹

you shall not find another piece quite the like of that little piece of work, for supreme, serene, unassuming, unflinching sweetness of painter's perfect art. Over every other precious thing, of such things known to me, it rises, in the compass of its simplicity; in being able to gather the perfections of the joy of extreme childhood, and the joy of a hermit's age, with the strength and sunshine of mid-life, all in one. Which is indeed more or less true of all Carpaccio's work and mind. ("The Shrine of the Slaves" 339)

Both writers stress Carpaccio's sweetness, his ability to encompass diverse feelings, the precious perfection of his art, his gift of touching the viewer's affection. More than this, in their response to the painter one senses the involvement of something intensely personal: both give the impression of having found in Carpaccio's paintings the depiction of some cherished dream.

In the case of James, it seems to be a dream linked to a place. In fact, the two paintings he describes — "The Dream of St. Ursula" and "St. Jerome in his Study"¹² — have the same setting: a spacious room flooded by a morning light which is at the same time peaceful and vibrant. It is the second picture in particular (the last in the series of St. Jerome in the Guild of the Slaves) that seems to have engrossed James's imagination — and one can easily see why. It depicts any scholar's idea of paradise: a quiet, sheltered room, full of light, and full of everything a scholar might need or desire: books, music, scientific instruments, works of art, a faithful dog. Even today, when it is known that the protagonist of the canvas is St. Augustine in his study, the painting produces a soothing effect on the viewer. When James saw it, however, its impact was increased by Ruskin's interpretation of it as "The life of Sr. Jerome in Heaven":

This at least is certain, that as the opposite St. George represents the perfect Mastery of the body, in contest with the lusts of the Flesh, this of St. Jerome represents the perfect Mastery of the mind, in the fulfilment of the right desires of the Spirit: and all the arts of man, — music (a long passage of melody written clear on one of the fallen scrolls), painting (in the illuminated missal and golden alcove), and sculpture (in all the forms of furniture and the bronze work of scattered ornaments), — these — and the glad fidelity of the lower animals — all subjected in pleasant service to the more and more perfect reading and teaching of the Word of God: — read, not in written pages chiefly, but with uplifted eyes by the light of Heaven itself, entering and filling the mansions of Immortality. ("The Shrine of the Slaves" 352)

One can imagine James standing in front of the picture in the little Venetian chapel, wishing he could step into it and be its protagonist. James would more and more preserve "himself for his art ... [like] a worldly and adventurous monk who always safeguards the avenues of retreat into his cell" (*Letters*, vol. iv, xxx). His engrossment in the art of writing would intensify with the passing of the years, becoming a dimension of living which transcended the horizontal plane of worldly things.

As could be expected, it is in two stories that have the religiously committed artist as their protagonist that the spell Carpaccio's work cast over James finally surfaces. The first story is "The Lesson of the Master" (1888). Introducing it James wrote:

Let it pass that if I am so oddly unable to say here, at any point, "what gave me my idea," I must just a trifle freely have helped myself to it from hidden stores. ("Preface," vol. 15, xiii)

It is tempting to think that Ruskin's description of St. Jerome in his story quoted above — a description inseparable from James's experience

in the chapel of St. George of the Slaves — might have been the "hidden store" in which James found the seminal idea for this story. Indeed, Ruskin's words perfectly summarize its subject, and could even have been echoed in its title — in which the word "master" irresistibly recalls the "mastery" praised by Ruskin. And, in the light of the above, the fact that the name of the master is Henry *St George* is too fitting to be accidental.

The story is about an acclaimed writer who teaches his younger disciple the necessity of avoiding "the lusts of the Flesh" — here represented by a beautiful young woman — in order to reach perfection — here represented by "the fulfilment of the right desires of the Spirit: and all the arts of man."

Henry St George is aware of the fact that his art has declined because, having been unable to resist the temptations represented by family life and social standing, he has been infected by "the rule of the cheap and easy" ("Preface," vol. 15, x). Thinking of himself as beyond redemption, he urges the younger writer, Paul Overt, to do what he wasn't able to do, kill the dragon (there is a passage in which Overt openly refers to St George's wife as "the dragon"),¹³ and devote himself exclusively to Art.

