

Venice and the Cultural Imagination: ‘This Strange Dream Upon the Water’

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At the start of his brilliant essay ‘Venice’, first published in 1882, Henry James famously commented that there ‘was nothing new’ to be said about the city. An equally famous quotation is to be found in the first edition of Murray’s Handbook for travellers in Northern Italy published forty years earlier: ‘no one enters Venice a stranger.’ (1842, p. 326) Both Henry James and the mediaevalist and anthologist, Francis Palgrave, responsible for the second observation, highlight how educated 19th-century men and women in the Anglophone world possessed an incredible familiarity with the former Serenissima, a familiarity that extended even to the vast majority who would never visit Italy. For, from the fall of the Napoleonic Kingdom of Italy, Venice was encountered both directly by steadily increasing numbers of travellers and tourists, and indirectly through legion representations in art, literature, travel writing and histories, and, as the century progressed, through photographic images. Such engagement with this most recognisable of urban spaces persisted into the 20th century and remains to this day. It is, alas, this very familiarity that prompts so many authors with only the most passing knowledge of and acquaintance with this remarkable place to feel that they can pronounce upon it with authority. Yet Venice’s pivotal rôle in western culture – one of the contributors to this book neatly describes is as ‘the great intertextual echo chamber of Western literature’ (p. 143) – and its iconic status combine to make it an especially hard topic on which to be either interesting or original. On the one hand, even beginning to master the huge and polyglot literature on Venice is both daunting and immensely time-consuming; penetrating and using its nonpareil archives can be even

more demanding. On the other hand, so pervasive are the clichés and topoi that it is only a most conscientious scholar or genuinely original poet, painter, or film-maker who can free herself from them. Sadly, despite the editors' vaunting the novelty of their approach, most of the contributors to this volume appear to lack the originality and the knowledge to live up to their boasts. Based on a series of lectures delivered between October 2009 and March 2010 under the auspices of Durham University's Institute of Advanced Study, the chapters in this book will do little to enhance the reputation of the contributing authors.

Let me turn to the more worthwhile pieces in the collection first. Sarah Wootton and Rebecca White offer workmanlike, and clearly-argued, essays on literature and film. Wootton is especially sensitive to the way in which paintings are referenced and evoked both in both James's novel *The Wings of the Dove*, and in Iain Softley's film adaptation. White focuses on the disturbing Daphne Du Maurier short story 'Don't look now', and on Nicolas Roeg's famed screen adaptation, which, in its very attempt to emphasise the 'changeability' of the city, to escape conventional representation, has risked 'once more imprisoning Venice within a clichéd frame' (p.171). The best essays in the book are by Dinah Birch, Pamela Knight and Jason Harding. Birch offers a thoughtful and nuanced discussion of the central place of Venice to transformations of Ruskin's ideas. In particular she highlights how his understanding of the city impacted on 'changing concepts of memory, in their broadest literary and cultural definitions', and 'the shifting dynamic between the urgent implications of history and those of the single life; more specifically his own life' (p. 96). One of the especially interesting aspects of Birch's analysis is her explanation of how Ruskin's reading of Venice was shaped, as he grew older, by his own sense of decay within the decaying city. There are shades of the much younger Byron here, who liked 'the evident decay', which echoed his own moral and physical state. Also impressive is Pamela Knight's study of Edith Wharton's 'Venetian backgrounds', which unpicks the novelist's 'sense of deep interconnections between reading, writing, travelling and individual identity' (p. 117). The essay is richly rewarding in its treatment of Wharton's understanding of Italian contexts – real and imaginary – and in suggesting how the 'insights of her travel writings infiltrate her American visions'. In her exploration of American engagement with Venice, she is at her most assured when dealing with the female gaze, but, as a 19th-century specialist, I was particularly struck by her thoughtful unpicking of the work of the American consul in Venice, William Dean Howells, author of *Venetian Life* and biographer of Lincoln, as well as a much praised, although now little read, novelist. Knight points to Howells's awareness of the way that, if one took the clichés away from representation of Venice, there was a risk that Venice could not be represented at all. She is equally persuasive addressing the writer's later portrayals of the city as uncomfortably plagued by transatlantic vulgarity and threatened by modernity, the gondola challenged by 'darting motor-boats'. This tension between modernity and the historic, which so unsettled Ruskin (one need only think of his delight at the destruction of the rail causeway during the 1848–9 insurrection), has led to bitter clashes amongst Venetians themselves; it is perhaps most exquisitely unpicked in Gabriele d'Annunzio's *Il Fuoco*, but was also manifest less artistically in debates between modernisers, such as the industrialist Giuseppe Volpi, and traditionalists, typified by the historian and politician Pompeo Molmenti. It persists today, perhaps most fervently articulated in arguments between those who use motorised vessels and those who see moto ondoso (waves generated by such craft) as one of the key challenges to the city's environment and future survival. It is a shame that more of the authors could not have explicitly teased out this conflict between the old and the new in an equally interesting fashion. One piece that does manage to do so is Jason Harding's elegantly written and cleverly constructed essay, which points to the way in which both Eliot and Pound 'advance a mythic narrative of Venice's moral and cultural fall into decline which serves to rebuke the perceived decadence of modern civilization' (p. 142). The essay serves too to remind those of us who admire Pound for the beauty of his verses, quite how repellent were his politics.

