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Silence and Voices in James's Venice *

Rosella Mamoli Zorzi

mamoli@unive.it

Università Ca' Foscari Venezia

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ABSTRACT – Henry James's descriptions, rich in visual details, often seem 'muted' from the point of view of sound. However, one particular sound seems to interest him more and more through the years: voices. In his works on Venice, voices seem to acquire a special value against the silence of the city, i.e. the absence of mechanical noises. Voices belong to people, but also to Venetian buildings, forecasting the use of voices regularly attributed to buildings in *The American Scene*. In Venice, gondoliers' voices have a special relevance: in spite of their "contempt for consonants and other disagreeables" James does not seem to condemn them, on the contrary he appreciates them. An odd position for a writer who criticized harshly the language of American women and of ethnic groups in America. The reason may be ascribed to the fact that Italian is not the beloved language of Shakespeare and of American democracy, but also to the dreamlike quality of the city, or to the writer's seeing Venice as a woman with whom he falls in love.

KEYWORDS – Henry James; Venice; Language; Sound; Voices.

Sound studies is a new field of enquiry for me. However, I was not totally unprepared for soundscapes studies, being familiar, just like every Americanist, with Thoreau's *Walden*, with John Cage's silences and noises entering from the window (*Dadaesque 4' 33"*; the piano concerts of the 1950s), and, before Cage, with the Futurists's music of noise (for example Pratella's *Manifesto tecnico della musica futurista*, 1911, Luigi Russolo's *L'arte dei rumori*, 1913, and his *Serenata per intonarumori*, c. 1920). In other words, I was already aware of the importance of silence, and of noise, in addition to voices and music, as interpreted traditionally or in a new way. However, R. Murray Schafer's books, which remain fundamental, in spite of some recent criticism (Bull

* This is an invited article. The editor thanks professor Mamoli Zorzi for accepting publication in this journal.

2019)¹, together with Schweighauser (2006), opened up new horizons to me and made my reading of Henry James not only more interesting, but quite startling.

Before approaching my subject, let me consider James's work at large from the point of view of sound studies. James's reading becomes startling because his detailed descriptions of places and cities, of country houses and villages, seem almost 'muted': James hardly seems to consider and refer to the soundscape of a city or of a country house, *or* he takes it for granted: in his elaborate visual descriptions of London, for instance, one would imagine that his Dickensian and detailed observations of the city should teem with references to sounds (anthroponies: mechanical noise made by people); but they do not. We do find some references to sound, for instance, in the essay "London" (1888) in *English Hours*: "The uproar of Piccadilly hummed away at the end of the street, and the rattle of a heartless hansom passed close to my ears" (James [1905] 1981, 4).

If the visual details of the city are specified and registered again and again, this is not what happens with the indication of sounds. It is a little different with the descriptions of the London parks, where James registers "the song of birds, the bleat of lambs, the ripple of ponds, the rustle of admirable trees" (11). James somehow takes noise for granted. However, the noise of London is to be inferred, by contrast, when the city's odd silence is described in "An English Easter" (1977), as during the period of Passion Week, when the City becomes as "silent as the grave": then a "half hearted hush steals over its mighty uproar" (74).

In the beginning of *Portrait of a Lady* (1881), even the shadows falling on the turf are described in detail, but the only sound which is registered is that of the voices if they raise in intensity in chapter 1: "By Jove, we should see some queer things!" cried Lord Warburton and laughed (James [1881] 1975, 21). An annotation on voice which interrupts the calm sound of the other voices (introduced by "said, asked, declared, exclaimed, replied, murmured, called out", or no tags) and, in chapter 2, by the "shrill barks" of the dogs (25). There are no twitters of birds, no noise of china teacups being deposited

¹ In the "Introduction" to the *The Routledge Companion to Sound Studies* (2019) Bull speaks about Schafer ignoring popular music in favour of avant-garde, and about his "cultural omissions": Pynchon, DeLillo, Beckett. See also (Schafer 1977 and 1980). I am immensely grateful to A. Calanchi for enlightening me on sound studies during a conference at Salamanca in 2019. See also Calanchi (a cura di) 2015.

(although the tea is described in detail, it is hot to Mr. Touchett). The description, again seems muted, the silence being interrupted by another alteration of voices: “Oh, I hope there would be a Lord...” and “You adorable creature!’ she suddenly cried, stooping down and picking up the small dog again” (27). Hints at laughs also appear. All of these are human sounds.

It is voices that interest James: in the 1888 essay on London, the great Babylon, it is the “tongue of London” that “would indeed be worthy of a chapter by itself” (James [1905] 1981, 5). And James does dedicate two sections (II and III) of this essay to “our consecrated English speech” (mind you, even if spoken by people who don’t have a “birthright” to that speech) (6).

