Between

Boring postcards. Spaces and places in the photographic frontispieces to Henry James's New York Edition

Donata Meneghelli

Abstract

The essay offers a new reading of the photographic frontispieces produced by Alvin Langdon Coburn for the New York Editon of Henry James's novels and tales published between 1907 and 1909. This reading is grounded in three main moves. First, taking as a starting point the overall project of the New York Edition and the multiple textual layers with which the images interact in the material support (not only the literary texts, but also the prefaces that James specifically wrote for the edition, and even the captions that accompany each of the images). Second, considering the frontispieces as a *series* of images related to one another and to several texts at the same time, in an intersectional pattern that goes beyond the mere one-to-one association. Third, situating the frontispieces – that are scenic still – in the context of James's spatial imagination, the uses of photography in late nineteenth century visual culture and literary tourism. Thanks to these critical moves, it is possible to reflect upon the images' *force* and the multifaceted intermedial relations they trigger, within what one may call a performative framework.

Keywords

Spaces; places; photography; scenic still; visual culture; tourism

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1. The James-Coburn dossier

Much has been written on the photographic frontispieces that Alvin Langdon Coburn produced for the twenty-four volumes of the collected edition of Henry James's *oeuvre* issued by Scribner's publishing house between 1907 and 1909 under the title New York Edition. With few exceptions, this bulk of critical investigation can be summarized in three main focuses.

To begin, there are the allegorical/symbolical interpretations of the images in relation to the texts they are associated to via the very basic means of a caption. The caption is supposed to link one image to one single text, or two images to one text when the text is a long novel divided into two volumes, therefore providing a ground upon which the interpretation can be built. To give a few examples, the gushing fountain in the picture captioned «By St. Peter's», which opens the volume containing "Daisy Miller", points to the exuberant, sparkling character of the eponymous heroine (Higgins 1982: 671); or «The Roman Bridge», a picture of Ponte Sant'Angelo in Rome, which opens the second volume of *The Portrait of a Lady*, «allegorically introduces Isabel's 'Passion', figuratively presented by the Bernini statues» (Nadel 1995: 110). The problem with such interpretations is twofold. On the one hand, they are almost always exclusively centred on both the story's anecdotic and the image's figurative *content*, leaving aside issues of form, composition, framing, or paratextual function. On the other hand, no matter how convincing each of them may or may not be, they always sound slightly arbitrary, because, as Philippe Dubois (1990) has argued, in photography reference and meaning are two different things and a photograph, in itself, can "mean" almost anything.

Second, much attention has been paid to the collaboration between James and Coburn, and the issues of authorship raised by it. It is well known how active a role James played in the choice of the subjects, even the frames and angles of vision, by giving Coburn very detailed written instructions. Furthermore, James was present right at the moment when most of the images which feature views and objects in London were taken, and everything leads to believe that they were taken under his strict supervision. Many have maintained that James and Coburn's collaboration was a happy instance of the productive interplay between literature and photography, of a true intermedial endeavour[1]. According to others, James's intrusive presence throughout the process was a form of high-handed control exercised by the writer on the photographer, aimed at *muting* photography (and illustration), by inhibiting Coburn's own creativity. Such control would be the cause of the poor results that Coburn – an undeniably talented photographer, if not Atget, and a prominent member of the *Camera Work* group – achieved with the frontispieces to the New York Edition[2]. Be it as it may, it is hardly debatable that the results are weird when compared with Coburn's other achievements, and even with his other experiences as illustrator: it is sufficient to consider H.G. Wells' *The Door in the Wall and Other Stories* (1911), or the 1954 edition of Stevenson's *Edinbourgh: Picturesque Notes* (fig. 1) to seize the difference[3]. In contrast, the pictures for the New York Edition, with very few exceptions, look strangely frigid, insignificant, and dumb. But that is precisely the reason why they continue to be puzzling and to invite scrutiny.

A third focus of inquiry revolves around the everlasting question: why? Why did James, given his well-known scorn towards the photographic medium, stated again and again in letters, essays and fiction writing, choose photography for such a cherished project as the New York Edition? Did his attitude towards photography change over time? Was he struck with Coburn's skill, to the point of reversing previous judgments[4]? Was photography, at the time the modern (and democratic) medium par excellence, a way to appeal to modern readers, to a larger public, a strategy to

[1] Cf. Higgins 1982, Bogardus 1985, Harmon 2002.

[2] Cf. Tick 1993. It is worth mentioning that the photographs are not credited, and that James only acknowledged Coburn's contribution in the last preface, the one to *The Golden Bowl*, after an appeal made by Coburn himself.

[3] The date of the edition of Stevenson's book should not be misleading: Coburn's Edinbourgh pictures were mostly taken between 1904 and 1905.

[4] Cf. Bogardus 1984.

Fig. 1. Edinbourgh, 1905.

make difficult – and less and less read – books more appealing[5]? Or, given James's ambivalent and anxious feelings towards illustration in general, was photography, in James's eyes, a "no medium", an "anti-medium", a transparent medium susceptible of entirely diluting itself in the represented object, and therefore perceived as less menacing, less competitive vis-à-vis the literary text[6] – if compared with the traditional black and white drawing? Such questions are not to be offhandedly dismissed, on the contrary, and some of them are very relevant indeed. However, the problem here is again twofold. On the one hand, they put too much emphasis on James's intentions while downscaling the tangible effects that the photographic images may engender in the specific context of the New York Edition, the ways readers are apt (or prompted) to process them in that context. On the other hand, such questions often tend to "essentialize" photography, overlooking issues related to its established uses in the last decades of the nineteenth century, cultural practices, photographic genres, etc.

That said, it is true that, if James didn't exactly choose to be illustrated in the New York Edition (illustrations were an integral part of the publishing

[5] Cf. Nadel 1995, Tucker 2010.
[6] Cf. Schloss 1989.

protocols for a deluxe collected edition, printed on handmade paper, beautifully bound and sold by subscription), he did choose frontispieces and, most of all, he did choose photography[7]: what did he expect from it? What did he imagine its added value to the volumes would be? James's choice was undoubtedly original, though less so than it may appear. Photographic illustration of serious literature was not so unprecedented at the end of the nineteenth century, as we shall see.

The lines of inquiry that I have rapidly summed up provide perceptive insights on this curious photo-literary case. However, they miss two fundamental points. First, they fail to read the frontispieces in the context of James's spatial imagination, where space is at the same time metaphor, structural principle, and theatrical stage. Despite his proverbial spare descriptions, sparer and sparer in the later phases of his career, James is an essentially *spatial* writer, and the relevance of space in his fiction is paramount. Aptly, in the Preface to *The Golden Bowl*, James referred to the frontispieces as «pictures of our 'set' stage with the actors left out» (1984: 1327), and indeed they mostly represent empty spaces/places, that is, spaces/places emptied of the human element, as if they were waiting for an entrance, for someone to appear. More technically, they are scenic stills, that work as *the apparatus of that same spatial imagination*, at various levels. As such, the frontispieces should be considered less as a succession of single illustrations, each one related to 'its' own text, than as a *series* of images related to one another and to several texts at the same time, in an intersectional pattern that goes beyond the mere one-to-one association. Despite the captions that should keep every image in its proper place, what Roland Barthes has called the «anchorage» function (1977: 37), the frontispieces tend to migrate and to establish multiple connections, overstepping their paratextual borders, and should therefore be read together.