The crucial incident of the story, Henry St George's plea, takes place in his apartment:

A large, high room — a room without windows, but with a wide sky-light at the top, like a place of exhibition. It was furnished with a library, and the serried bookshelves rose to the ceiling, a surface of incomparable tone, produced by dimly-gilt "backs," which was interrupted here and there by the suspension of old prints and drawings. At the end furthest from the door of admission was a tall desk, of great extent, at which the person using it could only write standing, like a clerk in a counting-house; and stretching from the door to this structure was a large band of crimson cloth, as straight as a garden-path and as almost as long. ("Lesson" 258)

The master defines this room, devised by his wife for the benefit of con-

centration, "a good big cage, to go round and round." But the younger writer is soon conquered by it:

"Lord, what good things I should do if I had such a charming place as this to do them in!" Paul reflected. The outer world, the world of accident and ugliness was so successfully excluded, and within the rich, protecting square, beneath the patronising sky, the figures projected for an artistic purpose could hold their particular revel. (260)

This "rich, protecting square," whose main note of color is a deep red, and whose distinguishing trait is the light from above (from heaven?), is clearly a variation on Carpaccio's room — and the moment of pure joy Overt experiences there is the only unalloyed feeling in the whole story.

The second work in which the memory of Carpaccio's paintings emerges is "The Great Good Place" (1900). It is an unusual story in James's production, introduced in the "Preface" to the New York edition in a cryptic way:

There remains "The Great Good Place" (1900) — to the spirit of which, however, it strikes me, any gloss or comment would be a tactless challenge. It embodies a calculated effect, and to plunge into it, I find, even for a beguiled glance — a course I indeed recommend — is to have left all else outside. There then my indications must wait. ("Preface," vol. 16, ix-x)

The story tells about a renowned writer who, after collapsing under the pressure of his own success, finds refuge in an idyllic retreat, whose main features are the absence of commitments and the unobtrusive company of "Brothers" — people, like him, slowly recovering spiritual health, and the joys of intellectual life along with it. Although this "great good place" turns out to be only a vision, the protagonist, George Dane (another George), on waking up retrieves his energy: experiencing the place, if only in a dream, has been enough to bring new life into him.

Everything in the "great good place" is characterized by softness,

serenity, stillness — the effect of the absence of all that has been left outside. In this atmosphere George Dane feels his inner life wake up again and rejoices in having regained possession of the "long, sweet, stupid day" (32). When one of his comrades says, "I shan't mind death if it's like this," he reflects that "It was too obvious . . . that one wouldn't" (22).

One soon recognizes that the "great good place" is James's vision of St. Jerome's heavenly room magnified: the story immerses us in the serene atmosphere of Carpaccio's painting; and at a climactic moment the protagonist himself thinks he is living inside a picture

There were times when he looked up from his book to lose himself in the mere tone of the picture that never failed at any moment or at any angle. The picture was always there, yet was made up of things common enough. It was in the way an open window in a broad recess let in the pleasant morning; in the way the dry air pricked into faint freshness the gilt of old bindings, in the way an empty chair beside a table unlittered showed a volume just laid down. ("The Great Good Place" 14)

Carpaccio's room is not only evoked through its mood and its distinctive features, however: it actually has a place of honor in the story:

It was the paradise of his own room that was most indebted to them [the things it was such rapture to be without] — a great square fair chamber, all beautified with omissions, from which, high up, he looked over a long valley to a far horizon, and in which he was vaguely and pleasantly reminded of some old Italian picture, some Carpaccio or some early Tuscan, the representation of a world without newspapers and letters, without telegrams and photographs, without the dreadful fatal too much. There, for a blessing, he could read and write, there above all he could do nothing . . . he could live. (33)¹⁴

James's paradise is not above the sky: it is in this world. And yet, the ripeness of life he wants to achieve does entail an ascension — upwards, from the rich chaos of life to the rich order imposed on it by art.