In other essays, such as the early one “Niagara Falls” (1871-72) the expected “uproar of Niagara” is present in the fourth line of the text, followed by other descriptions of the soundscape: “the river begins to tell its tale – at first in broken syllables of foam and flurry, and then, as it were, in rushing, flashing sentences and passionate ejaculations” (James 1885, 365). A description that shows how the river is described as having a voice, one could say a human voice that formulates sound in *tales*, *syllables*, *sentences*, *ejaculations*.

We do find other annotations on acoustic terms: “the cataract, save as a vague ground-tone to this trivial interlude, is, like so many other goals of aesthetic pilgrimage, temporarily postponed to the hotel”; “The horribly vulgar shops [...] ply their importunities in shrill competition with its thunder”; “you hurry to where the roar grows louder” (366); or:

[...] to the left booms in vaporous dimness the minor battery of the American Fall; while on a level with the eye, above the still crest of either cataract, appear the white faces of the hithermost rapids. The circle of weltering froth at the base of the Horseshoe, emerging from the dead white vapours – absolute white, as moonless midnight is absolute black – which muffle impenetrably the crash of the river upon the lower bed, melts slowly into the darker shades of green. (368-69)

“The central din of the cataract” is also evoked. But then what comes up again is voice: “with the sound as of millions of bass – voices; and yet its outline never varies, never moves with a different pulse. It is as gentle as the pouring of wine from a flagon – of melody from the lip of a singer” (371). And “sound and spray which rises up lamenting, like the ghosts of their brothers who have been dashed to pieces. They shriek, they sob” (374). One could comment that even in this early essay, Niagara is given a voice that prevails on

noise, although the description is by far more detailed in the visual annotations:

Little by little the elements become a picture, rich with the shadow of coming events. You have a foretaste of the great spectacle of colour which you enjoy at the Falls. The even cliffs of red-brown earth are crusted and spotted with autumnal orange and crimson, and, laden with this gorgeous decay, they plunge sheer into the deep-dyed green of the river. (367)

One can also find a detailed list of colors: green, verd-antique, vulgar greens, verdant, parent-green, blue-green, emerald, red, white, silver, etc.

But let me focus on Venice. There is hardly any indication of sound-scape in James's early letters from Venice, where it is the visual viewpoint that prevails (together with some olfactory annotations). In the essays instead we find several annotations that regard the sounds of Venice. The sounds mentioned by James, silence and human noises – voices, steps (biophonies and anthrophonies) – the splash of water against stone – (geosounds) – are characteristic of any aural description of Venice, at least up to a certain date: we might fix this date to 1881² when the first “awful” vaporetto (water bus) was used on the waters of the Grand Canal, being lamented mournfully by John Ruskin, Henry James, and – for different reasons – by the gondoliers.

James's description of the noise of the vaporetto is mentioned in the essay “The Grand Canal” (1892). The Rialto market is:

[...] odorous and noisy. The churning of the screw of the *vaporetto* mingles with the other sounds – not indeed that this offensive note is confined to one part of the Canal. But just here the little piers of the resented steamer are particularly near together, and it seems somehow to be always kicking up the water. (James [1909] 1992, 47)

In the first visits James made to Venice, and in his early essays on Venice, the mechanical noise of the vaporetto engine was not there. However, James's first essay on Venice, “Venice, An Early Impression” (1872), does begin with the description of a mechanical noise: the rumble of the train pulling in into the Venice railway station (“your long rumble on the immense white railway-bridge” (51). However, this rumble is soon dispelled, or made different from the mechanical noises of other cities, by the voices: “the keynote of the great medley of voices borne back from the exit is not “Cab, sir!” but “Barca, signore!” (*ibid.*)

² Vaporetto “Regina Margherita” of the “French Compagnie des bateaux Omnibus”.

It is true that the description continues mostly through the visual: “The mere use of *one's eyes* in Venice is happiness enough”, but we soon have another inkling of voices: the gossip (52) at Florian's, therefore the sound of voices, and then, after long passages based on light and on visual perception, we get the “delicious stillness” (53) of Torcello. If stillness may mean lack of movement and/or silence, there is no doubt the meaning here is silence as lack of noises, as specified in the following passage:

A delicious stillness covered the little campo at Torcello; I remember none so subtly audible save that of the Roman Campagna. There was no life but the visible tremor of the brilliant air and the cries of half-a-dozen young children who dogged our steps and clamoured for coppers. (*ibid.*)

We start having the two elements of most aural descriptions of Venice: silence and voices, silence interrupted, or enhanced, by voices, even if the description of the children, so much based on Ruskin's pages on Torcello, continues from a visual and artistic viewpoint: one of the little savages even “had a smile to make Correggio sigh in his grave” (54). The word *sigh*, however, brings us back to sound.