Second, many analyses fail to take into account – and to connect the frontispieces to – the New York Edition's overall project (on which James spent nearly five years of his life), both literary and editorial. The New York Edition is a compromise-formation between different and conflicting

[7] The correspondence between James, his literary agent James B. Pinker, and Scribner's editors during the making of the New York Edition leaves no doubt about Coburn's images being the author's choice. As for the choice of frontispieces (and not images disseminated in the body of the text), in the memorandum written for Scribner's in 1905, James specified: «a single plate [for each volume], though of a thoroughly superior quality» (1984: 368); clearly a strategy to keep illustration at a safe distance.

designs, marked by multiple fractures: a marketing enterprise (which will turn into a financial failure); a complex exercise in authorship; the construction of a literary monument reflecting/establishing the canonical status of the author; an autobiographical journey through one's experience and writing career; the foundations of a Jamesian aesthetic. Accordingly, it also targets different publics, both a «highly specialized, sophisticated group of readers, most of them presumably already familiar with the *oeuvre* the Edition re-presents», and the more «"distracted" modern reader» (Mc Whirter 1995: 12-13). In this manifold venture, the prefaces that James expressly wrote for each novel or group of shorter stories play a key role, as the publishers understood at once:

> We cannot refrain – wrote Scribner's editor to James – from expressing to you our absolute delight with the prefaces which seem to us not only to constitute a real feature of the edition but to furnish something very nearly, if not quite, unique in literature itself, and we cannot imagine anything more enchanting to the interest of your readers and the attractiveness of the volumes (Brownell 1906).

The publishers were right. The prefaces are indeed a «feature», something unprecedented that they hoped would make the volumes more sellable, being at the same time the *connective tissue* of the New York Edition. They trace links between the different – and up to that point scattered – texts, suggesting unifying patterns. More importantly, they weave together and overlay texts and author, fiction and biography, fiction and critical discourse, theory, aesthetic, and literary practice. For these reasons, the prefaces should be considered as another linguistic block with which the images interact, in a network of cross-relations between fictional texts and images, fictional texts and prefaces, prefaces and images, images and images[8]. It is this kind of reading that I intend to develop in my essay. In addition, while the role of the captions is often overlooked by critics, I mean to take them seriously, as still another textual layer to be reckoned with.

[8] To my knowledge, only two scholars have addressed the relationship between Coburn's frontispieces and James's prefaces: De Romanis 1999 and Mc Whirter 2006.

2. Reading against the captions: spaces and the narrative proxemics

What do the frontispieces illustrate? Jan Baetens and Hilde Van Gelder have argued that in the last decades of the nineteenth century photographic images were perceived as incapable of conveying any narrative or dramatic effect whatsoever, and this partly explains the belated encounter between photography and the novel (2006: 258). James's attitude appears perfectly coherent with such common view. In the last preface he discusses Coburn's frontispieces and praises them for their «shyness», for managing «not to keep, or to pretend to keep, anything like dramatic step with their suggestive matter»: «subjects […] the reference of which to Novel or Tale should exactly be *not* competitive and obvious», «images always confessing themselves mere optical symbols or echoes, expressions of no particular thing in the text, but only of the type or idea of this or that thing» (1984: 1327).

Coburn's «shy» images are indeed completely nondramatic and non-narrative, except for the last frontispiece, that could be seen as illustrating a scene, since at the end of *The Golden Bowl* two characters leave a house in Portland Place on a cab (fig. 2). Otherwise, as we have already noted, they represent spaces/places emptied of human presence. But there is something more in James's words. First, the insistence on abstraction, the general – as opposed to the particular – content of the images, almost as if they were pictograms («optical symbols», «the type or idea»), which is perfectly consistent with their being frontispieces, symbolic de jure. Fur-

Fig. 2. «Portland Place» (*The Golden Bowl*), vol. XXIV.

thermore, the claiming of a tenuous relation between the single image and the single text (a not obvious or competitive reference: in other words, a reference not immediately apparent). This way, the identity of referents that is supposed to link text and image (Baetens and Van Gelder 2006: 266) becomes uncertain, open. Going a step further, we could almost understand James's words as an invitation to disregard the captions, captions that in many cases are themselves very general and do not act as «a control […] in the face of the projective power of pictures (Barthes 1977: 38)». Can we read the frontispieces against the captions, and also against the common usages of illustrations at the time? Let's go back to the spatial imagination.

In many ways, James anticipated «the spatial turn» that has recently hit literary studies and the humanities[9], first of all because he conceives the act of narration itself in spatial terms. By general consent James is not only the practitioner, but the *theoretician* of point of view in fiction. Particularly, he is the strenuous advocate of the limited perspective(s), that is, the telling of the story through the standpoint (consciousness, vision, perception, biases…) of one or more characters, actors in the fictional world. He is the one who dismissed omniscient narration, so paving the way for modernist multiperspectivity, perceptual relativism, etc. This theory – as Jameson put it, «Henry James's codification of this already existing technique, his transformation of it into the most fundamental of narrative categories, and the development around it of a whole aesthetic» (1981: 221) – was systematized in the prefaces to the New York Edition. We might even say that in the prefaces James "invented" point of view as a theoretical tool. To conceptualize and phrase it, in the preface to *The Portrait of a Lady* he used a spatial image that was to become famous:

> The house of fiction has in short not one window, but a million – a number of possible windows not to be reckoned, rather; every one of which has been pierced, or is still pierceable, in its vast front, by the need of the individual vision and by the pressure of the individual will. These apertures, of dissimilar shape and size, hang so, all together, over the human scene that we might have expected of them a greater sameness of report than we find. They are but windows at the best, mere holes in a dead wall, disconnected, perched aloft; they are not hinged doors opening straight upon life. But they have this mark of their own that at each of them stands a figure with a pair of eyes, or at least with a field-glass, which forms, again and again,

[9] Cf. Pickles 2004, Tally and Drakakis 2012, Tally 2014.

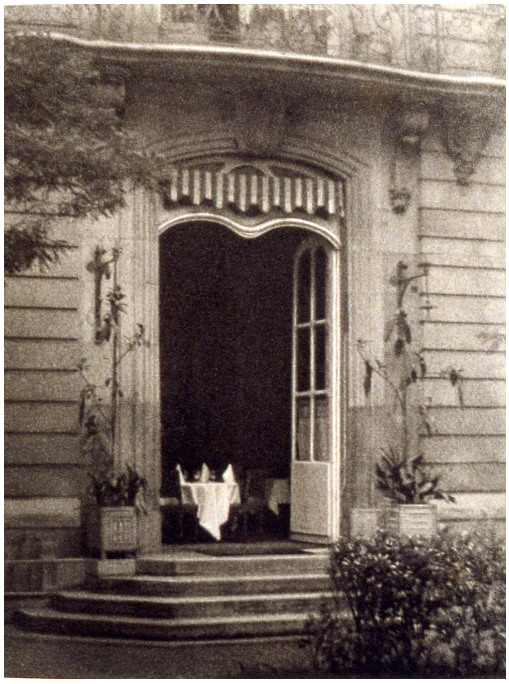

Fig. 3, «The Court of the Hotel», vol. XIII (*The Riverberator*).

> for observation, a unique instrument, insuring to the person making use of it an impression distinct from every other. […] The spreading field, the human scene, is the 'choice of subject'; the pierced aperture, either broad or balconied or slit-like and low-browed, is the 'literary form'; but they are, singly or together, as nothing without the posted presence of the watcher – without, in other words, the consciousness of the artist (James 1984: 1075).

