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Into the Wood: Dante, Byron and James in “Ravenna”

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Abstract: Approaching James’s 1874/1875 neglected Italian travelogue “Ravenna” as a disguised parable of the difficulties caused by expatriation for an aspiring writer, this article explores how references to Byron and Dante, and their poetic use of the nearby famous wood, the Pineta, position them as exemplars who renew James’s confidence in his creative ambitions; it also proposes that an allusion to Ravenna in *The Wings of the Dove* infuses the novel with overtones of Dante while revealing the elaborate circuits of James’s imaginative invention.

Keywords: Henry James, Italian travelogue, Ravenna, Byron, Dante

Résumé : Cet article se propose de lire “Ravenna,” essai du voyage en Italie en date de 1874-1875, comme une parabole des difficultés auxquelles l’expatriation expose l’aspirant écrivain. Il est montré comment James, en se référant à Byron et à Dante, et à leur utilisation poétique de la célèbre forêt toute proche de la Pineta, érige ces auteurs en modèles capables de raviver ses propres ambitions de création artistique. Puis, partant d’une allusion à Ravenne dans *Les Ailes de la colombe*, l’étude met en lumière des allusions à Dante dans ce roman tout en révélant les ressorts complexes de l’imagination jamesienne.

Mots-clés : Henry James, récit de voyage en Italie, Ravenne, Byron, Dante

Henry James was finely attentive throughout his career to the changes in personal equilibrium consequent on encounters with places unknown or unfamiliar; he was equally alert to how a return to accustomed pathways might generate tremors of disorientation as well as pleasures of renewed security. In his 1902 novel, *The Wings of the Dove*, Merton Densher, lately repatriated following his journalist’s tour of America, pauses on a street corner to look “vaguely forth at his London:”

There was always doubtless a moment for the absentee recaptured—*the* moment, that of the reflux of the first emotion—at which it was beyond disproof that one was back. His full parenthesis was closed, and he was once more but a sentence, of a sort, in the general text, the text that, from his momentary street-corner, showed as a great grey page of print that somehow managed to be crowded without being “fine.” The grey, however, was more or less the blur of a point of view not yet quite seized again; and there would be colour enough to come out. He was back, flatly enough, but back to possibilities and prospects, and the ground he now somewhat sightlessly covered was the act of renewed possession (1902 2.12).

The passage details one stage in a process by which the familiar, grown psychologically distant through absence, resumes distinction, emerges from shadowy vagueness to gain immediacy and focus, while also making a provocative association between the act of perception and that of writing. The blurred page of the London vista that Densher momentarily perceives seems figured, in the indefinitely qualifying terms of these lines, as both a projection of the self and simultaneously a force that inscribes it, perhaps suggesting thereby something of the quality and measure of that self’s volition before the imposing abundance of the real. A discomforting condition is glimpsed as Densher is recognised, or recognises himself, as “but a sentence [...]

in the general text,” as if he suffers diminishment in the congested, multitudinous cityscape or a loss of individuation so long as his point of view is unstable or subject to circumstances in which confident transactions with the world have been suspended.

James repeatedly finds his subject matter in such vertiginous, variable moments of shifting penury or possession; in turn, such moments raise questions as to what it means to be “in possession” of one’s self, of knowledge of one’s social conditions and surroundings, and of the potential text by which both may be recorded. The passage above conceives of success in terms of an ability to control that process, to create a space of interiority like that “full parentheses” that Densher presumably has left behind in America, and in which one is not a minor figure, a sentence merely in a greater totality, but a dynamic, generating entity, a lengthy paragraph, a full page, a book. From this basis further questions, and attention to shaping circumstantial forces working upon the individual, emerge in James’s fiction as he evaluates the contrasting claims and conditions of being in motion and being stationary, of embracing movement or choosing enclosure, of being at home or being unhoused. James’s fiction often launches itself on the premise that to journey, purposively to displace oneself, promises personal growth and liberation, mental freedom before ever-receding horizons, a fertilising release into psychological expansion. Yet these narratives also repeatedly depict an opposing need for a more stationary or settled state, even while this may entail the acceptance of a degree of confinement or the recognition that the finality of such a choice is a premonition of one’s own extinction. Milly Theale, in *The Wings of the Dove*, may initially appear ardently desirous of motion, in a mood of “high restlessness,” surveying from her Alpine perch “the kingdoms of the earth” as she envisions journeying amidst a seemingly limitless European topography. But she is later portrayed as gratefully “sink[ing] into possession” of Palazzo Leporelli, that other elevation from which she wishes ““never, never to go down,”” and whose ““servants, frescoes, tapestries, antiquities”” provide intense satisfaction even while she acknowledges them as only ““the thorough make-believe of a settlement,”” a stage set of the realms of physical and emotional stability that stubbornly elude her as she confronts her own demise (1902 1.128, 1.139, 2.145, 2.162, 2.148).

James’s embrace of the beneficial aspects of travel has long been recognised as both cause and effect of his personal circumstances, although the terms in which he conceives of travelling clearly exceed those of any simple touristic enterprise to reach toward more profound meditations, particularly those relating to aesthetic processes and authorial prowess. It is in such terms that this essay looks closely at one of James’s most suggestive travelogues, his early essay on Ravenna, to unravel further how he represents issues posed by place for the travelling mind of an aspiring writer. “Ravenna” has been relatively neglected by critics—attention to James’s Italian travelogues tends to dwell on the numerous pieces devoted to Florence, Rome and Venice—but James himself appears to have favoured it: after an initial publication in the 9 July 1874 issue of *The Nation*, he chose to include it in both *Transatlantic Sketches* (1875) and *Italian Hours* (1909). James’s travelogues, especially those that focus on well-known destinations, often address his readership through an array of tones self-consciously reflecting various shared assumptions, opinions and expectations of an established transatlantic community, and function so as to keep the challenges of foreign parts within bounds of relatively effortless, even superficial appropriations. Yet they often contain narratives, partially hidden or oblique, in which a more personal, less assured and questioning voice emerges. It is such a voice, blending with the lightly urbane tones of “Ravenna,” that fashions this essay, and provides clues to a question that James, in one of his final publications, described as the interest that above all others “generally or more recurrently solicits us, in the light of literature:” that of learning how the writer “has come into his estate, asserted and preserved his identity, worked out his question of sticking to that [...] in spite of the accidents and dangers that must have beset this course” (1984b 747). “Ravenna,” approached as a parable of the writing life, may

thus reflect something of how James established himself amidst the simultaneous enticements and threats of movement and stability, as well as the circuits by which a particular place might become transformed from a geographic reality into a nourishing space of introspection, infusing imaginative invention long after departure from the physical realm.