All the contributions I have so far discussed are scholarly, well-structured, and add something to discussions about the place of Venice in our cultural imagination without threatening to be especially innovative or radical. I am far less convinced by the virtues of the other pieces in this volume. Anyone who has heard Bernard Beatty lecture will know that it is an exhilarating experience. The problem with his essay is that it still reads like a brilliant lecture. It is the brio that one remembers after hearing Beatty speak rather than the detail. But the devil is in the detail, and a published piece is open to closer scrutiny. Beatty here is cavalier with footnotes and in his treatment of historical background; some of what he says about the latter is

tendentious. Moreover, his reliance on Eglin for an account of British attitudes to the fall of Venice leads him into problems. Eglin confidently asserts, and Beatty repeats, that 'it was as the conqueror of Venice that Napoleon Bonaparte [...] became generally known in Britain'. This was possibly true, but misses the point that the overwhelming majority of Britons, even the well-educated and well-travelled, were both unconcerned about the collapse of the ancient republic, and relied for their news principally on translations from the French press. Later, as Beatty is well aware, they would turn to Francophone apologists for their historical accounts. Few people took any notice of John Hinckley's translation of Barzoni's attack on Bonaparte, and it is striking that Eglin (Beatty's principal but not especially reliable source) seems to be utterly unaware of the original authorship. Elsewhere Beatty's mention of the 'brief declaration of [Venetian] independence' in 1848 is very misleading: the Venetian revolution was amongst the most durable in Europe, and was the longest lasting in Italy (Manin surrendered only in late August 1849, a year and a half after the Austrians had been ousted). Similarly, it is simply untrue to say that the first Venetian ambassadors arrived in England in 1603; Giovanni Michiel, for example, was reporting from the court of Queen Mary in 1554. Frustratingly, there is no footnote to show the origin of this mistake.