The window as a metaphor of representation is certainly not a novelty in western culture, nor in the mimesis discourse and practice that accompany the rise of realism in nineteenth century literature. Following Philippe Hamon[10], it has mainly two functions. First, in the meta-discourse, it is a figure that stands for the author's vision, with a special emphasis put on the glass as a filter. Second, the window, together with its variants, such as the door, the wall, the mirror, the shopwindow, is a *technème*, that is, an architectural element inside the text, that allows the writer to segment the fictional world (inside vs. outside, public vs. private, visible vs. invisible) and to justify descriptive passages by delegating the vision to some charac-

[10] Cf. Hamon 1989, 1993.

ter placed in front of a shopwindow or a mirror, or looking out a window. In this framework, the *technèmes* that haunt the realistic text are operators of visibility and, therefore, of legibility.

James draws on this tradition in the prefaces to the New York Edition, where windows, doors, glasses surface throughout the volumes, gravitating around the metaphor of the house of fiction. Accordingly, Coburn's frontispieces, which are placed at each volume's threshold, on the left page, which introduce the prefaces even before the fictional texts, reproduce a collection of *technèmes*, in their manifold possible material embodiments. In other words, they may be regarded as illustrating or punctuating the metatext, the (self)commentary on the text, rather than the text (Baetens 2022: 64). More bluntly still, they may be seen as illustrating the way the stories are narrated, the aesthetic framework from which they stem: something much more nonrepresentational and nonfigurative than a scene in a novel, or even the setting of a novel.

The frontispieces are a sequence of houses, façades, doors, windows, shopwindows, balconies, fences, grids, mirrors (fig. 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8), starting from the windowed house that opens the first volume of (and the preface to) *The Portrait of a Lady* (fig. 9), and offers itself as a visualization of James's metaphor. We will go back to this image, which is indeed – with its frontal and postcard-like framing – a meagre equivalent for the visionary architecture conjured by James's words. Most likely, Coburn's creativity *was* hindered by James's controlling presence, because a few years later he autonomously produced a much more masterful take on the same theme: a

Fig. 4. «On Sundays, now, you might be at home» ("Lady Barbarina"), Vol. XIV.

Fig. 5. «The Curiosity Shop», vol. XXIII (*The Golden Bowl*).

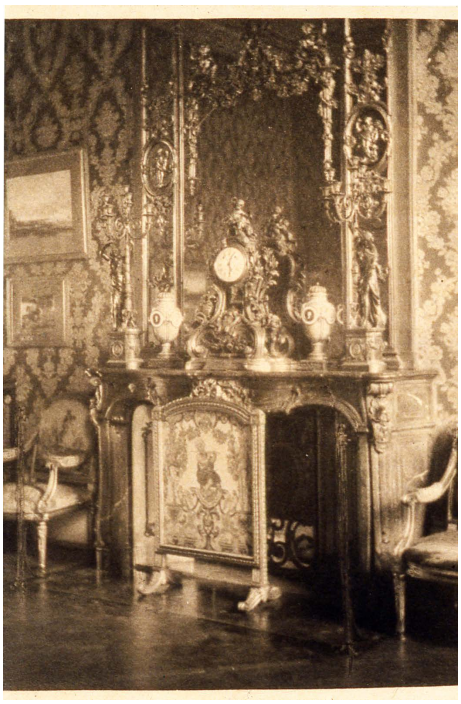

Fig. 6. «Some of the Spoils», vol. X (*The Spoils of Poynton*).

Fig. 7. «St. John's Wood», vol. VIII (*The Tragic Muse*).

Fig. 8. «The Doctor's Door», vol, XIX (*The Wings of the Dove*).

Fig. 9. «The English Home», vol. III (*The Portrait of a Lady*).

Fig. 10. The Thousand Windows, 1912.

modern, urban, overbearing, stifling, panopticton-like house of a thousand windows (fig. 10).

However, in his use of the *technèmes*, James distances himself from the tradition I have hinted at. His windows have nothing to do with description, and little to do with the author's vision, at least in the usual sense of the terms and despite the reference to «the consciousness of the artist» in the passage that I have quoted. Neither are they operators of legibility. On the contrary, their role is more often to obstruct or blur vision, as the invariably *closed* doors in the frontispieces testify, or as the shopwindow that opens the volume containing *In the Cage* – with its grid-like and fragmenting glass, made opaque by advertising posters – shows (fig. 11).

Fig. 11. «The Cage», vol. XI (*In the Cage*).

In James's discourse and practice, the window has two interlaced and often superimposed functions. First, it is a threshold that both separates and connects two different spaces: the space where the story is narrated and the space where the story unfolds. Second, as James accurately phrases it, the window is «the literary form», and corresponds to the character's limited perspective from which the narrative is not only told but constructed. Every window – each one different from the other, great windows at some *piano nobile*, balconies, French doors, little upper windows, splits in an old wall – has different shape and dimension, is placed at a variable distance from the «human scene», and therefore each time it frames a different portion of that scene, it circumscribes a visual field, it traces a perimeter and fixes the borders. James is the keenest land surveyor of modern fiction, and the frontispieces to the New York Edition – with their sharp lines, neat contours and contrasts, unimaginative style, so distant from the soft focus and pictorialist effects of Coburn's work of the same period (fig. 12) – are also the diagrams to be delivered to the Castle authorities (the cultivated readers, the critics, James's fellow-practitioners…).

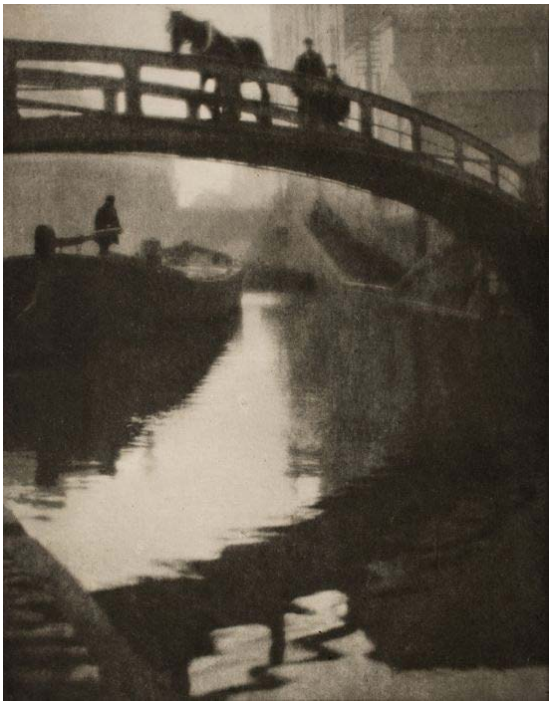

Fig. 12. Regent's Canal, 1906.