An “unvisitable” past?

If “Ravenna” does not distinguish itself on the literary-critical map of James studies, the city itself did hardly more so on the itineraries of nineteenth-century visitors, many of whom made the journey there, if at all, for its celebrated mosaics and rapidly departed. It was not a place in which to ‘linger’—that mode of initiation that James advocated for other destinations, notably Venice. One visitor, the British art critic and art historian, Lady Eastlake, supplies reasons for such behaviour in a letter of 8 October 1860:

Now a little about Ravenna which was new to me [...] It is externally the most disappointing place; one may drive through the city from morning till night without the suspicion of its [sic] containing any object of the slightest interest—a wretched, modern, filthy, Italian fifth rate town without a tower conspicuous in the distance or any details worth seeing near. One must enter there low, common looking whitewashed buildings to find oneself suddenly transported from the 19th to the 5th & 6th centuries, to ancient Christian sarcophagi, sculptured with the simplest styles of early Christianity & to grand figures in gleaming mosaics stalking in solemn progression along the walls, or looking down from domes & apses [...] The art of these monuments is beautiful, the various engravings I know give no idea of its beauty. [...] But nothing short of objects of such interest wd ever take me to Ravenna, which seems the very type of that Papal education, which has rendered its unfortunate subjects the most barbarous, ferocious & filthy of the Italian race. One other thing was fine—the ancient pine forest which stretches 20 miles in length & depth between Ravenna & the sea. I drove into its confines—about 3 miles off—& fed my eyes on its solemn grandeur [...] (204).¹

Eastlake’s description suggests why the city often failed to attract nineteenth-century visitors intent on placing themselves in relation to the most picturesque sights of the Italian peninsular in pursuit of heightened, romantically charged experience. It also indicates why it may have confronted James with a challenge distinct in kind to cities in which the spectacle of tourism itself offered diverting subject matter suitable to the commercially viable travel writing that he was commissioned to supply. Yet if such paucity of readily available material tested James’s inventiveness, the city also held attractions that we might suppose spoke intimately to a young determined writer. In 1872, James’s friend and mentor, James Russell Lowell, wrote a lengthy article on Dante in the *North American Review*; when this was republished, in 1895, he added the comment that “the chief magnet which draws foreigners and their gold to Ravenna” was not its famed mosaics but the tomb of Dante (4.142).² His remark echoes one made several decades earlier by a temporary resident, Lord Byron, for whom the poet’s tomb was decidedly a place of homage and “one of the principal objects of interest in that city” (Byron, 1821 7).³ James’s essay might therefore be read as a disguised account of a literary pilgrimage, a movement to and from a powerful line of predecessors inhabiting the city’s past and, not unlike those “grand figures in gleaming mosaics stalking in solemn progression,” posing questions to the young writer, by turns reassuring and discomfiting, about his own creative ambitions. “Ravenna” is dated, below the title, “June 8, 1874,”⁴ but James did not write the essay at that time or when staying in the city itself, facts that he self-consciously announces in his opening sentence, and which not only signal the partial abandonment of a more mimetic enterprise to one shaped retrospectively, but also define a temperamental bias, one James later referred to as his difficulty in writing of places “under too immediate an impression,” given his “horror [...] of agitated reflexions” (1984a 1059). Place name and date are there, he explains, for “local color’s sake” while he perches on “a cold Swiss mountain-top.” The former phrase is

something of a sleight-of-hand. The city is decidedly without the liveliness he details as having found elsewhere; the “glowing” nature he attributes to it derives not from its innate allure but is rather the prosaic effect of intense heat, an oppressive glare that confined him as he “edged along the narrow strip of shadow binding one side of the empty, white streets.” The image of this crepuscular marginal space, at once literal and psychological, echoes a commonly used nineteenth-century trope to refer to mental atmospheres in which clarity and confusion of perception, framed as potentially delusive or illuminating, are comingled. It introduces Ravenna as a place capable of assuming the guise of an unreal city, a teasing simulacrum of a material structure that, despite the mildly jocular tone of the essay, can destabilise the visitor’s hold on the actual, creating spaces in which imaginative freedom is constrained by epistemological uncertainty and ebbing creative vitality.