When James was trying to finish *Portrait of a Lady*, in Venice, in 1880, it is well-known he could not do so, as he wrote in the “Preface” to the novel, as the *ceaseless human chatter* on the Riva degli Schiavoni distracted him:

I had rooms on Riva Schiavoni, at the top of a house near the passage leading off to San Zaccaria; the waterside life, the wondrous lagoon spread before me, and the ceaseless human chatter of Venice came in at my windows, to which I seem to myself to have been constantly driven, in the fruitless fidget of composition, as if to see whether, out in the blue channel, the ship of some right suggestion, of some better phrase, of the next happy twist of my subject, the next true touch for my canvas, mightn't come into sight. (James [1881] 1975, 3)

If we look at the other essays on Venice, for example “Venice” (1882), we find that, again, silence and the voices of gondoliers are the most important elements of sound, in addition to that of *conversazione*: “they [the Venetians] assist at an eternal *conversazione*”, they are content with “sunshine and leisure and conversation” (James [1909] 1992, 9).

About the voices of the gondoliers and silence James wrote in the same essay:

When I say they [the gondoliers] are associated with its [the city's] silence I should immediately add that they are associated also with its sound. Among

themselves they are an extraordinarily talkative company. They chatter at the traghetto, where they always have some sharp point under discussion; they bawl across the canals; they bespeak your commands as you approach; they defy each other from afar. If you happen to have a traghetto under your window, you are well aware that they are a vocal race. I should go even further than I went just now, and say that the voice of the gondolier is in fact for audibility the dominant or rather the only note of Venice. There is scarcely another heard sound, and that indeed is part of the interest of the place. There is no noise there save distinctly human noise; no rumbling, no vague uproar, nor rattle of wheels and hoofs. It is all articulate and vocal and personal. One may say indeed that Venice is emphatically the city of conversation; people talk all over the place because there is nothing to interfere with its being caught by the ear. (18-19)

If in describing London, the great Babylon, James hardly mentions *rumbling, uproar, rattle of wheels and hoofs*, in this essay he does list these noises in the negative form – as absent – when describing Venice, the city of silence and voices, in particular those of the gondoliers: “Sometimes the gondolier’s cry, carried over the quiet water, makes a kind of splash in the stillness” (17). The imagery and the sound of water start coming into the landscape and the soundscape. The gondoliers’ voices are associated with the splash of water. James will use this sound – “hear through the high windows the soft splash of the sea on the old water-steps” in “The Grand Canal” (38) – and in *The Wings of the Dove*.

In the essay “The Grand Canal” also the palazzo Barbaro is given a voice, or, better, *mystic voices*:

[...] it [the palazzo Barbaro] has its moods and its hours and its mystic voices and its shifting expressions. If in the absence of its masters you have happened to have it to yourself for twenty-four hours you will never forget the charm of its haunted stillness, late on the summer afternoon for instance, when the call of playing children comes in behind from the campo, nor the way the old ghosts seemed to pass on tip-toe on the marble floors. (39)

Silence allows voices to be heard (voices of the palace, of playing children), and even the soft passing on tip-toe of old ghosts. All this can happen because “There is no ‘hum’ in Venice, so that their voices travel far; they enter your windows and mingle even with your dreams” (43).

However, the sound of the gondoliers’ voices is not always positive, a simple *conversazione*. It can be rash, noisy, unpleasant (they *bawl*, they *defy* each other). For instance, the voice of the gondolier who announces the names of the palaces is compared to that of “an English butler bawling titles into a

drawing-room” in the 1882 essay on Venice (10). The gondoliers’ voices add an unpleasant sound to other unpleasant noises: to the creaking of the imaginary “wicket that admits you” (10), to the realistic “horde of savage Germans encamped in the Piazza” who “filled the Ducal Palace and the Academy with their uproar” (*ibid.*), to the just as realistic “brassy voice” of the valet-de-place, “which resounds all over the place” (*ibid.*), to the voices of the pedlars who “hiss into your ear” (*ibid.*), and to “the serenading in particular [which] is overdone” (31). They seem to occupy the silence of the city, with its *murmur* of nature: “All nature beckons you forth and murmurs to you” (17).