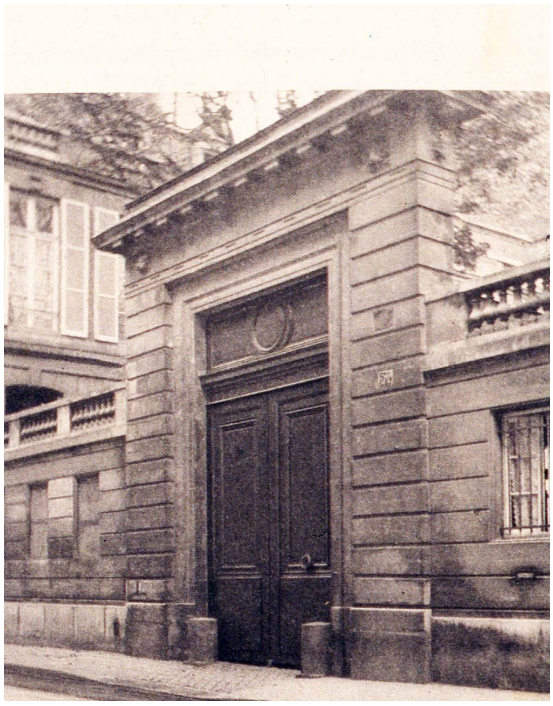

Fig. 13. «The Faubourg Saint-Germain», vol. II (*The American*).

The window stands for the «related point of view», the «actor's imagination and vision», «the wondering witness» (James 1984: 1297, 1089, 1160), either speaking in the first-person or mediated by an impersonal narrative voice. This is a fundamental distinction, in James's narrative theory and practice, because the limited perspective combined with the impersonal voice is something like his technical trademark. As he points out in the preface to *What Maisie Knew*, the «difference […] is but of a shade: it is [Maisie's] relation, her activity of spirit, that determines all our own concern – we simply take advantage of these things better than she herself» (*ibid.*: 1161). Looking out the window, then, there is the baffled, puzzled, confused witness; and next to her, there is an illegitimate presence which watches Maisie watching, a second witness who «takes advantage» of Maisie's vision and always risks superimposing his gaze on hers. For this very reason, James's window is a paradoxical object: it both hangs on the scene and is within the scene; it is a threshold that is not placed between the inside and the outside, but *inside and outside at the same time* (Meneghelli 1997: 216). Likewise, most of the frontispieces are two-faceted, they represent both the intangible site of narration and the "concrete" scene of the stories: both an abstract and de-contextualized façade, door, window (even more

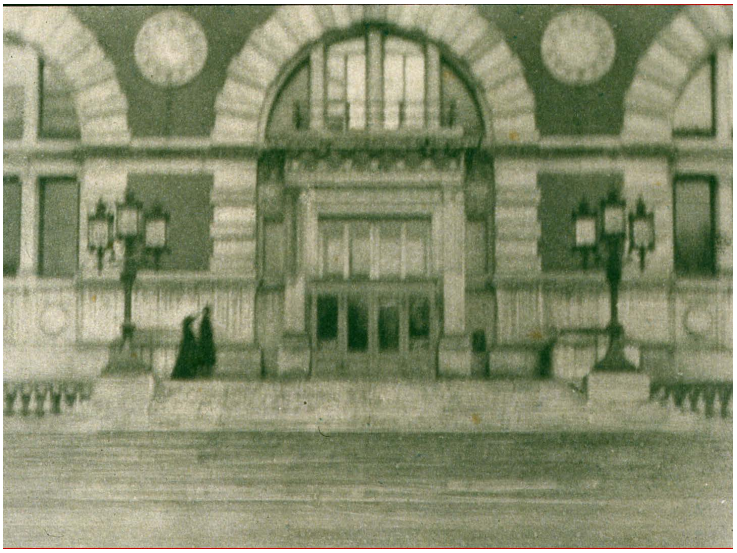

Fig. 14. «The Halls of Julia», vol. XVII *(Julia Bride*).

abstract and de-contextualized thanks to the framing, the close up, and the lack of human presence), and the aristocratic district in Paris where Christopher Newman experiences his defeat (fig. 13).

The house of fiction deals with what Georg Simmel, discussing the bridge and the door, called «the relentless separation of space», in order to locate interfaces, to bridge connections, to identify gaps (1995: 5). It is probably true – as Stanley Tick has argued – that doors, bridges and shop-windows are, and were already at the beginning of the Twentieth century, photographic staples (1993: 82, 91). But in the New York Edition they also become theoretical objects in Simmel's sense, almost an experiment in conceptual photography. Through the house of fiction and its gravitating *technèmes*, James doesn't simply describe a literary technique, nor a dynamic of representation. First and foremost, he stages a *narrative proxemics*: that is, the arrangement of voices and points of view, a mobile system of emplacements, a measurement of the distances or the proximity that each time obtain between author, narrator, characters, and the reader, to whom the «related point of view» offers an ideal emplacement from which to perform interpretive processes and enact aesthetic responses. Such proxemics is precisely the unrelenting shifting between those different poles, like the two ghost-like, sliding silhouette that haunt the façade of the Metropolitan Museum in the frontispiece to vol. XVII (fig. 14).

Within this framework, Fredric Jameson's well known allegations, that the Jamesian's point of view is one of the «textual determinants which pro-

Fig. 15. *Intérieurs parisiens.*

duce and institutionalize the new subjectivity of the bourgeois individual», a late nineteenth-century bourgeois «containment strategy, which comes into being as a protest and a defense against reification, [and] ends up furnishing a powerful ideological instrument in the perpetuation of an increasingly subjectivized and psychologized world» (1981: 154, 221), should be reconsidered. Because the point of view as proxemics is a process that continuously decentres what should be the centre, both in the narrative theory and in the concrete textual realizations. The celebrated Jamesian «centres of consciousness» or «reflectors» are less «monads» (Jameson) than intersubjective nexuses with permeable borders, that expose the contradictions and tensions within the very myth of individualism[11].

Furthermore, what I have called a narrative proxemics is anything but a disembodied schema. The space of narration, as James conceives it, is the space where *knowledge is negotiated*, and knowledge, for James, is not only an epistemological concern (anticipating, once again, modernist stances), but a political one, related to issues of status, gender, class, nationality. James's essential questions – who knows what, who can tell it

[11] Cf. Cameron, 1989.

Fig. 16. Andy Stephenson, Hardwick House, 2007 (source: Wikipedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hardwick_House,_Oxfordshire).

and to whom, who is the object of whose gaze, to whom does the gaze belong, where does it stand and who/where the target is – always underlie a set of highly intertwined power-relations. But knowledge concerns and power relations, in turn, always rely on «positions», as geographer Denis Cosgrove has noted (1999: 7). James's space of narration can be construed as a narrative proxemics because, though intangible, it remains an essentially *social* space, abstract and concrete at the same time: the theatre of the negotiation I have mentioned above. Photography, in the form of Coburn's scenic stills, allowed James to materialize it with a force that no black and white drawing could match.

And yet, Jameson is right, at least as far as the frontispieces are concerned. Because, if they are an experiment in rendering James's narrative proxemics, if they are visual equivalents of the shifting work of consciousness, that same consciousness is seen from a distance (despite the close ups), as an external object which can be observed. This feature comes to the forefront if we compare Coburn's frontispieces with the photographs collected by Eugène Atget in 1910 in the album *Intérieurs parisiens*. What strikes, in these pictures, is their being suffocatingly full, and the sense of closeness they suggest, as if the registering instrument (the camera) and the objects were in the same scale (fig. 15). As Didier Maleuvre has pointed out:

> In trying to take a picture of the place where one is, Atget really attempts to represent the place where vision and consciousness take

> place – the place of the subject. The *Intérieurs parisions* bridges the distance between the camera and the scenery by collapsing the field of vision and the object it seeks to seize (1999: 152)

In contrast, in the frontispieces to the New York Edition «the place of the subject» appears objectified and therefore domesticated. Either consciousness – the narrator's, the character's, even the reader's – is in front of the window (the door, the façade, the shop window, the mirror…) and look at it from outside, from a safe position; or it is made into a bourgeois door, a bourgeois house, a great palace, a museum. Either way, a friction emerges between the prefaces and the images, since the images convey a somewhat petrified and "monumental" version of James's aesthetic. They are not consistent visual translations of James's metaphors, but – partly, at least – counter-texts that problematize those very metaphors. This is especially true of the core-image of the house (repeated at least ten times in the frontispieces), fetish of the bourgeois culture, equivalent and prosthesis of the bourgeois subject and individualism's ideology. And of the particular house that opens the third volume (fig. 9), a reproduction of Hardwick House (fig. 16), a Tudor residence in Oxfordshire to which the magazine *Country Life* had devoted an illustrated reportage in 1906. The house of fiction becomes «The English Home» (this is the caption affixed to Coburn's photograph), with its web of references to Englishness, tradition, hidyllic rurality, class, heritage. Downtown Abbey *avant la lettre*.