Verisimilitude and equanimity both seem imperilled as James unravels his impressions of his brief stay, especially as he oscillates between the familiar stance of a persona aspiring to obtain something of Ravenna’s “manners and customs” and one put off by its atmosphere of stagnation and historical remoteness. Coming to the city after relishing the “gorgeous medley of color” and “pictorial confusion” of two simultaneous Bolognese festivals, he initially encounters Ravenna as a place of “seclusion and repose” eliciting a “tranquil, melancholy interest.” Yet as he walks the deserted streets on the night of his arrival the “gray illumination” and “suffocating atmosphere” create the momentary fantasy that he is moving about “in the Italy of Boccaccio, hand-in-hand with the plague, through a city which had lost half its population by pestilence and the other half by flight” (1875b 329). This uneasy evocation of ambulating through a deserted city, with his own foot-steps and those of an unnamed companion as “the only sounds,” and in which the mind easily moves towards forms of nightmarish reverie, reverses the traditional romantic paradigm of a walk as that which leads to revelation or contentment into an unresolved dream journey in which arrival is deferred and structures of orientation dissolve. As such, James seems momentarily to glimpse a vision similar to that represented in Charles Dickens’s 1860 “Night Walks,” an essay that has been interpreted as a parable of the author’s writing life. In this strange piece, the insomniac narrative voice, identified as “Houselessness,” roams London, encountering ever more disturbing visions as familiar structures are engulfed by hallucinations of the historical past and brooding forces of pestilence, animalistic life and death reduce the walker to a fragile spectre vanquished by his vulnerability to disruptive impressions. “Ravenna” does not sustain the nightmarish quality that permeates “Night Walks,” yet neither does it manage to prolong for any appreciable length of time a release from troubling images. James’s nocturnal wanderings glimpse a condition in which no reification of the self is possible amidst strong reminders of the surrounding remote past and in which an atmosphere of suffocation and bleak quietude threatens the walker with estrangement even as flickers of ghostly presences give way to the comparative safety of the city’s more prosaic “old-world dulness.”

When the city is perceived in these terms, the dispirited traveller hopes that the comforting enclosure of “antiquity, history, repose” might be available to him. Yet when he sets out to explore the “vast, straggling, depopulated village” by daylight, he repeatedly finds himself confronting “some peremptory challenge to [his] knowledge of unfamiliar periods” and is only able to “attune [his] intellect vaguely” to the city’s medieval heritage and the churches that constitute Ravenna’s “palpable interest.” This is not a “visitable” past in the terms James valued, but one separated by a temporal gulf that he cannot bridge, a condition he realises most acutely when contemplating the city’s early Christian mosaics. He admits that the “great almond-eyed mosaic portraits” might have a “really formidable interest” to the more knowledgeable visitor, but they seem most to impress him with the “primitive rigidities of the Christian faith,” evoking a sense of the fixed and unchangeable that seems part of the very stillness of the city itself. Repose thus becomes transformed into an eerie inertness, an

immobile lifelessness, as the narrative's reflections on the city's historical nature seem to shape, and to be shaped by, visions of its "low and meagre and shabby" dwellings "cracking and baking in the sun [...] interspersed with high garden walls over which the long arms of tangled vines hang motionless into the stagnant streets" (1875b 331). Bafflement is a recurrent note of the traveller's impressions as distinct features of rich church interiors are noted yet remain matter for mere lists resisting the arrangement of an intellectually coherent whole. The "early Christian odds and ends" of the church of Sant' Apollinare Nuovo thus trouble the visitor as fragmentary ciphers of an inaccessible epoch:

fragments of yellow marble incrusting with quaint sculptured emblems of primitive dogma; great rough troughs, containing the bones of old bishops; episcopal chairs with the marble worn [...] slabs from the fronts of old pulpits, covered with carven hieroglyphics of an almost Egyptian abtrusiveness—lambs, and stags, and fishes, and beasts of theological affinities even less apparent. (1875b 332)

Significance eludes the speaker; these are "strange things" that match the "strange figures in the great mosaic panorama," the adjectival repetition suggesting a frustrated effort to move beyond initial impressions, while these figures, too, although appearing "lifelike enough to speak to you and answer your wonderment," articulate their responses in voices inaudible to the modern ear:

What it is these long, slim seraphs express I cannot quite say, but they have an odd, knowing, sidelong look out of the narrow ovals of their eyes which, though not without sweetness, would certainly make me feel like murmuring a defensive prayer or so if I were to find myself alone in the church toward dusk. (1875b 333)

Although temporarily housed within sacred spaces that might be supposed to offer sanctuary, James is excluded from any experience of equanimity, exposed instead to powerful manifestations of religious belief through figures that come close to taunting him, looming as inquisitors against whom he must mount a defence or with whom he can discover no nourishing mutuality and evincing states of being so distant from his own as to threaten a kind of erasure. He adopts a light tone before the "orthodox stiffness" of the "great Christ" in Sant' Apollinare Nuovo, mockingly observing that he betrays no "divine foreknowledge [...] of Dr Channing and M. Renan," but this may be whistling in the dark. Deeper engagement with the theological history of Ravenna is avoided while the dazzling effect of the mosaics' "scintillation [...] brilliant and elaborate" (1875b 333–334) appears to offer some respite, distracting the eye and softening the threat that the formidable images seem to make. Self-preservation may nonetheless have required a defensive act of retrospective effacement:

[...] to tell the truth, my memory of [the Ravennese churches] has already become a sort of hazy confusion and formless meditation. The total aspect of the place, its sepulchral stillness, its absorbing perfume of evanescence and decay and mortality, confounds the distinctions and blurs the details. (1875b 334)

One aspect of the anxiety that James may have felt in Ravenna is the peril to which a writer might be exposed by expatriation. The essay glimpses a realm in which, through "unhousing" the self from the stabilising co-ordinates of a fixed place and the creative security of the intimately possessed, one's footing amidst historical density could be lost whilst also being removed from the actualities of one's time. It could be argued that Ravenna was temporally too remote to threaten James in this way; equally it could be said that it accentuated a frustration he had experienced elsewhere in Europe and that especially surfaces in the Italian travelogues. Yet "Ravenna" also suggests that such a condition might not be a consequence simply of being unable to gain access to a past or present era, but curiously something close to the reverse: that

an artist could be undone by a temperament so receptive to deep impressions as to be unable to order them or to erect defences firm enough to negotiate the assault of their competing dominion and potentially superior authority.