In this essay, James dwells also on the particular language of gondoliers and of the people, that is on the Venetian dialect, which is seen as a “delightful garrulous language”, “with its soft elisions, its odd transpositions, its kind contempt for consonants and other disagreeables” (19). In spite of these negative characteristics, this “delightful” language:

[...] has in it something peculiarly human and accommodating. If your gondolier had no other merit he would have the merit that he speaks Venetian. This may rank as a merit even – some people perhaps would say especially – when you don’t understand what he says. But he adds to it other graces which make him an agreeable feature in your life. (*ibid.*)

This accommodating way of judging elisions, transpositions, “contempt for consonants and other disagreeables” is quite startling if we have in mind James’s highly critical discussion of American women’s language in the essays “The Question of Our Speech”, “The Speech of American Women”, and “The Manners of American Women” (Tedeschini Lalli 1987, 247-62), not to mention James’s embarrassing treatment of the Jews’ language in the Lower East Side in *The American Scene*. James does not mind the Venetian dialect’s “contempt for consonants and other disagreeables” while he elaborates a whole critical theory of the American language in analysing speech “when consonantal sound drops out”, engendering, for instance, “The abject Yeh-eh”, or the even worse “Yeh-ep” (which James described in “The Question of Our Speech”, 1999, 49), or the pronunciation of “vanilla-r-ice-cream, of California-r-oranges, of Cuba-r-and Porto Rico, of Atalanta-r-in Calydon” and of “the idea-r-of”, or even of the transformation of Papa into Popper (“Is Popper-up stairs?”) (*ibid.*). And one can also think of the verbs used by the girls of St. Margaret School³ in “The Speech of American Women”, III,

³ See Walker 1999, 193.

“shrieked... bawled... hoot... howl... romped... conversed” (69) or also of the “bevy of four young, very young girls” who took “vociferous possession of the car” in the train going from Boston to the South Shore in “The Manners of American Women” (82).

James’s irritation with English as spoken by women in America, a distinctly gendered language, and by immigrants in the Lower East Side of Manhattan, a distinctly class-based and ethnically connoted language⁴, does not seem to apply to the dialect of gondoliers. If the tongue of London was appreciated in earlier years, the new English of immigrants is not appreciated at all in the later years, those of *The American Scene*.

But let us continue with the 1882 Venice essay, where all these faults are pardoned. The essay continues with visual appreciations of painters, but even in this visual appreciation James manages to use verbs indicating auditory perceptions: the robes of the Veronese powerful people in the Ducal Palace *rustle* – “Their glorious garments rustle in the air of the sea and their sun-lighted faces are the very complexion of Venice” (James [1909] 1992, 25) – just like those of the Veronese characters in the London National Gallery, where we see and hear “the family of Darius rustling and pleading and weeping at the feet of Alexander”⁵.

Even the appreciation of the great Venetian painters is consigned to an auditory verb: “When one has said Carpaccio and Bellini, the Tintoret and the Veronese, one has struck a note that must be left to resound at will. Everything has been said” (20). It is as if Venice was the ideal city where one can hear voices, because of its lack of mechanical noises: even “the sounder” of *In the Cage* (1898) is never described as *clicking*, which it did.

⁴ The passage on the Jewish Lower East Side in *The American Scene* is well-known: “the critic’s ear (how else should it have been a critic’s?) could still always catch, in pauses of talk, the faint groan of his ghost. Just so the East side cafés – and increasingly as their place in the scale was higher – showed to my inner sense, beneath their bedizenment, as torture-rooms of the living idiom; the piteous gasp of which at the portent of lacerations to come could reach me in any drop of the surrounding Accent of the Future. The accent of the very ultimate future, in the States, may be destined to become the most beautiful on the globe and the very music of humanity (here the “ethnic” synthesis shrouds itself thicker than ever); but whatever we shall know it for, certainly, we shall not know it for English – in any sense for which there is an existing literary measure” (“The Fate of Language”: James [1907] 1968, 139).

⁵ This is the big and gorgeous painting by Paolo Veronese, *The Family of Darius in front of Alexander*, which is in the London National Gallery, having been sold from the Palazzo Pisani in 1860 (James [1909] 1992, 21).

James needs silence both to imply noise (Easter London) and to be able to hear voices. His love for voices was to develop further in *The American Scene*, which is much richer than earlier texts in auditory indications. In *The American Scene* even the air and buildings and nature are given voices, as one can see in the following example: “the discreet voice of the air – which quavered away, for me, into still other admissions” (James [1907] 1968, 42).

