VENICE REDISCOVERED

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Man is in love and loves what vanishes,
What more is there to say?
W. B. Yeats

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INTRODUCTION

JULES AND EDMOND DE GONCOURT found it remarkable that Rousseau had spent more than a year in Venice in the 1740s and remained insensitive to its enchantment. In spite of his penchant for description, he had not seen the exquisite city that they and their contemporaries saw. They deduced therefore that the modern age had in some way clarified human vision. 'Le XIXe siècle a opéré l'humanité de la cataracte.'[1]

Their deduction was correct. The change that divided their generation from that of Rousseau was a change in perception rather than in the thing itself. Venice was not radically transformed in the nineteenth century, in the way that Rome was, and Paris, and London. If Canaletto, who died in 1768, had returned a hundred years later—when the Goncourts made their comment—he would have noticed many alterations, but he would not have felt a stranger in the city whose image he had made familiar abroad. During the next hundred years change was to be even less apparent. Yet appreciation of its beauty then became so acute, both in Europe and North America, that a passionate battle was fought and won to fabricate for Venice the illusion of immortality. When buildings crumbled or collapsed, they were resurrected by the thaumaturgic power of nostalgia. A rare example of conspicuous change was in the increasing dilapidation and shabbiness of Venice, especially in its outlying areas. The change in perception is registered by the fact that this evidence of deterioration made the city not less but more attractive. In the early 1800s Venice had been generally regarded as an odd and rather depressing wreck which could qualify as beautiful only when seen at a distance or by moonlight. By the end of the century the most fastidious sensibility was not only able but eager to contemplate the detail of its ruin. A transfiguring myth had developed, rooted in esoteric cults of art and literature; and as those cults became obsolete, the metabolism occurred that converts yesterday's highbrow conceit into today's middlebrow cliché. The myth lived on, providing a language and an iconography for advertising, journalism, and mass entertainment.

The cult of Decadence, whose origins were French but whose appeal spread throughout Europe, represented the intellectual revolt against Rousseau in his best-known role, as the apostle of nature. Gautier and Baudelaire despised nature, which they saw as the source of ugliness and dissonance; and French writers of the next generation, deeply humiliated by the disasters of the Franco-Prussian War, discovered a creed for their times in a mixture of Schopenhauerean pessimism and Baudelairean celebration of the artificial and the occult.[2] They yearned with Baudelaire for 'anywhere out of the world'; and it was in the city, that abomination of Rousseau, that they discovered their antithetical universe. The city was a theatre of masks and *maquillage*; a temple of the abnormal and the perverse; a hospital of pathological process. And Venice was the quintessential city. There were no slums more slummy than the Venetian back canals, with their leprous buildings and odour of decay; while in the great Venetian palaces there was an unparalleled example of human contrivance at odds with nature. No further refinement of art was possible. 'I do not understand why anyone paints Venice,' wrote the English poet of Decadence, Arthur Symons, 'yet everyone who paints, paints Venice . . . To do so is to forget that it is itself a picture, a finished, conscious work of art. You cannot improve the picture as it is, you can add nothing, you need arrange nothing. Everything has been done . . .' To Symons the Piazza San Marco suggested nothing so much as stage-scenery: 'I seemed, after all, not to have left London, but to be still at the Alhambra, watching a marvellous ballet . . . The Doge's Palace looked exactly like beautifully painted canvas, as if it were stretched on frames, and ready to be shunted into the wings for a fresh "set" to come forward.'[3]

He saw a stage that was deserted—'the actors, the dancers, are gone'. But they were not absent for long. The twentieth century brought to the city the film-makers, with their retinues of actors in make-up and costume. In 1922 the Italian writer Ugo Ojetti watched the shooting of *I Due Foscari*, one of the first of countless films to use Venice as a location, and relived Symons's experience of the real becoming fake: 'Il peggio si è che a fissare per mezz'ora quella mascherata al sole, noi stessi perdiamo il senso della solida realtà, e non le mura del palazzo [ducale] ci fanno sembrare vere le comparse, ma le comparse ci fanno sembrare finto il palazzo.'*[4]