Exile and the Artist's Estate

James wrote most powerfully of the entropic state he may have felt threatened by in Ravenna in *Roderick Hudson*, the novel in which the young sculptor's exposure to the aesthetic and historical density of Italy reduces him to listless melancholia, a spiritual and creative destitution in which his former vitalism unravels. Interpretations of the novel have often understood it as a portrait of the artist for whom the repressed power of the past returns to destroy the present and as a work defining influence in terms of experiencing a fallen state within a secular world in which forms of aesthetic or religious transcendence are no longer possible. But the novel is also preoccupied with an artist's vulnerability to his own temperament. It reflects on the kind of creativity that can best withstand the assaults of past glories as well as modern commercialism and how the receptivity essential for genuine artistic expression need be coupled with an equally strong expressive force of one's own. *Roderick Hudson* was begun in the same period in which "Ravenna" was composed, spring 1874. Evident within it is a meditation, on the author's part, on whether the artist is capable of writing under siege, of preserving emotional and mental equilibrium within atmospheres in which the manifest "wave of time," as James lamented in another of the Italian travelogues, is ever as ready "to pass over" one's experience "as the salt sea to wipe out the letters and words your stick has traced in the sand" (1909 345).

The questions that shape this early novel as well as "Ravenna" have much to do with how an intellectually and emotionally susceptible artist may locate the self in order to maximize productivity, be removed from home without succumbing to homelessness and travel before an ever-receding horizon of self-expansion while not losing self-definition. Early in *Roderick Hudson*, placed within Rowland Mallet's ruminations as he walks through the protagonist's New England village on a tranquil summer night, there is an unusual evocation of the town as a place of "kindness, comfort, safety" in which one could find "beauty sufficient for an artist not to starve upon it," (1879 1.104)⁵ a moment figuring the intrusion of doubt, in Rowland's mind, as to whether uprooting his protégé will be to the young sculptor's advantage. Once abroad, however, when Rowland suggests that Roderick might "go home," if only in order to escort his mother and Mary Garland to Rome, the latter contends that "the sight of Northampton Main Street would permanently upset me," confirming the estrangement he would feel from his prior habitus (1879 2.67). In revision, this sentiment becomes fiercely defiant: "'The more I should 'go' the less of that sacred name there would be about it—so that not really to *become* homeless I had better keep my distance'" (1907 174). Homelessness is converted into a state in which one is paradoxically housed within the familiar, whereas "home" retains its hallowed character, its satisfying embrace, only so long as it is a place unvisited save in the mind. Roderick's declaration leaves open the question of where the place would be in which the artist could be "at home" in a genuinely sustaining way, although his fall, his tortured submission to the dominance of influence, implies that it is a realm on which creativity depends. In "Ravenna," one such fertile territory is witnessed when the speaker, as he continues to wander through imposing interiors, comes upon a figure seated under the dome of another of the city's churches, a position James associates in *Roderick Hudson* with an enhanced, enlarged vision.⁶ He encounters "an artist whom [he] envied, making at an effective angle a picture of the choir and its broken lights, its decorated altar, and its incrustated, twinkling walls" (1875b 335). Gloom, stagnation, melancholia are transformed by the representation of beauty in an ironic triumph of the artist over place: "The picture [...] will hang, I suppose, on

the library wall of some person of taste; but even if it is much better than is probable [...] all his taste will not tell the owner, unless he has been there, in just what a soundless, mouldering, out-of-the-way corner of old Italy it was painted" (1875b 335). This figure anticipates other examples of artistic prowess, far from nameless, who are associated with the city and whose reason for residing there propel the essay's shadowy meditation on artistry in exile: Byron and Dante.

James would not only have been travelling towards this city of Byron and Dante's exile, during his first trip to Italy, but with these poets in several respects. As has been well documented, Byron was a figure who came to be intimately associated with European and especially Italian tourism during the mid-nineteenth century period in which mass tourism arose. Despite his "vilification as the embodiment of Continental libertarianism and libertinage," as James Buzard has argued, Byron was instrumental in transforming the Continent "into a great theatre for travellers' acts of cultural self-dramatisation." (115–117ff) The poetry in which Byron evoked European and especially Italian settings served to heighten the potential historical, emotional and erotic glamour of a traveller's experience, to cause specific locations to become reanimated by an aura of romantic intensity. Yet ironically, in shaping the terms of a traveller's immediate response to a foreign place, such poetry could also cause that reaction to be preconceived.⁷ The fact that quotations from Byron's works were repeatedly used in his British publishers' venture into the tourist market, Murray guidebooks, reflects the ways in which travellers' enactments of desire often followed forms of clichéd behaviour or were reliant on commonplace gestures and stock attitudes. James's fictional treatment of the use of "Murrays," and their German equivalent, the equally popular Baedekers, reveals his understanding of this phenomena. Indeed he did not exempt himself from the mild mockery in which he presented his characters' reliance on such guides: "I conned my guide-book [...] then fumbled at poor Murray again," he laments in "Ravenna," overcome by "an atmosphere of records and relics" while attempting to decipher the city's medieval past (1875b 330).

If James was repeatedly reminded of Byron's presence in Italy during his own journeying, the figure of Dante may well have been equally or indeed more prominent in his imaginative geography at this time. James is known to have acquired an 1874 copy of *La Divina Commedia*; his library also contained, as far as can be ascertained, an 1865 translation of *L'Inferno* and a later translation of the *Il Purgatorio* and *Il Paradiso* (Edel and Tintner 28).⁸ The wide-spread nineteenth-century interest in Dante makes such acquisitions unsurprising. In England and America Dante's work provided a steadily increasing fascination for readers and scholars, an enthusiasm that caused Emerson to define the distinctive "taste of the period," in 1852, as "the new vogue given to the genius of Dante" and to position such a resurgence of interest as among the century's most significant cultural events (Fuller 1.240). Emerson's attraction to Dante, it has also been argued, was founded on his belief that "certain of Dante's virtues [...] were] particularly commendable to American writers." (Verduin 9)⁹ While for Emerson and his associates among transcendentalist intellectual circles, Dante was an inspirational figure for artists of a young republic ambitious of creating distinct forms of literary expression, two figures with whom James was intimately acquainted, Charles Eliot Norton and James Russell Lowell, were active in popularising Dante through new translations and studies of their own and promoting his significance within academic institutions. This interest was heightened by American endorsement of Italian independence movements, especially as these were perceived in terms of a heroic struggle for liberation that closely paralleled the country's own earlier struggles toward self-governance. Underpinned by the way in which Dante became a key figure used by Italian nationalists for creating a unified Italian identity, his poetic and political qualities fused so as to make him a spiritual father of patriotic fervour in Italy throughout the Risorgimento, American valuation of Dante often praised him in terms of a temperament uniquely combining poetic power with moral strength. As Norton wrote, summarising Dante's