3. The writer and the transatlantic scene: spaces into places

There is another English home, among the frontispieces to the New York Edition, that holds a special status: the one that opens vol. IX, containing a novel by 1898, *The Awkward Age*. Its remarkable feature is – once again – related to the photograph's referent (fig. 17). It is a picture of Lamb House, James's residence in Rhy, Sussex, where he moved at the end of 1897, with a twenty-one-year lease, and which is today a museum owned by the National Trust. But it is captioned «Mr. Longdon's», and is therefore supposed to represent the residence of a character in the novel.

As I have already suggested, the frontispieces hold together and conflate different spaces: the space of narration, the fictional space, the real space (the "world of the author", the space of writing). The example just mentioned perfectly embodies this manifold function: it is another version of the windowed house of fiction, it is the house of the main character in *The Awkward Age*, it is an «English home», and James's own house, a house,

Fig. 17. «Mr. Longdon's», vol. IX *(The Awkward Age*).

furthermore, that he acquired just at the time when he was writing the novel in question. Simultaneously a theoretical, fictional, real and biographical object, it tells us something about the mobile borders between the different spaces.

Again and again, in the prefaces, James tells «the story of one's story» (1984: 1309), that is, the circumstances surrounding each act of writing, and these circumstances mostly amount to some spatial coordinates. The image network of the house (the room), the wall, the window, and the bustling world outside, obsessively returns, but with a different meaning: now the subject is the author in flesh and blood. The same scenario, though, is set in ever-changing locations: a palace in Venice, an apartment in London or in Boston, a house in the English countryside, a small hotel in the south of France or on the Alps, some rented rooms in Paris, in Florence or in Rome. The dissemination of the self makes Lamb House a mark in a wider map: I am here, but also there…

Each time James minutely discusses the multifarious relationships between the location where the writing occurred, or where the first germ of the story was gathered, and the location where the narrated action occurs: to transplant to Paris an anecdote originally set «in a grand old city of the

south of Europe» (*ibid.*: 1195), and develop it into a full-fledged story in a small pension in Baden; to write in New York about Paris, in London about Italy or the South of France, in Washington about Europe, in Paris about London, in Florence about New England, in Venice about Rome, as for the second part of *The Portrait of a Lady*, written in Venice and mainly set in Rome, the pages of which evoke in James memories of the former rather than the latter.

> There are pages of the book which, in the reading over, have seemed to make me see again the bristling curve of the wide Riva, the large colour-spots of the balconied houses and the repeated undulation of the little hunchbacked bridges, marked by the rise and drop again, with the wave, of foreshortened clicking pedestrians (*ibid.*: 1070).

It is also possible, of course, to write in Paris about Paris, in London about London, in an English country house about an English country house, but it is a much rarer circumstance. This way, he constructed an image of himself as the ever *displaced* writer, always caught in a "space lag": as the observer from a distance, as the gazer from elsewhere, who does not *belong*, who lives (and writes) in a perpetual hotel, symbolic when not actual (fig. 3). An image where the notion of perspective finds a further, more situated application: «I have ever, in general, found it difficult to write of places under too immediate an impression—the impression that prevents standing off and allows neither space nor time for perspective» (*ibid.*: 1059).

Spaces turn into places, with geographical identities and names. Since what do the frontispieces represent, sometimes explicitly, sometimes more allusively, if not London (fig. 11), the English countryside (fig. 9), Venice (fig. 18), Rome (fig. 19), Paris (fig. 20), New York (fig. 14), or New England (fig. 21)? And again, they are two-faceted. On the one hand, the frontispieces offer something like an autobiography in pictures of the wandering writer, who in the New York Edition advertises himself as the cosmopolitan novelist par excellence, boldly using – thanks to the weld joints between prefaces, images, and literary texts – his life and biographical persona to sell his books. More precisely, the frontispieces mark the «positions» of the perpetual zigzag race that James – looking for perspective, for distance – recreates in his telling «the story of one's story».

On the other hand, the wondering writer stages (and markets) himself as the epic poet of the late nineteenth-century transatlantic scene. The space of autobiography becomes the fictional space and vice versa. The frontispieces also trace the perimeter of James's fictional world: a fictional

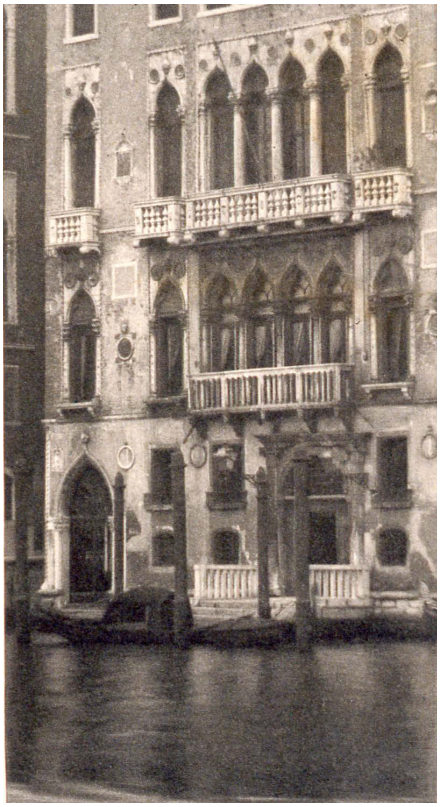

Fig. 18. «The Venetian Palace», vol. XX (*The Wings of the Dove*).

Fig. 19. «By St. Peter's», vol. XVIII (*Daisy Miller*).

Fig. 20. «Splendid Paris, Charming Paris», vol. VI (*The Princess Casamassima*).

world that, taken as a whole, is always the same, no matter the particular story we pick up. Together, they form the enclosed map on which all the stories can and should be grafted, the signposts of a real/symbolic geography that works as a federative principle, somehow similar to Thomas Hardy's Wessex, «an amalgam of the literal, the material, and the imaginative» (Bullen 2013: xvii). It is not by chance that, though the idea of Wessex dates from the publication of *Far from the Madding Crowd* in 1874 and was already discussed by critics in the late 1880s, it became «a powerful package», as a universe geographically both articulated and complete, in the first collected edition of Hardy's works published from 1895.

> [Hardy] began to reassess Wessex in other ways too, reconstructing it in the new prefaces to individual novels. […] First of all, he decided to show readers something more of where Wessex was located. Each of the *Wessex Novels* came now with a map. In the preface to *Far from the Madding Crowd* (1895), he acknowledged that his work had already generated "explorers"; it is hard to avoid seeing this addition as an aid (though not an exact one) for pilgrims (Haslam 2009: 167-8).