I could point to other such confusions. But I have a bigger bone to pick with Beatty over his interpretation of Byron's Venetian sojourn. Beatty like so many others rightly emphasises the lines in Canto IV of *Childe Harold*, in which Byron identifies 'Otway, Radcliffe, Schiller, Shakespeare's art' as the origins of his Venice. But Beatty then, to my mind, makes two mistakes. First, he fails to emphasise that this was from Byron's perspective exactly how things should be. Four writers, who had never set foot in the place, had actually created his picture of the 'greenest island of my imagination'. For Byron it was the literary picture of Venice that mattered; this was what would endure even when the city was reclaimed by the seas. In his narcissistic brilliance, Byron considered his poetry, albeit located within a broader intertextual framework, of much greater value than the decaying former dominion. Second, contrary to what Beatty implies, Byron was not very interested in a 'real' Venice at all. Not only did Byron spend most of his time in the city (when not writing self-obsessed letters or wonderful poetry) in a state of priapic drunkenness, but he quite clearly had next to no appreciation for its urban fabric, its paintings and its architecture, or even its inhabitants. Bar very occasional affectionate remarks about servants or sexual partners, Byron's letters are remarkable for his contempt for Venetians: the women were all 'whores' and even those with whom he had longer relationships were animalised – they became antelopes or tigers, referred to with about as much esteem as his dog Mutz. (I would note here that this was not Byron's usual way of describing women.) Byron also singularly failed to understand or even reflect upon either Venice's economic or political realities. His criticism of the relatively mild Austrian government as 'infernal tyranny' was absurd. The Austrians treated Byron as an honoured guest; and the authorities only subjected him to police observation (with good reason) when he left Habsburg territory and started actively to conspire against Italy's newly established political stability. (For what it is worth Paride Zajotti, the most articulate apologist for Habsburg rule in the Restoration period, was a dedicated admirer of Byron.) The only substantive criticism Byron made of the Austrians while living in Venice was the (false) assertion that Austrian rule made it hard for him to acquire English newspapers. While he would write that his having lived in Venice gave him the edge over earlier literary figures who set plays in the city, there is no sustained sense that Byron much liked Venice beyond the cheapness of living and the possibility of paying for copious amounts of sex; the few very general comments about its aesthetic charms, to my mind, carry little conviction; when in Venice, Byron's preferred haunts were always on the fringes: the Armenian monastery, the Lido, the banks of the Brenta. Byron's city, unlike that of many British visitors (for example, the Shelleys), was an almost entirely literary construct.

Mark Sandy's essay on 'reimagining' Venice offers a slightly hackneyed ramble through some well-known texts. There would be little wrong with this, were his contribution not chequered by whole sentences that make no sense at all. Let me offer just one example:

That the city's ruinous state stems, partly, from political corruption is evident in Mary Shelley's invocation of Venice as 'the widowed daughter of ocean', which, through an interwoven fabric of allusion, recalls Wordsworth's earlier sense of the city espoused to the sea, Byron's later

reversal of gender, in Childe Harold, of how 'The spouseless Adriatic mourns her lord;/ And annual marriage now no more renewed', and the end of the Doge's ritualistic renewal of these vows after the violation of Venice's betrothal to the Adriatic and the end of the Republic. Here the sea is also representative of the oceanic process of change, decay, memory and history. (p. 33)

I have re-read this passage repeatedly, and am still utterly baffled. Is some sort of elaborate game going on here at the reader's expense? Elsewhere, Sandy is guilty of letting anachronistic free association run riot. Thus, we are told in a discussion of Shelley's wonderful Maddalo that a reference to a solitary fisherman on the Lido should be read in the following fashion.

The figure of the 'lone fisher' underlines this sense of natural indifference, but also obliquely recollects the atavistic fertility myth of the Fisher King (who awaits the future restoration of his barren lands) and finds a future affinity with T.S. Eliot's urbanized version of this figure in *The Waste Land*, who muses on death, decay and waste in less salubrious climes, 'While I was fishing in the dull canal/On a winter evening round behind the gashouse' (p. 30).

My own temptation is to suggest that Shelley was simply offering an evocative description of the bleak and deserted nature of the Lido, but there again I am a historian not a literary scholar. Yet if there is a deeper symbolic value here, why hit upon the Fisher King? Why should the 'lone fisher' not 'recollect' the Greek fisherman god Glaukos, or one of Christ's fishermen disciples, or even the devil, 'the great fisher of souls'? As for the reference to T. S. Eliot, it is so arbitrary that it might as well be to the children's nursery rhyme 'Once I caught a fish alive' or the Geordie 'Thou shall hev a fishy'.