importance in previous decades as well as his own contemporary moment, “the secret of his peculiar hold upon so many and so various minds” derived from his genius for “holding his powers in complete command, controlling his own genius, by force of character and compelling it to minister to the perfecting and invigorating of his moral nature.” (qtd. in Dupont 4).¹⁰ Powers governed in this way, it can easily be supposed, might have had a particularly charged resonance for the author of *Roderick Hudson*.

The figure of Byron, especially in regard to the sexually transgressive reputation associated with him, has long been understood as inspiration for James’s creation of Jeffrey Aspern, following James’s own identification of these figures in his Preface to “The Aspern Papers.”¹¹ Nonetheless, when tracing references to Byron in James’s criticism, it may be accurate to say that he keeps his distance from this predecessor. Such a position may perhaps reflect James’s wariness of following those superficial inflations of one’s experience abroad to which, as aforementioned, visitors to Italy in the mid-nineteenth century were prone. As Buzard argues, distinguishing oneself as a traveller, not a tourist, in Italy during this period often took the form of self-consciously demonstrating one’s separation from common forms of Romantic adulation. And yet, contemplating Byron’s residence in Ravenna from 1819 to 1821 James cannot help but be impressed by his ability to write in such a backwater. Having emerged from the city’s churches, James turns his attention, in the final lengthy paragraph of his travelogue, to the evidence, material and immaterial, of literary figures who resided in the city. Puzzling over Byron’s dwelling, “a homely, shabby, two-storied dwelling [...] with as little as possible of isolation and mystery,” James professes amazement that a man “so much *de son temps*” could have sustained his poetic gift in this “profoundly stagnant city” despite what he coyly refers to as Byron’s “notable pastime,” the romantic liaison he had conducted there with Countess Teresa Guiccioli. Consequently, the poet’s productivity amidst such a moribund atmosphere increases his “esteem” for Byron and renews his faith “in the sincerity of his inspiration” (1875b 337). As to the peculiar hold Dante may have exercised over James’s imagination, the case is more oblique. He observes, in a characteristic turn of phrase, that Dante’s grave “is anything but Dantesque,” while declaring that any monument to him would be superfluous given that he “built himself his memorial in verses more solid than Cyclopean blocks” (1875b 336–337). Yet as exemplars of complex negotiations between exile and literary expression, there are further signs in this essay of meditations surrounding these figures and of how they may have illuminated, for James, ongoing considerations of where a writer finds a location secure enough to nourish imaginative life when home will not serve.

James is not only encountering two exiles, in this essay, but placing himself in a line of transmission: one that moves from Dante, who accepted the protection of the lord of Ravenna, Prince Guido Novello da Polenta, in 1318, in the period following his expulsion from Florence, and lived in the city until his death, to Byron, for whom Dante figures in turn in the personal circumstances that brought him to Ravenna and whom he acknowledged in his aforementioned 1819 poem, “The Prophecy of Dante.”¹² James, unlike Byron, does not make so large a gesture of homage to this predecessor; he did not write at length on him and there are few explicit allusions to Dante in his fiction. Yet it is perfectly in keeping with Rowland Mallet’s character and cultural milieu that he lends Roderick his copy of the *Inferno*, having advised him that “a sculptor should make a companion” of the poet. And while the tempestuous Roderick may declare that when one’s “genius is in eclipse Dante’s a dreadfully smoky lamp” (1879 2.84–5),¹³ it is evident that Dante’s life served James as a model of the relation a strong temperament might forge between literary success and challenging material conditions. In his 1916 preface to Rupert Brooke’s *Letters from America*, cited earlier, there is a telling sign. Confessing that he is “haunted by the observed law, that the growth and the triumph” of a writer’s “faculty at its finest have been positively in proportion to certain rigours of circumstance,” James lists a series of cases that begins, “We think of Dante in harassed exile” (1984b 747, 748).