James's Euro-America, too, is «an amalgam of the literal, the material, and the imaginative» that could be explored, as we shall see. And James, too, took the collected edition opportunity to give his geography another turn of the screw, by «reconstructing it» in the prefaces, by «show[ing] readers something more» of it through Coburn's frontispieces, by making that geography more delimited and defined through the arrangement of the volumes. This way, he tried to turn his *oeuvre* into something akin to a literary cycle, by using not recurring characters (spare and episodic cases in James's fiction) but recurring places, a «unity of locale which create[s] a fictional world which exists between the texts» (Pothier 1997-98: 110)[12]. If indeed characters don't recur throughout James's novels and tales, it is undeniable that they could have easily bumped into each other because they beat the same tracks. The famous «international theme» that James exploited during his whole career, the cultural clash between Europe and America, the perpetual travelling through the Atlantic, is first and foremost a geography, a recognizable territory in which all the stories unfold.

[12] It is worth noting that Pothiier's remarks refer to another amazing (modernist) experiment in literary geography: Faulkner's creation of Yoknapatawpha County.

Fig. 21. vol. XVI, «The New England Street» ("Four Meetings").

The frontispieces to the New York Edition – and the captions that accompany them – work accordingly. The anecdotal reference that links each of them to the single text to which it is associated is only half of the story. Much more significant is the reticular system achieved by James. On the one hand, there is the crossing reference of one image to several texts at the same time, that are thus placed in relation to each other, in a trans-textual dimension[13]. But the trans-textual dimension also works the other way round, since multiple scattered images can be associated to one single text beyond the order arranged by the layout of the volumes. Thus the images appear extremely integrated as signposts of James's narrative geography, and at the same time fungible, interchangeable: up to a certain point, one is as good as the other. In this reticular system, captions play a key role, because of their weak fictional reference: St. Peter, the Faubourg St. Germain, the court of the hotel, the Venetian palace, the English home are simply locations, stages where anything may happen. Either way, the single element is less relevant than the whole series. James's model seems to be the album, the portfolio.

[13] To make a few examples: «By St. Peter's» (fig. 17) could be related to "Daisy Miller", *The Portrait of a Lady*, *Roderick Hudson* and many other stories if we interpret the image as a synecdoche or a symbol of Rome; «The English Home» (fig. 8) to *The Portrait of a Lady*, *The Princess Casamassima*, *The Spoils of Poynton*, "The Turn of the Screw"; «The Faubourg St. Germain» (fig. 11) to *The American*, *The Ambassadors*, *The Riverberator*, and several short stories.

4. Flirting with photography: geography and the tourist-reader

Usually, when photography thematically surfaces in Henry James's fiction, it is in the form of the photographic portrait: the uncanny portrait of the man, full of spectral resonances, in "The Friends of the Friends", Nanda's photograph owned by Wanderbank in *The Awkward Age*, or the picture where the antiquarian recognizes the Prince and Charlotte in *The Golden Bowl*[14]. However, there is a short story, a much less known and canonical text, though a little chef-d'oeuvre, where the photographs in question are scenic still: "Four Meetings", originally published in 1877, and included in volume XVI of the New York Edition, where it is the text which the frontispiece refers to (fig. 21).

"Four Meetings" opens on tea party set «in the depths of New England» (James 1985: 227), in a small town ironically called North Verona, a name invented by James. The narrator, a much travelled American who has visited Europe several times and knows it at his fingertips, is asked by the hostess, a Mrs. Latouche, «to show the photographs» to some of the ladies present: the photographs, collected «in a couple of great portfolios» brought home by Mrs. Latouche's son, just returned from Europe, are «large views of Switzerland, Italy and Spain, landscapes, reproduction of famous buildings, pictures and statues» (*ibid.*: 227-9). He selects an attractive young woman named Caroline Spencer and begins the strange ceremony – or perhaps a common social ritual – consisting in looking at the pictures with her and commenting on them, that is, talking about the represented places (in the story, it is never question of the pictures *qua* pictures, their artistic qualities or value).

> Occasionally, as I laid one of the pictures down, she said without confidence, which would have been too much: «Have you seen that place?» I usually answered that I had seen it several times […]. I had asked her at the outset whether she had been to Europe; to this she had answered «No, no, no» – almost as much below her breath as if the image of such an event scarce, for solemnity, brooked phrasing. But after that, though she never took her eyes off the pictures, she said so little that I feared she was at last bored. Accordingly when we had finished one portfolio I offered, if she desired it, to desist. I rather

[14] On photographic portraits in James's fiction, see Ceserani 2011 and Clayton 2017. I borrowed the title of my fourth section from Clayton's brilliant essay.

> guessed the exhibition really held her, but her reticence puzzled me and I wanted to make her speak. I turned round to judge better and then saw a faint flush in each of her cheeks. She kept waving her little fan to and fro. Instead of looking at me she fixed her eyes on the remainder of the collection, which leaned, in its receptacle, against the table.
>
> «Won›t you show me that?» she quavered, drawing the long breath of a person launched and afloat but conscious of rocking a little.
>
> «With pleasure,» I answered, «if you›re really not tired.»
>
> «Oh I›m not tired a bit. I›m just fascinated.» With which as I took up the other portfolio she laid her hand on it, rubbing it softly. «And have you been here too?»
>
> On my opening the portfolio it appeared I had indeed been there. One of the first photographs was a large view of the Castle of Chillon by the Lake of Geneva. «Here,» I said, «I've been many a time. Isn't it beautiful?» And I pointed to the perfect reflexion of the rugged rocks and pointed towers in the clear still water. She didn't say «Oh enchanting!» and push it away to see the next picture. She looked a while and then asked if it weren't where Bonnivard, about whom Byron wrote, had been confined. I assented, trying to quote Byron's verses, but not quite bringing it off. She fanned herself a moment and then repeated the lines correctly, in a soft flat voice but with charming conviction. I complimented her and assured her she was perfectly equipped for visiting Switzerland and Italy […] (*ibid.*: 229-30).

The long scene is imbued with eroticism: she blushes, rubs her lips with her fan «almost excitedly», and at a certain point the narrator says that «she looked as pretty as if instead of showing her photographs I had been making love to her» (*ibid.*: 231). The photographs work as both an object of desire and an object *mediating* desire. From the start, the narrator is drawn to the young woman, and when Mrs. Latouche states that Caroline Spencer is «just the person» because she «doesn't care for flirting», he replays that «if she didn't care for flirting she wasn't perhaps just the person» (*ibid.*: 228). For him, the photographs are little more than memory tokens and props in a seduction game. Things are less simple for Caroline Spencer. She is captivated by the photographs, and by the narrator's talk about the represented places, because she has longed to visit Europe all her life but has never been there. The short story dramatizes at the utmost photography's special appeal that results from its combining iconicity (resemblance between image and referent) with indexicality, its being not a mere image but an imprinting, «an *emanation* of the referent» (Barthes 1981: 80, my italics). In fact, the narrator himself interests Caroline Spencer mainly as an «emanation» of Europe: he has been there, in front of

those buildings and landscapes, exposed just like a negative; he literally merges with the photographs, and like the photographs he is a medium transmitting, representing, standing for the object of desire, Europe.