Carpaccio helped James dream of a perfect place where, protected from the harassments of the outer world, a dedicated intellectual could experience "moments in which every apprehension counted double and every act of the mind was a lover's embrace" ("The Great Good Place" 34) — a place where an artist could be free to live the life of St. Jerome in Heaven, after conquering the dragon once and for all.¹⁵

NOTES

1. The other painters he claimed to have (re)discovered were Turner, Tintoretto, Luini and Botticelli (*Modern Painters* 355). In the case of Botticelli and Carpaccio Ruskin's claims need qualifying, however: Botticelli had been praised also by Pater and Swinburne, and Carpaccio himself had first been brought to Ruskin's attention by Burne-Jones. Another art historian who had early recognized Carpaccio's stature was Ann Jameson, in whose *Sacred and Legendary Art*, published in 1848, we read that the St. Ursula series is "magnificent" and that "the richness of fancy, the originality and naïveté with which the story is told, renders this series one of the most interesting examples of early Venetian Art" (Jameson 514).
2. Quoted in *Modern Painters*, note 3, 356. On Ruskin and Carpaccio see "Introduction" to *The Complete Works of John Ruskin*, vol. 24, 48-57 and Herbert.
3. Thanks to the attention that Ruskin attracted to it, the St. Ursula cycle, previously neglected, was revalued and eventually granted a new gallery in the Academy museum (see *Guide to the Academy at Venice*, liii, liv). On Ruskin in Venice see Perosa.
4. For Ruskin's letter see note 3 in *Modern Painters* 355. The first part of *St. Mark's Rest* was issued on April 1877. Later that same year a *First Supplement* appeared, which contained "The Shrine of the Slaves," entirely devoted to Carpaccio's paintings in the chapel of St. George of the Slaves. In 1879 a *Second Supplement* was published, containing "The Place of Dragons," centered on the cycle of St. George.

5. Lady Enid Layard (1843-1912) was the talented wife of Sir Henry Layard, English archaeologist and diplomat. The couple lived in Ca' Cappello, on the Gran Canal. For the journal entry see *Lady Layard's Journal*.

6. "Ruskin's little book" was one of the two (possibly both) supplements to *St. Mark's Rest* (cf. note 5 above).

7. James — who already knew and admired Ruskin's writings — met him in person through Charles Eliot Norton in 1869 (*Letters*, vol. 1, 103) — a circumstance that surely intensified his interest in his work and ideas.

8. See, for instance, *The Complete Works of John Ruskin*, vol. 10, 82-84.

9. In 1873 Ruskin expressed to Norton his "cordial admiration" for James and, in particular, for his treatment of Tintoretto (James had written about Tintoretto in a letter published in the *Nation*. Cf. note 3 in *Letters*, vol. 1, 361). James's enthusiasm on learning this ("Nothing could have given me more substantial pleasure" — *Letters*, vol. 1, 361) confirms, if necessary, how important the elder writer was for him. On James's and the Anglo-american reception of Tintoretto see Mamoli Zorzi.

10. As he had already done in "Travelling Companions," in this story James had his protagonist frankly confess the influence of Ruskin's writings on her: "[they went] to look at certain out-of-the-way pictures as to which Ruskin had inspired her with a desire to see sincerely" ("The Chaperon" 114).

11. This is the second picture in the series of St. George and the Dragon.

12. James follows Ruskin's interpretation of the picture (of which later). The modern title of the picture is "The vision of St. Augustine." A possible model for the figure of St. Augustine was Cardinal Bessarione, one of the Guild's benefactors and, more interestingly for us, the prominent humanist whose bequest of a collection of a thousand manuscripts started the Marciana Library in 1468. (On the identification of the model of the painting as Cardinal Bessarione see Perocco 61-62 and Fortini Brown. Gentili advances a different hypothesis: he sees in the features of St Augustine the portrait of another benefactor of the Guild, cardinal Angelo Leonino. See Gentili, "Carpaccio e Bessarione," *Carpaccio* 29-32 and *Le storie di Carpaccio* 85-90).

13. "Overt risked the profane observation: 'St. George and the dragon, the anecdote suggests!'" ("The Lesson" 231).

14. The modern title of Carpaccio's picture, "The Vision of St. Augustine," creates a further parallel between it and James's story (the only story by James structured around a dream).

15. In her *The Museum World of Henry James* Tintner detects the presence of Sir Edward Burne-Jones's figure and paintings behind both "The Lesson of the Master" and "The Great Good Place." Her idea is perfectly compatible with the hypothesis of the present paper, however, Carpaccio being one of the painters Burne-Jones himself admired (as recalled in note 1 above, it was Burne-Jones who introduced Ruskin to Carpaccio).

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