Exile may seem too extreme a condition for it to be applied to a young writer wandering through the dusty streets of Ravenna, able to transport himself at any time by the modern convenience of rail to the nearest Alpine perch. In recent considerations of the term, and through the violent cataclysms of the twentieth century, it has been associated more strictly with those displaced by imperialist or totalitarian conflicts. Thus Edward Said resists conceptualisations of exile as “beneficially humanistic” in regard to the literature informed by this condition and calls attention to necessary distinctions amongst a variety of persons and groups, “exiles, refugees, expatriates, and émigrés” (181). Yet a more benign form of the term serves James, at this period, as a way to evoke the opposite pole to his belief, expressed several years earlier with buoyant confidence in a 20 September 1867 letter to his friend T.S. Perry, that as Americans they were privileged to “deal freely with forms of civilization not our own,” to “pick and choose” and “claim our property” wherever it might be found (1974-1984 1.77). His 1875 tale, “The Madonna of the Future,” takes a more sober view, placing the American artist abroad in an unrelentingly disadvantageous position: ““We are the disinherited of art! [...] We poor aspirants must live in perpetual exile,”” cries the woeful painter of this tale, condemned to an interminable state of preparation before his imagined masterpiece, never able to execute his vision (1875a 269). James’s experience at Ravenna, especially when confronting those mosaic figures careless of his presence, can be understood as reducing him to a not dissimilar state, outside a natural or national aesthetic tradition of his own and precariously defined, in terms of his own backward reach and physical displacement, in an exile at once tangible and spiritual. Yet “Ravenna” also suggests that such a position need not be wholly negative for the artist who knew how best to make use of it. In James’s essay on Brooke, he gives special emphasis to how the poet has “been able to reach us and touch us [...] in spite of the accidents and dangers that must have beset [his] course,” confirming his preoccupation with artists who “kept fighting for their life and insisting on their range of expression, amid doubts and derisions and buffets, even sometimes amid *stones of stumbling quite self-invited*” (1984b 747, 48; my emphasis). The relation of adverse circumstance to artistic expression here approaches a form of necessity, with inauspicious conditions defined as the generating force of the artist’s oppositional spirit, thus transforming such experience as so crucial to artistic development as to be, if not actually imposed upon one, then actively sought and created. Such sentiments may haunt the hours of James’s journey to Ravenna and the margins of his text. Certainly, they may account for his self-portrait at the close of this travelogue, in which mood and tone are transfigured as he places himself within a hallowed *locus*, a place of dense literary allusions as well as cooler air. In the closing lines of “Ravenna,” James leaves the city to visit the Pineta, the nearby ancient pine forest that Lady Eastlake had described as a place of “solemn grandeur:” “I drove out to it for Byron’s sake, and Dante’s and Boccaccio’s,” he explains, consciously performing the journey in tribute to those for whom the forest had been a place of inspiration and who had interwoven it in their work (1875b 338).

The Shades of the Pineta

In Boccaccio’s *Decameron* the Pineta is a terrain of harrowing dream-like visions of unrequited love that nonetheless allow a canny lover, suffering from rejection, to devise a way to transform his misery into happiness, a tale that exemplifies the triumph of invention over ill fortune.¹⁴ In Byron and Dante’s works, it is also associated with forms of creativity and rejuvenation, although those consequent on rapt contemplation of one’s place, respectively, in a literary tradition and a divine order far beyond purely secular dimensions. In “Don Juan,” the poet apostrophises the wood and hour of his visit:

Sweet hour of twilight!—in the solitude
Of the pine forest, and the silent shore

Which bounds Ravenna's immemorial wood,
Rooted where once the Adrian wave flow'd o'er,
To where the last Cesarean fortress stood,
Evergreen forest! which Boccaccio's lore
And Dryden's lay made haunted ground to me,
How have I loved the twilight hour and thee! (III.105 517)¹⁵

Byron imbues the wood with historical as well as poetic resonance, its "evergreen" nature accentuating it as a timeless, fertile place in which one is enclosed within sequences of events and traditions of sensibility that allow rhapsodic meditation; mind and place exist here in harmonious, joyful reverie untroubled, in this twilight hour, by any disturbances in the material circumstances of the speaker's life. For Dante, the Pineta is also a place of repose; it is remembered as a stage in his spiritual journey in which the "selva oscura" that the poet found himself in at the opening of *L'Inferno* is replaced by a "divina foresta spessa e viva" in Canto XXVIII of *Il Purgatorio*. Here, the singing of birds is associated with an art of such gladness as to impress the leaves of the forest trees, causing them to resonate with melodious rhyme, and "un'aura dolce" is felt on the poet's brow, as if a sign of heavenly comfort and benediction (vol. 2. Canto XXVIII, lines 2, 7, 13-21. 364).¹⁶

The Pineta also spoke eloquently to James. In the closing lines of "Ravenna" he evokes an experience whose mood of restful contemplation contrasts sharply with the details of his journey thus far. Visiting another church, "the stately temple" of Sant'Apollinare in Classe standing between the city and forest, he passes "a delicious half-hour sitting in [a] wave of tempered light, looking down the cool, gray avenue of the nave, out of the open door at the vivid green swamps, listening to the melancholy stillness." Rambling "for an hour in the Pineta, between the tall smooth, silvery stems of the pines" he glimpses "a view of white sails, gleaming and gliding behind the sand-hills" (1875b 338), an image of graceful, unimpeded progression. The visitor's former agitation and frustration have departed; the mosaics of this church are no longer threatening as his vision moves, in this highly deliberated spatial organization, between the undulating light within and the actual landscape outside, bringing the tangible and intangible constituents of the scene into peaceful equilibrium. Yet the essay withholds any details of what James was meditating while "listening to the melancholy stillness"—a paradoxical phrase suggestive of a form of self-communing or spiritual interiority consequent on a cessation of physical movement in the self as well as the landscape¹⁷—nor does it confess whose company he kept, although the voice heard most clearly may well have been Dante's.

Immediately following this experience, having described his meandering walk, James concludes "Ravenna" abruptly and in a highly provocative manner:

It was infinitely picturesque; but, as the trees stand at wide intervals, and bear far aloft in the blue air but a little parasol of foliage, I suppose that, of a glaring summer day, the forest was only the more Italian for being perfectly shadeless. (1875b 338)

The final term is startling. It may signal a disengagement from whatever stability James had found in the 'shades', the spectres of Boccaccio, Dante and Byron, and a confident disavowal of indebtedness; he may be indicating in particular his own distance from Byron's romantic twilight as well as an embrace of the secular by emphasizing the hard light of the actual that he would take as one aspect of his own subject matter. Yet these phrases could also be read as emphasizing a new tolerance of the Italian glare or way to exist within it, one whereby deprivation in a worldly realm or on well-trodden ground could be transformed into creative energy, and exile, defined as life outside habitual orders and modes of perception, could facilitate an unusual sharpness of vision.