Michael O'Neil's references to Calvino and Scarpa are perhaps a legitimate – although rather strained – way to try to frame the opening of the essay, but his allusions to modernists – Eliot, Hart Crane, and Yeats – become increasingly forced and perplexing as he explores Dickens: "'Its one will – flow", Hart Crane's phrase about the Mississippi, tells us about one motive at work in Dickens's tour de force [...]' (p.80); 'Little Dorrit has none of Yeats's rage [...]' (p. 85). Probably the most absurd passage in the article comes when its author treats us to a comparison between Dickens's oneiric treatment of Venice in *Pictures from Italy* and the *Communist Manifesto*. This is legitimated by the fact that they are 'roughly contemporaneous' (for once the author is not being anachronistic) and both deal with the 'spectral'.

Marx's spectre asserts a life denied to the supposedly substantial structures of capitalism. Dickens's chapter remains a fantastical trifle that lightly speaks of what is not be [sic] trifled with, the imagination's unexorcized, post-Romantic power. Marx's metaphor thinks it describes a truth; Dickens's images know they are metaphors. (p. 81)

Andrew Wilton's essay is simply striking for saying almost nothing of any novelty. Again I suspect it would have made for a delightful lecture for a general – and not especially well-informed – audience. Readers wishing to know about Turner and Venice would be much better advised to look at Ian Warrell's work in the catalogue *Turner and Venice* produced for the major Tate exhibition of 2003. As someone with very much less knowledge of music than of literature or the visual arts, I was especially eager to read Jeremy Dibble's piece on Venice and opera. However, I rapidly became frustrated both by its rather hackneyed treatment of the political rôle of opera (a topic which has been subject to much revision in Italian historiography), and the author's evident vagueness over 19th-century history. As I read I became irritated at a certain sparseness of footnotes in some of the more interesting passages. Inspired to delve further into the subject, I returned to Margaret Plant's study of Venice since 1797 (of which I have long been a qualified fan), and to an academic article praised by Dibble, James Johnson's 'The myth of Venice in nineteenth-century opera'. It soon became clear how quite long passages of Dibble's essay, often those without especially thorough footnotes,

were rather dependent on both Plant and Johnson, occasionally seeming little more than précis of their texts. Had I encountered something similar in a first-year undergraduate essay, I would have been inclined to offer some stern advice about appropriate academic practice. Especially strikingly was one quotation from Wagner, for which Dibble cites the Whittall translation of 1983; it is also cited by Margaret Plant. Dibble, however, gives the wrong page number in his footnote. He appears simply to have lifted the passage directly from Plant, but to have copied the bibliographic details and page number from the previous Plant endnote. I am sure that many scholars are tempted to plunder the work of others for quotations, but surely it is more honest to acknowledge that this is what one is doing. If one is going to lift quotations, it would be wise at least to get the page numbers right.

Dibble's slightly sloppy attitude to dealing with footnotes strikes me as emblematic of the whole enterprise. The essay – and it should be pointed out that its author is a specialist in British and Irish music – suggests that the Dibble is splashing about more than slightly out of his depth. This is an impression that I am left with in general by the weaker pieces in this collection. It is an impression underlined by the authors' supposed engagement with the Venetian historical context. The editors boast (p. 3) that they 'take account of emphases in recent historical studies of Venice'. Given this, it is slightly disturbing to see the works that they consider of significance. At various points essays turn to John Julius Norwich's extremely slight *Paradise of Cities* (which announces in its preface that the history of 19th-century Venice is of no interest), Peter Ackroyd's *Venice: Pure City* (well-written and entertaining, but scarcely a work of scholarship), Margaret Doody, *Tropic of Venice* (a classic case of highly articulate but fundamentally dilettante dabbling, often marked by the recycling of clichés), and Andrea Di Robilant's *Lucia: a Venetian Life* (a good story, well-told, but not a serious work). These are all highly readable, but for the most part of no value for the scholarly understanding of life, culture, and politics in the Venice of the Romantic and post-Romantic era or even of the reception of the idea of Venice in this period. In singling out Iain Fenlon and Elisabeth Crouzet-Pavan as key figures in the recent historiography, the editors further show how little they know of the historiography. Both Crouzet-Pavan and Fenlon are fine scholars, but they offer next to nothing on Venice after the Republic, which provides the context for the artists and writers, film makers and composers who form the focus of this book. In the meantime, the contributors bizarrely ignore two key multi-volume works – the *Storia della Cultura Veneta*, edited by Arnalidi and Pastore Stocchi, and the more recent monumental volumes of the *Storia di Venezia*, edited by Mario Isnenghi (champion of the study of Italian *lieux de mémoire*) and Stuart Woolf, which I would suggest as a first point of call for anyone wanting to find out more about Venice in the 200 years after 1797. Given the focus of the original lecture series on water – which periodically sneaks into the essays in a more-or-less contrived fashion – it is worrying that Piero Bevilacqua's *Venezia e le acque. Una metafora planetaria* appears nowhere either in the notes or bibliography. Equally it is unfortunate that *Venise, un spectacle d'eau et de pierres*, the brilliant thesis of the young French scholar Laetitia Levantis on French travellers' engagement with Venice from the Enlightenment to the mid 19th century has yet to be published as the authors of these essays could have learned much from her work in both its breadth and interpretative frameworks.