Existing in symbiotic connection with this thirst for artifice and simulacrum, provoking it and being provoked by it, was an obsession with truth and fact. The age of Decadence overlapped the age of natural science and scientific history. The work of Niebuhr, Ranke, Michelet, Taine, Froude, Arnold, Milman, Acton, and the other lights of 'le siècle de l'histoire'[5] now lies, as in a mass grave, in the undisturbed recesses of older academic libraries. Yet nineteenth-century historiography is not entirely

* The worst of it is, that by watching for half an hour this masquerade in the sun, we ourselves lose the sense of solid reality, and instead of the walls of the [Ducal] Palace making the actors seem real, it is the actors who make the palace seem fake.

dead, because the modern appreciation of Venice is in some measure its legacy. In Rousseau's time Venice was an independent republic whose past and present reputation precluded sentimental rhapsody. By the time of the Goncourts the city had become a phantom, a relic, whose political power was extinct and whose history had been rewritten. Tyranny had gone; and in its place was the pathos of merit traduced and majesty dethroned. The nineteenth-century historians brought about this change of perception by looking at Venetian history not from the outside, but from the inside. That is to say, they used as evidence not the reports of foreign observers and contemporary chroniclers, but the records of the Venetian state itself. Furthermore they judged the Venetian Republic by a different light. They judged it not by the standards of a notional universal morality, but by the standards of the period they were discussing. Eighteenth-century historians—Gibbon, Voltaire, Turgot, Condorcet, Hume—had used the comparative method in order to discover an invariable. They had looked, amidst the accidentals of time and place, for human nature—something they assumed to have been always and everywhere the same. 'Mankind are so much the same', wrote Hume, 'in all times and places, that history informs us of nothing new or strange in this particular. Its chief use is only to discover the constant and universal principles of human nature.'[6] To the historians of the following century the results of such inquiry seemed highly suspect. The older historians were accused of having found what they wanted to find—which was a universal man who was rational, benevolent, and happy. They had used history to validate Rousseau's assumption about the natural goodness of man and the corrupting influence of society. The new historiography rejected Hume in favour of the Italian philosopher Giambattista Vico. By adopting Vico's view that human nature was subject to psychological and moral development, it introduced relativity into historical judgement and made possible the rehabilitation of discredited institutions. The historian, said Henry Hart Milman, should be superior to that 'contemptuous wisdom . . . which refers everything to one standard'.[7] The scientific methods of research perfected in the German universities were therefore applied by historians who abjured absolute morality. Both ancient and modern history were looked at afresh, from viewpoints that were themselves within history.

The growing attractiveness of Venice, then, can be explained in terms of new ways of looking at the city and at the past. But it was a question of more than just the discarding of eighteenth-century prejudice. Venice in its posthumous years acquired a poignant topicality. It had qualities that answered to the most deeply felt appeal of the modern heart—the appeal for permanence and coherence in a fragmenting and chaotic universe. There is copious evidence of intellectual suffering in nineteenth-century literature. This was the age of the *mal du siècle*: a neurosis of deracination and dislocation, caused by traumatic severance from the past and compounded by the prevailing drift of thought. What Nietzsche called the Socratic spirit was at work, preaching that virtue is happiness and that knowledge is virtue. It was pulling the world apart, and then failing to put it together again. And Nietzsche, the tormented thinker who was at the same time both a hater of Socratism and one of its most brilliant practitioners, represents the divided psyche of his century. The intellectual landscape was a battleground between the principles of analysis and synthesis, and analysis won all the victories. Elaborately constructed systems, like those of Comte and Spencer, built on the wreckage of destroyed faith, fell victim in their turn to the prevailing blight of scepticism. 'Il n'a pas inventé grand chose, ce misérable siècle', wrote the novelist J. K. Huysmans in 1891. 'Il n'a rien édifié et tout détruit.'*[8] The English historian James Anthony Froude remembered his youth as an initiation into an era of doubt: 'All around us the intellectual lightships had broken from their moorings, and it was then a new and trying experience. The present generation . . . will never know what it was to find the lights all drifting, the compasses all awry, and nothing left to steer by except the stars.'[9] As Nietzsche pointed out, a longing for art was the outcome of the great metaphysical illusion of Socratism.[10] When science reached those outer limits of inquiry where logic collapsed, a new tragic perception arose which demanded the consolation that only art could confer. The nineteenth century solaced its affliction with the symphony and the novel, and it consecrated art by making it the essential ingredient in a religion called 'culture'. The symphony, the novel, and the idea of culture—these were the nineteenth-century consolations. The unprecedented importance that they acquired is explained by a yearning for ecumenical vision; and the unprecedented importance that Venice acquired is explained by its being the most symphonic, novelistic, and cultural of cities.