In the short story, photography is placed in a complex network of actors, media, genres, practices, and even senses, beyond sight. Actors: the narrator, the man of the world who has much travelled, Caroline Spencer, the young woman from «the depth of New England» who cannot travel for lack of money, Mrs. Latouche's son, who has collected the pictures, who probably bought them from some of the photograph retailers that were becoming more and more widespread at the time; more generally, the Americans travelling to Europe. Media: photography, literature, the spoken word, and the intermedial dimension the pervades the whole scene. Genres: at one point Caroline Spencer declares: «I know more about [foreign lands] than you might think […]. I mean by reading – for I've really read considerable. In fact I guess I've prepared my mind about as much as you *can* in advance. I've not only read Byron – I've read histories and guide-books and articles and lots of things» (James 1985: 233). Practices: travelling for leisure, flirting, social gatherings like the one offered by Mrs. Latouche, collecting pictures, looking at them and conversing about them. Senses: Caroline Spencer softly *rubs* the portfolio, the narrator *hears* her soft flat voice repeating Byron's lines. And then there is the emotionally charged attitude that the female character projects onto the images and the whole context.

The network, and the emotion, revolve around one of the most important social phenomena of modernity, a practice in itself: tourism. Many have highlighted the relation between the rise of modern tourism and the medium of photography. According to John Urry and Jonas Larsen, not by chance they both date back to 1840 and have contributed to create «the tourist gaze», that is, the specific tourist's ways of seeing places, ways that are culturally shaped and directed by the tourism industry.

> We show how the tourist gaze has been inseparably tied up with the development and popularisation of cameras and photographs. The gaze is constructed discoursively and materially through images and performances of photography, and vice versa. We analyse significant *moments* within tourism photography and show how photographs enhance, frame and substitute for physical travel in complex and contingent ways […]. […] we show how photographs activate both 'imaginative mobility' and 'memory travel' […]. Photographs are more than just representations, and while photographic *images* are

Fig. 22. The Castle of Chillon, 1860-1880, Archivi Alinari, Firenze.

> caught up with the moment, photographic *objects* have temporal and spatial duration. They are performative objects generating affective sensations (Urry, Larsen 2011: 155).

Every point stressed by Urry and Larsen is made relevant in "Four Meetings". However, there is a missing link in their analysis, and this is literature, as James's story perfectly shows, by making Caroline Spencer and the narrator immediately recall Byron's reference (and lines) while looking at a picture of Chillon, of which the Alinari archive can offer us a model (fig. 22). The relation between tourism and photography intersects the one between tourism and literature, tourism being indeed one of the grounds where photography and literature meet, most especially in the nineteenth century, when the spread of photography goes hand in hand with the development of literary tourism. A striking example of such an alliance are the extra-illustrated books put forth, between the end of the 1860s and the beginning of the twentieth century, by Tauchnitz publisher: unbound editions of novels and travel guides set in Italy that «contained blank spaces onto which tourists could paste photographs or postcards relating to scenes in the text […]. When complete, the books were taken to a specialist binder to be bound to their owner's specifications» (Mills 2016: 65). The series, aimed at an Anglo-American audience, included inter alia Hawthorne's *The Marble Faun*, Eliot's *Romola*, Bulwer Lytton's *The*

Fig. 23. Venice, Canal Grande, 1896, Archivi Alinari, Firenze.

Last Days of Pompei, and James's first travelogue book, *Portrait of Places*[15].

Such a phenomenon calls attention to a particular type of readers, the tourist-readers, who could be commercially exploited, as the Tauchnitz editions testify, and to whom Caroline Spencer (though she has never been to Europe) certainly belongs. And it suggests that for these readers the frontiers between fiction, travel-guide and travelogue were blurred, while it points out new "ways of reading" literature: performing, acting out the text, by visiting the places described in a novel or in a poem, by using it as a plan or a map, capable of shaping cognitive and emotional responses, triggering either memories or expectations. It also tells us something about the readers' *desire* for photographic illustrations and for turning literature into an intermedial experience. Furthermore, the Tauchnitz extra-illustrated series, with its singular dialectics between customized books and ready-made images (the same for everybody), emphasizes how photography, in the last decades of the nineteenth century, had already produced an iconic

[15] See the catalogue of the Todd collection of photographically extra-illustrated Tauchnitz editions at Princeton University Library (https://catalog.princeton.edu/catalog/9933841343506421: last retrieved December 15, 2022). James's book is listed at p. 5.

archive, a formatted and stereotyped imaginary of places.

The portfolios in "Four Meetings" and the extra-illustrated Tauchnitz series give us a fundamental key for reading Coburn's and James's frontispieces. Because the frontispieces clearly "flirt" with late nineteenth century touristic visual culture and photography, in at least two different ways. First of all, the frontispieces are – as the whole New York Edition – a conflicting project, in that they partly reproduce touristic clichés and partly work to mark a distance from those very clichés, without finding a balance, a visual manner *to treat and reframe* the cliché, unless it be the close up and the frequent depth of field reduction, that differentiate Coburn's images (fig. 18) from the typical vistas at the time (fig. 23). What James wrote to Coburn about the Venice subjects is telling: «And do any other odd and interesting bit you can, that may serve as a sort of symbolised and generalised Venice […]; preferring the noble and fine aspect, however, to the merely shabby and familiar […] – yet especially not choosing the pompous and obvious things that one everywhere sees photos of». (James 1984: 428).

What is there in between the «shabby» and the «pompous» or «obvious»? What is the difference between the «symbolised», the «obvious» and the «noble»? Is not «noble» Venice what «one everywhere sees photos of»? The problem is that James's geography, even when/if allusively presented, had to remain recognisable, so as to appeal to the reader's experiences and expectations. As one reviewer of the first volumes of the New York Edition aptly wrote: «It was a very happy idea to illustrate each volume with portraits of some scene, situation, etc., *representative of the locality of the text* […]: the pictures are an immense addition to the novels» (Hale Jr. 1908: 176, my italics). The pictures counterbalanced James's «modernistic text», by materialising his «spirit of place» and making it match the reader's own: the sense, in his fiction, «of great centres, of Rome, of London, of Paris, "the splendid, the glorious", the sophisticated, the *decadent*, as they [the readers] used to say themselves» (*ibid.*).

However, there is another way to "flirt" with photography. As Victoria Mills rightly argues, the Tauchnitz extra-illustrated books «rise questions about what happens when a real thing becomes a literary object» (2016: 82). This is certainly true, but we could also ask the opposite question: what happens when a literary thing becomes a real object? Because this is precisely how some of the frontispieces work, thanks to the deep-rooted belief (at least in late nineteenth and early twenty century debate) in the veracity of the photographic image, its claim to be "the real thing". A nameless bench, in an unidentifiable spot, becomes «Saltram's Seat», titled after the name of the main character of the story in question and only made

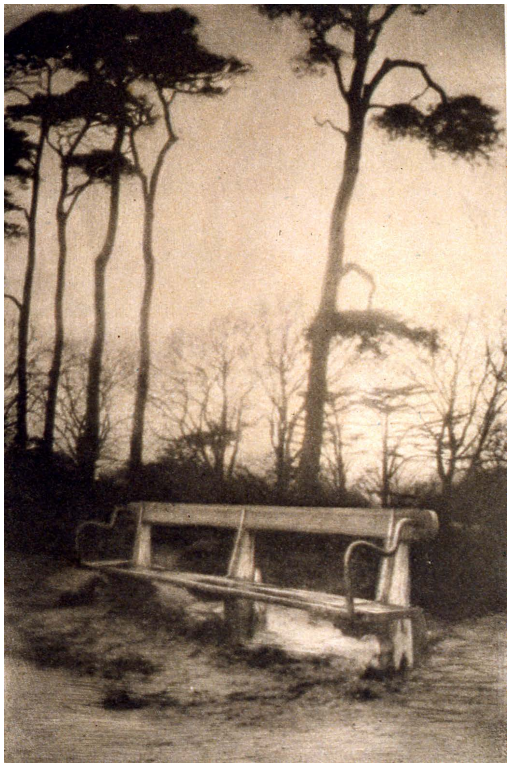

Fig. 24. «Saltram's Seat», vol. XV ("The Coxon Fund").