The charitable explanation for such staggering omissions in contextualisation would be that the contributors are linguistically challenged rather than simply indolent or ignorant. Given the bizarre manner in which the Italian title of Tiziano Scarpa's charming meditation on Venice, *Venezia è un pesce*, is rendered in Italian by Michael O'Neill (the endnote significantly refers only to the English translation) this would appear to be the case for at least one of the editorial team. Yet, even if an absence of a basic reading knowledge in Italian and German means that key works by Adolfo Bernardello, Andreas Gottsman, Brigitte Mazohl-Wallnig, Giandomenico Romanelli, Eva Cecchinato, Silvio Lanaro and Marino Zorzi are beyond the contributors' comprehension, there is no excuse for an almost flamboyant failure to glance at the appropriate anglophone historiography. Thus Alan Griffiths' and John Law's collection on the Venice of Rawdon Brown, Paul Ginsborg on 1848–9, my own work on Venice under the first Austrian domination, and in the years 1848–1915 are nowhere cited. Had the authors decided to play to their strengths and to examine literary and artistic matters as discrete studies in intertextuality this would have perhaps been less of a problem, although the apparent ignorance of the transnational and the specifically Venetian context in which the likes of Byron or Ruskin or James operated has clearly imposed very real limitations on some of the contributors' capacity

to write creatively and interestingly. However, given the editors' statement of intent, and their perhaps surprising desire to deal with the 'realities' of post-Republican Venice, their failure to pop to the library (or even to ask the advice of someone who knows a bit about the subject) is inexcusable. A brief engagement with the texts mentioned above would have provided the sort of historical background that would have prevented some of the sillier errors creeping into this book.

Given straitened library budgets, it is hard to see this book rushing off the shelves, especially given the many other excellent books that deal with similar material. Every time I turn to Tony Tanner's outstanding *Venice Desired* I am struck by something new and brilliant. Despite my own reservations about some of its conclusions, John Pemble's *Venice Rediscovered* still offers the best wider introduction. Margaret Plant's *Venice: Fragile City* is the book to which I still return for its almost encyclopaedic coverage. Manfred Pfister's and Barbara Schaff's *Venetian Views, Venetian Blinds: English Fantasies of Venice* remains a thought-provoking collection that probably sets the bench-mark for how one can approach the Venetian imaginary in an edited collection. Ian Warrell on Turner, and Robert Hewison on Ruskin will remain the definitive studies for decades to come. It is to these works that I would advise readers to turn first if they are interested in Venice's distinctive place in the Anglophone cultural imagination.[\(1\)](#)

Notes

1. Tony Tanner, *Venice Desired* (Oxford, 1992); John Pemble, *Venice Rediscovered* (Oxford, 1995); Margaret Plant, *Venice: Fragile City 1797-1997* (New Haven, CT, 2003); *Venetian Views, Venetian Blinds: English Fantasies of Venice*, ed. Manfred Pfister, Barbara Schaff (Amsterdam, 1999); *Turner and Venice*, ed. Ian Warrell (London, 2003); Robert Hewison, *Ruskin on Venice: 'The Paradise of Cities'* (New Haven, CT, 2009)[Back to \(1\)](#)

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