Schopenhauer anticipated a new way of thinking when he attributed to instrumental music supreme transcendental significance. Such music, he maintained, represented the metaphysics of all that was physical in the world. It was not, like the other arts, an image of phenomena, a copy of the Platonic Idea; but a direct expression of what he called the Will—that is, the noumenal reality that lies behind all appearance. And it was in the symphony that he found the highest form of instrumental music, because

* It hasn't invented very much, this miserable century. It has knocked down everything and raised up nothing.

the symphonic structure resolved chaos and conflict into order and harmony. A symphony of Beethoven revealed the *rerum concordia discors* (the dissonant concord of things), and transmuted human passion into pure abstraction.[11] During the eighteenth century the view had prevailed that instrumental music was inferior. During the nineteenth century Schopenhauer's elevated conception of the symphony was widely proclaimed, and Beethoven, master of the symphonic idiom, was revered. To Berlioz, Beethoven was comparable to Shakespeare. To Wagner, he was a new Luther, the reformer and redeemer of a sacred inheritance.[12] The symphony became a ruling influence in the world of music. A great many symphonies were written, and symphonic thinking overflowed into adjacent areas of composition—into the overture, the tone-poem, and the opera. Especially the opera. Traditional *Singspiel*, in which isolated arias, *arioso*, and ensembles were linked by recitative or dialogue, gave way to the 'through composed' work: a continuous musical sequence in which the orchestra was dominant and in which the *leitmotiv* functioned as an agent of thematic unity. Nineteenth-century opera culminated in the Wagnerian music-drama, which used the voice as a component in an orchestral texture and which Wagner conceived as 'symphonic' in the widest sense. The music-drama was *Gesamtkunstwerk*, a total art-form, that signified the rebirth of Greek tragedy. It recompounded the elements into which the original Attic drama had separated—dance, music, poetry, and the plastic arts. It was Wagner's ideas and Wagner's music that inspired the young Nietzsche to develop his own thesis of dissolution and reintegration. In *Die Geburt der Tragödie* ('The Birth of Tragedy', 1871) music features as the Dionysian art, the art of frenzy and intoxication that is the means of apprehending the original oneness, the ground of being behind phenomena. Such knowledge brings suffering as well as joy, and the Greeks had made it bearable by invoking the arts of dream and illusion—illusion, above all, of individuation. These were the plastic arts, the arts of Apollo. Synthesis had been achieved in Attic tragedy, whose parents were Dionysus and Apollo, the contrasting but conjugal gods. The Greek harmony had been transient; however, Nietzsche's message was that it could be achieved again, now that Dionysus, whose rebirth was signified by modern German music, was overcoming his arch-enemy Socrates.

Thomas Mann linked Venice directly with the Nietzschean idea of redemption through a new cosmic symphony. In his novella *Death in Venice* (1912), the city is stricken with Asiatic cholera. The arrival of the disease, and the grotesque, erotic re-enactment there of the death of Socrates, signal the triumphant return of Dionysus from his Indian exile and his reunion with Apollo in an orgy of intoxication and desire. And other writers responded to its mysterious harmonies, to what Walter Pater would have defined as its aspiration to music. Awareness of *rerum concordia discors* inspired, for example, Gautier's description of the basilica of San Marco:

> chose singulière, qui dérange toute idée de proportion, ce ramas de colonnes, de chapiteaux, de bas reliefs, d'émaux, de mosaïques, ce mélange de styles grec, romain, byzantin, arabe, gothique, produisent l'ensemble le plus harmonieux. . . . Ce temple . . . fait de pièces et de morceaux qui se contrarient, enchante et caresse l'œil mieux que ne saurait le faire l'architecture la plus correcte et la plus symétrique: l'unité résulte de la multiplicité.*[13]

Ruskin wrote in similar terms. He interpreted Venice as 'the field of contest between the three pre-eminent architectures of the world', and the Ducal Palace as the expression of their reconciliation in perfect synthesis: 'The Ducal Palace of Venice contains the three elements in exactly equal proportions—the Roman, the Lombard, the Arab. It is the central building of the world.'[14] Ruskin's treatise on Venetian architecture reflects the symphonic quality of his subject. *The Stones of Venice* is in four sections, and it repeatedly invokes the quantity of three—three maritime empires, three pre-eminent architectures, three periods of Venetian history, three volumes. The Beethovian symphony, it will be recalled, has four movements, of which the first is in tripartite, or sonata, form.

The symphony, then, was transcendental. It revealed eternal meaning beyond flux and disintegration in time. The novel too was defined in new and elevated terms. 'On ne peut', wrote Edmond de Goncourt in 1877, 'à l'heure qu'il est, vraiment plus condamner le genre à être l'amusement des jeunes demoiselles en chemins de fer.'†[15] The novel was not transcendental. It was a transcription not of the noumenal but of the phenomenal; it dealt in the currency of the actual and the contingent; it accepted Locke's psychology of memory and his definition of identity as 'consciousness through duration in time'.[16] Yet the novel too was consolatory, because it restored coherence and pattern to life in its spatial dimension. The modern newspaper, of which Bagehot said 'everything is there and everything is disconnected',[17] had its corrective in the modern novel, which supplied

* the strange thing, which upsets all notions of proportion, is that this jumble of columns, capitals, and bas reliefs, of enamel and mosaic; this mixture of Greek, Roman, Byzantine, Arab, and gothic styles, produces the most harmonious totality. . . . This temple, made up of odds and ends which clash with one another, bewitches and caresses the eye better than the most correct and symmetrical architecture could. Unity issues from multiplicity.

† One really cannot, in this day and age, sentence the genre to further existence as the amusement of young ladies in railway carriages.

connections and relationships and put a frame round the whole of human experience. The novel was catholic.

Its practitioners defined it as history. It held a mirror up to life, not to other literature. But it was history of the life that historians did not encounter. The Goncourts, who wrote history as well as novels, stressed the affinity between the two. History was a true novel—'ce romain vrai'—and the novel was 'cette histoire individuelle qui, dans l'Histoire, n'a pas d'historien.'*[18] The modern novel, they explained, 'n'a plus rien de commun avec ce que nos pères entendaient par roman. Le roman actuel se fait avec des documents, racontés ou relevés d'après nature, comme l'histoire se fait avec des documents écrits. Les historiens sont des raconteurs du passé; les romanciers des raconteurs du présent.'†[19] These ideas were imported into English by Henry James. He stressed again and again that the novel was history and that the novelist was a historian who explored 'museums of character and condition unvisited'. His province was 'all life, all feeling, all observation, all vision . . . all experience.' For James, the modern French novelists were not catholic enough. He reproached them for their 'narrow vision of humanity'. They had lost the amplitude of Balzac, whereas the English and Russians had followed where Balzac had led. Trollope's novels referred to 'the whole area of modern vagrancy'; their tone was the 'tone of allusion to many lands and many things'. Turgenev showed the individual 'in the general flood of life, steeped in its relations and contacts'. Tolstoy was 'a reflector vast as a natural lake'. Yet the novel was more than just the sum of documents and observations. The novelist who, like Zola, became a recording mechanism, 'labour[ing] to the end within sight of his notes and charts', dealt only in 'experience by imitation'. The novel took note of science as it took note of everything else; but 'the game of art' had to be played.[20] This idea of the novel as a portrait that was true to life yet at the same time more than life alone was central to French literary theory. 'Ce que la vie lui offre', wrote Flaubert of the novelist, 'il le donne à l'art.'‡ Maupassant defined the novel as 'le miroir des faits, mais un miroir qui les reproduit en leur donnant ce reflet inexprimable, ce je ne sais quoi de presque divin qui est l'art.'§[21]

* that individual history which, in History, has no historian.