When James revised “Ravenna” for his 1909 collection, *Italian Hours*, he made several notable changes to these concluding sentences: in the later volume he rambles “for an hour” not in the “Pineta” but the “Wood of Associations,” a place that is no longer described as “picturesque” but rather “nobly ‘quaint’”; and instead of the forest understood as “the more Italian for being perfectly shadeless” it is “the more characteristic of its clime and country” for being so (344).¹⁸ The elimination of the term “picturesque,” a word imbued with a range of nineteenth-century discourses and usages, occurs frequently in James’s revisions to his early travelogues and is often accompanied by an accentuation of a sense of mystery in the landscape or meanings behind surface appearances.¹⁹ Such is the case here through the textual proximity of the evocative “Wood of Associations,” while the phrase, “nobly ‘quaint’” retains an aura of the agreeable in the walker’s perception of the scene as it also serves to distance him from a possible taint of superficiality.²⁰ These revisions accentuate the Pineta as a hallowed, aesthetic space, resonant with spectral voices, and the apprehension of which stands in greater contrast to its emphasized seasonal heat and geographic location, its “clime and country.” They also render the phrase “perfectly shadeless” more prosaically factual, permitting it to stand as a record of the actual conditions of James’s visit, while yet making these less of an impediment to his imaginative occupation of the wood and his susceptibility to its deeply affecting quality. James, in 1909, embellishes his earlier text in a more confident negotiation of the real and the imaginary, and in what could be seen as a confirmation of the kinds of enlightenment that his youthful visit had offered him. The early version of “Ravenna,” I have suggested, may be approached as a parable of a young writer’s journey from disorientation and self-doubt to a recognition of how ambitious creativity could find a productive path, one in which adversity might generate its own advantages. If that reading is a valid one, then James’s revisionary return to this city might be construed as both an acknowledgement of earlier discoveries experienced there and of the predecessors with whom, in the intervening years, he had lived. James made another visit to Ravenna in May 1894.²¹ He was travelling from Venice, where he had been engaged in assisting the relatives of Constance Fenimore Woolson to dispose of her personal effects, and was en route to Rome, where he would visit his friend’s grave in the Protestant Cemetery. The single extant letter he wrote from Ravenna gives no clues as to why he returned, and it may have been merely a convenient stop-over. Yet it is suggestive that several months later, in November 1894, he made his first extended Notebook entry for what would become *The Wings of the Dove*, and also that, in this work, he made reference to the city. The allusion is slight but profound; in Chapter XIII of Book Fifth, Susan Stringham is described as having a manner toward Milly which, in its deference, was “scarce more inquisitive than if she had been a mosaic at Ravenna” (1902 1.280). The comparison could be taken as belittling, an indication of a mental habit, “a positive need” of Susan “to treat [Milly] as a princess” (1902 1.279); yet as pointing to her loyal belief in her friend’s value it could also signal Susan’s own kind of “stillness.” Decades previously, in “Ravenna,” James had expressed his “keen wonderment that, while centuries had worn themselves away and empires risen and fallen, these little cubes of colored glass had stuck in their allotted places and kept their freshness” (1875b 334), and the virtues of “sticking” may have been in his mind when describing Susan as someone similarly unmoving in her unquestioning devotion. Susan Stringham may at times seem a relatively negligible character, someone whose virtues, even in the passage above, are inseparable from kinds of limitation, especially in terms of evaluating persons she encounters through Milly. Yet she is given the role of staging one of the most dramatic confrontations in the novel, and one in which several of the sombre questions that reverberate in its closing chapters are voiced. When Susan visits Merton Densher in his Venetian apartment, after the devastation wrought by Lord Mark’s revelation, she functions as a mild but unyielding interrogator, a distant version of Ravenna’s mosaic figures, asking him of what he is made, withholding judgement but withholding grace as well. She poses to Densher

versions of a question not unlike that which Beatrice puts to Dante, in an exchange between these figures in *Il Purgatorio*: “E quali agevolezze o quali avanzi / nella fronte delli altri si mostraro, / per che dovessi lor passeggiare anzi?” (vol. 2. Canto XXXI, 28–30. 402)²² Susan cannot easily be likened to Beatrice, but she represents a figure who might be associated with her, in the strange atmosphere of the later stages of this novel. As Densher, “alone, in the stillness of his rooms” in London listens with a “spiritual ear” to Milly’s absent voice, the novel comes to resemble a Dantesque tale of a young man’s journey from his embroilment in a duplicitous plan through forgiveness to a kind of apotheosis in love and memory, even while the narrative acknowledges that Densher’s penitent longing will never be fully realised. This fusion of the scenes and figures of Ravenna, these patterns of agitation and self-reflection, may tell us something of the novel’s exploration of sacred and profane love; they may also be figured as the shadowy signs, the outcome of a circuitous, elongated and mysterious path, revealing traces of what James made of his time in the stagnant byways and glimmering interiors of Ravenna and the Pineta’s haunted ground.

There may be reason not to overstate the significance of Dante in James’s creative frameworks at this time, even given his deeply habitual orientation toward other writers. Yet considered through the lens of one whose debt to the Italian poet was considerable, James’s imaginative transactions with Dante, from 1874 to 1894 and beyond, assume a weightier possibility. In his 1950 lecture, “What Dante means to Me,” T.S. Eliot explained that the “greatest debts are not always the most evident” and that “the influence of Dante, where it is really powerful, is a *cumulative* influence.” What he meant by this, Eliot stressed, was that it was a relation which grows with the passage of time and “at every stage of maturing” as one is better positioned to understand the intricacies of the poet’s work. (126, 130, 127) James may not have been able, like his predecessors, to write in Ravenna, but within it, far from home, he may have experienced a space of the mind, a “divina foresta spessa e viva,” in which he would eventually do so.