Or, as regards houses, we find the voices of the “huge new houses” of the Jersey shore which say:

“Oh, yes; we were awfully dear, for what we are and for what we do,” of the houses of the newly rich “We are only instalments, symbols, stopgaps,” they practically admitted, and with no shade of embarrassment; “expensive as we are, we have nothing to do with continuity, responsibility, transmissions, and don’t in the least care what becomes of us after we have served our present purpose”. (8-11)

Also the houses of the Cambridge College Yard are given voices:

See, see, we are getting on, we are getting almost ripe, ripe enough to justify the question of taste about us. We are growing a complexion – which takes almost as long, and is in fact pretty the same thing, as growing a philosophy; but we are putting it on and entering into the dignity of time, the beauty of life. (63)

The spire of Trinity Church in New York city is also given a voice: “It was to speak to me audibly enough on two or three other occasions” (78). We also find the voice of the “restless analyst” talking to the houses, for instance to these houses of Upmost Fifth Avenue:

It’s all very well for you to look as if, since you’ve had no past, you’re going in, as the next best thing, for a magnificent compensatory future. What are you going to make your future of, for all your airs, we want to know? – what elements of a future, as futures have gone in the great world, are at all assured to you? Do what you will, you sit here only in the lurid light of “business”, and you know, without our reminding you, what guarantees, what majestic continuity and heredity, that represents. (160-61)

Or in Boston, in front of the Athenaeum, dwarfed by the tall buildings, a voice is attributed to two imaginary bullies, with wonderfully ironic effect:

[...] the brute masses, above the comparatively small refined facade, (one saw how happy one had always thought it) having for the inner ear the voice of a pair of school-bullies who hustle and pummel some studious little boy. “Exquisite’

was what they called you, eh? We'll teach you, then, little sneak, to be exquisite! We allow none of that rot around here". (233)

A voice is given to the restless analyst but also to nature, in a dialogue where nature replies:

The touching appeal of nature, as I have called it therefore, the "Do something kind for me," is not so much a "Live upon me and thrive by me" as a "Live *with* me, somehow, and let us make out together what we may do for each other – something that is not merely estimable in more or less greasy greenbacks. See how 'sympathetic' I am," the still voice seemed everywhere to proceed, "and how I am therefore better than my fate; see how I lend myself to poetry and sociability – positively to aesthetic use: give me that consolation". (21)

In James's memory, New York can also house someone "warbling like a tiny thrush even in the nest", "infant phenomenon Adelina Patti"⁶.

After this excursion into the later work, one wonders why everything is pardoned in the earlier Venice essays: first of all, the dialect of the gondoliers is *not* the American speech, which is related so closely to manners, morals and democracy in America, the speech which James cares so much about, opposing its careless usage by American women to the care of the English women; this is also the language of his writing: the English of Shakespeare and of tradition, not that of the immigrants of the Lower East Side.

One could also surmise that it may be the charming character of the city that allows pardoning everything: a city that first keeps its dream-like quality and then becomes a *lover*. In his letter of 1869 to John LaFarge James wrote: "Venice is quite the Venice of ones dreams, but it remains strangely the Venice of dreams, more than of any appreciable reality" (James 2006, II, 109). In the essay "Venice" (1882) James described his love-affair with Venice:

When you have called for the bill to go, pay it and remain, and you will find on the morrow that you are deeply attached to Venice. It is by living there from day to day that you feel the fullness of her charm; that you invite her exquisite influence to sink into your spirit. The creature varies like a nervous woman, whom

⁶ James [1907] 1968, 79. It is interesting to note the different version of the episode in *The Autobiography (A Small Boy and Others)* and in *The American Scene*: in the first text, there is no annotation of the "warbling": "I listened to that rarest of infant phenomena, Adelina Patti, poised in an armchair that had been pushed to the footlights and announcing her incomparable gift. She was about of our own age, she was one of us, even though at the same time the most prodigious of fairies, of glittering fables" (James 1983, 66).

you know only when you know all the aspects of her beauty. She has high spirits or low, she is pale or red, grey or pink, cold or warm, fresh or wan [...] Tenderly fond you become [...] The place seems to personify itself, to become human and sentient and conscious of your affection. You desire to embrace it, to caress it, to possess it; and finally a soft sense of possession grows up and your visit becomes a perpetual love-affair. (James [1909] 1992, 11-12)

In a love-affair it does not matter at all if “the consonantal sound drops out”. In James’s “recording” of sounds, from the early essay “Niagara Falls”, through the descriptions of Venice, to the speaking buildings of *The American Scene*, it is voices that are important. Voices that are appreciated even if they mispronounce a language, as the Venice gondoliers do, or voices that can *not* mispronounce the English of Shakespeare, the American language of democracy, the language that James uses in his works.

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