† no longer has anything in common with what our fathers understood by 'novel'. The present-day novel is constructed from documentation, either verbal or taken straight from nature, in the way that history is constructed from documents that are written. Historians are narrators of the past; novelists are narrators of the present.

‡ That which life offers him, he offers to art.

§ the mirror of facts, but a mirror which, in reproducing them, gives them that indefinable reflection, that quasi-divine something or other that is art.

All the great cities of the nineteenth century were, in their plenitude of character and incident, novelistic; but to novelists who reckoned that their task began where the historian's ended, modern Venice was especially and compellingly so. Everything about it seemed contrived, to use another phrase of Henry James, for 'putting one in the mood for a story'.[22] Unlike Paris, and London, and Rome, it had moved beyond the province of the historian and become the refuge of those whom history had either forgotten or ignored. The written history of Venice ended with the collapse of the Venetian Republic in 1797; but thereafter its unwritten history had become uniquely enriched. In the later years of the nineteenth century a procession of foreign visitors and settlers, representing the world of privilege and power on vacation or in exile, mingled with the human and architectural remnants of Venetian prestige and transformed the city into an unrivalled museum of character and condition. Modern Venice was territory in which the historian had no mandate. It was territory of the private life; and when the historian tried to reclaim it, he was baffled by the stratagems of secrecy. Those encircling waters were a barrier beyond which the novelist was king. So the novelist returned again and again, inspired by inexhaustible suggestiveness. 'The painter of life and manners', wrote Henry James,

> as he glanced about, could only sigh—as he so frequently has to—over the vision of so much more truth than he can use. What on earth is the need to 'invent', in the midst of tragedy and comedy that never cease? Why, with the subject itself all round, so inimitable, condemn the picture to the silliness of trying not to be aware of it?[23]

The new conception of the symphony was a German response to the nineteenth-century malaise; the new conception of the novel was French; and the new idea of culture was Anglo-Saxon. In French and German thought 'culture' signified a whole way of life. Its scope was national; and it was inside history and determined by it. It could thus be read as an index to social and economic conditions. This was Marx's view, and Taine's. But there were British and American thinkers who understood the term differently. In their view culture was both wider and narrower than Franco-German usage allowed. It was not national, but global; and it signified not the generality, but the best, of art, thought, and manners. Culture, in Matthew Arnold's famous definition, meant 'getting to know, on all matters which most concern us, the best which has been thought and said in the world'.[24] It therefore meant, in practice, knowledge of great art and literature, international travel, and familiarity with foreign languages. Arnold fixed in the Anglo-Saxon mind the notion that culture is an attribute not of the mass but

of a minority ('the friends and lovers of culture', 'the poor disparaged followers of culture'), and that it is the antonym of vulgarity. For 'vulgar' too changed its meaning in this general adjustment of terminology. 'Vulgar', which had once meant no more than 'popular', now came to mean coarse, boorish, ignorant, and provincial as well. John Addington Symonds, the essayist and historian whose style of life and writing made him a type of Victorian culture, tried to disown the preciosity and priggishness that the term had come to imply. He acknowledged the justice of Walt Whitman's strictures against excessive concern for sensibility and learning. Nevertheless, his definition of culture remained incontrovertibly Arnoldian: 'It is the appropriation of the heritage bequeathed from previous generations to the needs and cravings of the individual, in his emancipation from "that which binds us all, the common".'[25] Culture, then, in Anglo-Saxon thinking, was the exception, not the rule; and it differed further from the Continental concept in that it was not determined by history, but existed outside history and corrected it. To say that culture consists in knowing 'the best which has been thought and said' is to say that culture is concerned with something that has survived the test of time; with a residue that remains when history has receded. George Eliot stressed this quality of permanence when she wrote of 'that great treasure of knowledge, science, poetry, refinement of thought, feeling, and manners, great memories and the interpretation of great records which is carried on from the minds of one generation to the minds of another'.[26] The belief that this inheritance was therapeutic was taken from Coleridge, who had advocated 'cultivation' as an antidote to the hectic excesses of 'civilization'; and it received its best-known expression in Matthew Arnold's argument that culture was the antidote to anarchy. As T. S. Eliot said, culture in Victorian England was a substitute for religion.[27]