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¹ Letter to Sara Austen. Bologna. Lady Eastlake (Elizabeth Rigby) was married to the then Director of the National Gallery in London, Sir Charles Eastlake. I am grateful to Cecilia Riva for bringing this letter to my attention.

² James was familiar with this article; in his 1896 memorial essay on Lowell, he remarked on his "beautiful studies (1872–5) of Dante, Spenser, and Wordsworth" (1984b 544).

³ In the "Dedication" to his poem "The Prophecy of Dante," Byron called the work his "imitative rhyme" (5).

⁴ All quotations from "Ravenna" refer to the essay's first book publication in *Transatlantic Sketches* (1875b). The essay was revised when republished in *Italian Hours* (1909).

⁵ *Roderick Hudson* was originally published in the *Atlantic Monthly*, January–December 1875; the first American book edition was published by James R. Osgood in Boston in 1876 and a revised UK edition was published in three volumes in London by Macmillan in 1879. As I have been unable to source the first American edition, I have quoted from the 1879 publication, noting where it differs from the *Atlantic Monthly*. There is one change from the *Atlantic Monthly* text in these (1879) quotations; the earlier version has 'beauty enough for an artist'; February 1875, 155.

⁶ See, for example, Chapter 17, in which Rowland Mallet and Mary Garland, staring at the "golden immensities" of the great dome of St Peter's in Rome, discuss the consequences of living in a "complex and accumulated, civilization."

⁷ Buzard is not the only critic to discuss the implications of this behaviour; see, for example, Stabler 50–52ff.

⁸ James's 1875 copy of *La Divina Commedia* bears his signature. Full publication details of these volumes are not supplied by Edel/Tintner, but it is most likely that the translation of *Il Purgatorio* and *Il Paradiso* that their list records as published in Boston in 1891–92 was a first edition of Charles Eliot Norton's three volume annotated prose translation of the *Commedia*, issued at this date by Houghton Mifflin.

⁹ Verduin understands Emerson's appreciation of the concrete, objective quality of Dante's images to be one reason why he believed him to be an especially valuable exemplar for American writers.

¹⁰ For this quotation Dupont cites: Turnbull Lectures. 1894. Charles Eliot Norton, Miscellaneous Papers, Houghton Library, Harvard. bMS Am 1088.5, box 13. It is notable that aspects of Italian culture that especially engaged Norton were intensified by his interest in Dante; in his 1860 travelogue, *Notes of Travel and Study in Italy*, he brings his knowledge of Dante to bear on his lengthy discussion of the cathedral at Orvieto (99–159). James is likely to have been familiar with this work.

¹¹ In the present context, associations made between Roderick's early confidence in his powers and the "demonic vitalism of Blake or Byron" are suggestive (Saint-Amour 31).

¹² Dowling notes that there is evidence that a mutual admiration for Dante served to initiate Byron's affair with Teresa Guiccioli (220).

¹³ The *Atlantic Monthly* reads "eclipse, Dante is." June 1875 (648).

¹⁴ This is the eighth story of the fifth day. It tells the story of the unhappy Nastagio degli Onesti who witnesses, in the forest, the sentence imposed on a woman and her cruelly spurned lover, after his consequent suicide and her own death. Both must endure a chase, many times repeated, in which the woman is pursued by a pack of dogs and her unrequited lover, and eventually slain by him. Nastagio, who has been similarly rejected, stages a banquet in the forest in which his own beloved witnesses this horrific spectacle and thereafter agrees to marry him. John Dryden translated the story in verse form in *Fables Ancient and Modern* (1700).

¹⁵ III.106 of "Don Juan" makes further comment on Boccaccio's story, and "The spectre huntsman of Onesti's line."

¹⁶ Sinclair translates these phrases: the "divine forest green and dense," "a sweet air." The passage continues: "[l]e fronde, tremolando] non però dal loro esser dritto sparte/ tanto che li augelletti per le cime / lasciasser d'operare ogni lor arte; / ma con piena letizia l'ore prime, / cantando, ricevieno intra le foglie, / che tenevan bordone alle sue rime, / tal qual di ramo in ramo si raccoglie / per la pineta in su 'l lito di Chiassi, / quand'Eolo Scirocco fuor discioglie." Sinclair translation: ["the fluttering boughs] yet were not so much swayed from their erectness that the little birds in the tops did not still practise all their arts, but, singing, they greeted the morning hours with full gladness among the leaves, which kept such undertone to their rhymes as gathers from branch to branch in the pine wood on the Chiassi shore when Aeolus looses the Sirocco," (Dante 2.364–5).

¹⁷ This moment may be placed alongside Elizabeth Johns's reading of *The Ambassadors* in light of Dante, especially through her notion of a pilgrimage leading to "essentialized interiority" (Johns 152ff).

¹⁸ James's use of the upper case in "Wood of Associations" suggests that it may not be a phrase of his own invention, yet I have been unable to find any documented usage of this name for the Pineta, or, if it is a literary allusion, to trace it to an explicit source.

¹⁹ I have made this point previously in my "Introduction" to *Italian Hours* (Follini xvi). For an extended discussion of James's use and revision of this term in his travelogues, see Herford Ch. V.

²⁰ "Quaint," in what the *OED* terms "[n]ow the usual sense," is defined as "Attractively or agreeably unusual in character or appearance; esp. pleasingly old-fashioned," and illustrated there by a letter James wrote to Edith Wharton, on 18 December 1905, upon receiving a photograph of her: "I take it gratefully for my *étrennes* and place it ever so conspicuously among quaint tributes already beginning to cluster on my mantel shelf" (1974-1984 4.384). We might suppose, therefore, that this is the meaning the word carried for James when revising this travelogue.

²¹ One letter exists to document this visit; James wrote to his brother William on 25 May 1894 from Ravenna (Horne 269-70).

²² Sinclair translates: "what attractions and advantages showed in the aspect of other things for which thou must be at their service?" (Dante 2.403)