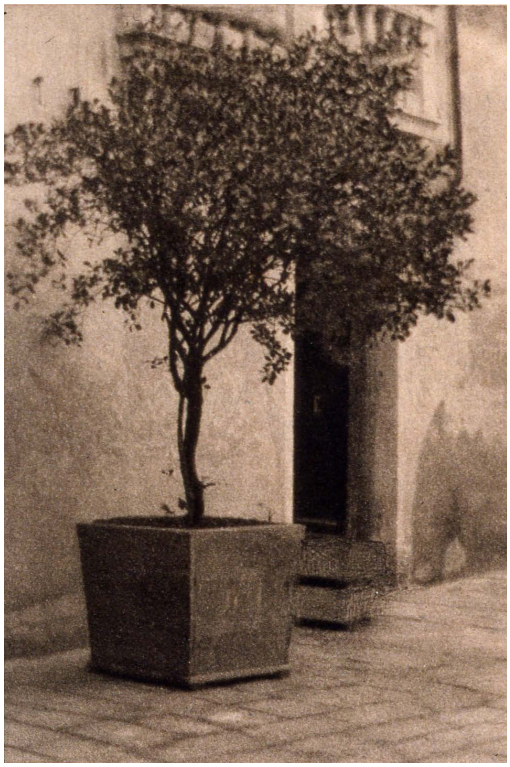

Fig. 25. «Juliana's Court», vol. XII (*The Aspern Papers*).

noteworthy by it (fig. 24); an anonymous bit in Venice (but in the picture Venice is unrecognizable as such, if not on the story's authority) becomes the back door of the old crumbling palace where the unfathomable Juliana Bordereau lives (and dies) in *The Aspern Papers* (fig. 25).

The issue at stake, here, is less a hide-and-seek game with reality and fiction than the promotion – legitimized by photography – of one's literary texts to a collective (touristic) mythology, to a territory to be explored by pilgrims, by juxtaposing, and thus equating, places «one everywhere sees photos of» and places that primarily exist in Henry James's fiction. Anyone can find St. Peter, the Arc de Triomphe or the Canal Grande, but how, armed with a copy of *The Aspern Papers*, to search for Juliana's faded Palazzo[16]? We learnt from biographical data that it is or it should be Palazzo

[16] The «Museo del Camminare», an online based institution for the promotion of walking tourism in Venice, has reconstructed two Jamesian itineraries, mixing fiction and the author's biography. See: http://www.museodelcamminare.org/progetti/re_iter/james/james_en.html (last retrieved December 15, 2022).

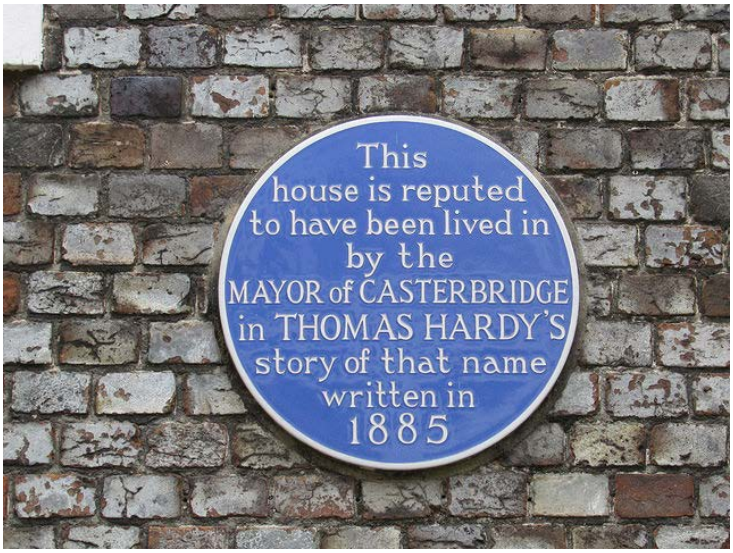

Fig. 26, Hardy's plaque in Dorchester (source: https://www.open.ac.uk/blogs/literarytourist/? p=143)

Capello, where James's friend Constance Fletcher lived and James himself stayed. But, as far as we know, it is «Juliana's Court». «A place – writes Philippe Hamon – is never truly a place until it has become a named locality (*lieu-dit*)» (1993: 45). Perhaps James dreamed of some plaque, one day, like the one that we can see today affixed to a building in Dorchester and celebrating it as the house of Hardy's Major of Casterbridge (fig. 26). Something like: «This Palazzo is reputed to have been lived in by Juliana Bordereau in Henry James's story titled The Aspern Papers written in 1888».

In my essay, I have tried to shift the focus from a classificatory framework – what is an illustration? How does it differ from an iconotext? To which kind of intermedial relation should it be traced back? – to a performative one, asking myself: what does an illustration, or a set of illustrations, *do* (to the text, the author, the readers)? In other words, freely borrowing from the speech-acts theory lexicon, what is its *force*, both illocutionary and perlocutionary. That is, both in terms of intentions (author's, illustrators', publishers') and in terms of the effects produced on the readers, effects that can be actual or potential, foreshadowed by the authors and/or her «allies»[17], so blurring the rigid divide between illocutionary and perlocutionary, or completely unpredicted. Far from being an absolute value, this force is a variable magnitude, so to speak, that changes over time, ac-

[17] Cf. Genette 1997.

cording to different contexts, triggering different interpretive processes. However, as the frontispieces to the New York Edition make evident, such a force only exists within a wider relational and intersectional network, in the multi-layered interplay between the images and the whole set of linguistic messages – far beyond what we may call the "main text" – that dynamically surround them.

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About the author

Donata Meneghelli

Donata Meneghelli is Full Professor of Comparative Literature and Literature and Visual Studies at the University of Bologna. She is member of the PhD program in "Letterature, arti, media: la Transcodificazione" at the University of L'Aquila (Italy), and of the directive board of the international PhD Program in Comparative Studies at the University of Lisbon (http://phdcomp.net/). She has participated in many international projects, is member of the editorial board of several periodicals, and is editor in chief of "Scritture migranti". Her interests focus on the theory and history of the novel, modernism, intermediality, narratology, adaptation, literature and visuality, thing theory. Amongst her publications: *Una forma che include tutto* (1997), *Teorie del punto di vista* (1998), "What Can a Film Make of a Book? Seeing Literature through *Apocalypse Now* and *Barry Lyndon*", *Image [&] Narrative* (n. 8, May 2004), "Sophie Calle: tra fotografia e parola", in *Guardare oltre*, Eds. S. Albertazzi – F. Amigoni (2008), "Le texte et son ombre ou le lecteur supplicié dans *Projet pour une révolution à New York*", *Interférences littéraires* (n. 6, mai 2011), *Storie proprio così. Il racconto nell'era della*

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E-mail:donata.meneghelli3@unibo.it

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