Before the middle of the nineteenth century Venice would not have qualified for inclusion in Arnold's category of the cultural. The British, by and large, did not share Rousseau's indifference. They admired and described the city's canals, bridges, and palaces, and these were constantly reproduced in paintings, engravings, and stage-scenery. Visitors often remarked, like Byron, that they knew the city before they saw it. Yet it remains true that in these earlier years the British did not regard its art and architecture as the best. The gaudy splendour of Venice suggested 'civilization' rather than 'cultivation', and Coleridge might well have had the Republic in mind when he wrote that 'a nation can never be a too cultivated, but may easily be an overcivilised race'. Furthermore Venice was at this time a frontier city. It bordered the Orient, and its civilization carried the stigma of miscegenation. The work of the most prolific and famous Venetian painters was tainted by sensuality. Much Venetian architecture seemed disconcertingly alien in detail and inspiration. It was not until the second half of the nineteenth century that evangelical prejudice was overcome and the mental map redrawn. Venice was now shifted from the frontier between civilization and barbarism to the eminence where civilization and culture intersected. No longer disqualified by their ostentation and their impurity, its art and architecture were reclassified as superlative, and generations of Britons and Americans hungry for culture made the city their Jerusalem. Venice did not command a monopoly of veneration, even when its rehabilitation was complete. Other Italian towns—Florence and Rome most notably—were holy places equally if not more crowded with cultural pilgrims. Furthermore, Rome and Florence were equally well provided with cosmopolitan communities of experts and connoisseurs, ministering like resident priesthoods to the cult of culture. But by reason of both its geographical and its political situation, Venice was better able than they to match the idea of a precious residue, refined by and set apart from the turbid flow of history.

In an age when educated feeling was dominated by the symphony, the novel, and the idea of culture, Venice could not but qualify as a city of the soul, a repository of consolations, a *patrie idéale*. In the work of George Sand, Maurice Barrès, Frederick Rolfe, and John Cowper Powys, it is associated with the androgyne—a much-favoured symbol of wholeness and virginity.[28] This fetishistic perception of Venice was essentially a foreign one, and although its influence was felt in Italy there has been among Italian intellectuals and public figures a determined effort to resist it. Even before the First World War a challenge was issued against the image of Venice abroad, in the name of a modern industrial city that forswore everything the tourists adored. More recently nineteenth-century Venice has been reclaimed for history by Italian historians, who maintain that this period was one of the most dynamic, enterprising, and innovatory that the city has known.[29] The argument is powerful. However, it may yet prove the case that historians of modern Venice, though they may deplore, cannot afford to ignore the Venice that has been celebrated and even invented by an unending succession of literary and artistic devotees.

Venice acquired its new celebrity at a time when Western society was becoming more mobile. Major changes in the technology of transport were making the city accessible to a great many people. But rediscovery was not a consequence of travel. Travel, rather, was a consequence of rediscovery. Venice was put on the itinerary of the sentimental journey by novelists, historians, and apostles of culture. All found there ingredients from which they could concoct remedies for bad dreams and cosmic disorder. To the

novelist it was a quarry of plot and character; to the historian, a mine of information about the European past and a clue to the mystery of the fate of empires; to the apostle of culture, a paradigm by which to measure and correct the perversities of contemporary society. By looking at Venice from their respective viewpoints the reasons for its kudos are clearly seen; and it becomes apparent that the chronicles of modern sensibility would be incomplete without reference to this paragon of cities. Yet it is also true that the chronicles of modern Venice would be incomplete without reference to sensibility. There was hidden in these states of mind and acts of the imagination a power to shape events; so to discover the rediscovery of Venice is to be reminded of Pascal's observation about Cleopatra's nose. If it had seemed less comely, the whole world would have changed.