Chapter 7, pp. 131-37: After Wilde

But the Wilde affair was of a different order of magnitude, not least in the boost it gave to international tourism. Frank Harris no doubt exaggerates – 'Every train to Dover was crowded; every steamer to Calais thronged with members of the aristocratic and leisured classes . . .' – but the exodus at the time of Wilde's arrest was real. And the pressure on homosexuals, at least on those who could afford it, to spend as much time abroad as possible continued for another seventy years. Trying to convey the state of mind that took Somerset Maugham and so many others into exile, his friend Glenway Wescott explained to Maugham's biographer: 'What is very hard for your generation to appreciate is that Willie's generation lived in mortal terror of the Oscar Wilde trial'. Whatever the periodic changes in moral rhetoric, sex tourism had been tacitly accepted as a social safety-valve for over two hundred years; in the case of homosexuals, it was not merely sanctioned but enforced.

For those in fear of the law, sex was a renegade pursuit, and the consciousness of this put them at a sharp angle to much of what was taken for granted by the law-abiding majority. This was notably true of Norman Douglas, whose transformation from career diplomat to exiled rebel was set in motion by the discovery of his homosexuality. In Italy, and particularly in Florence, where, according to his friend Pino Orioli, the

young Florentines had gaberdine trousers specially tailored to show off their genitals, he found a congenial base from which to wage war on respectability. To the young Joe Ackerley, lunching with him at a café in 1922, he pointed out a youthful waiter: 'Hasn't got a hair on his body, Joe. It slips into him like a knife in butter. When are you coming out here to join us?' Candour is a mode of defiance. Piercing the surface of Douglas's old-world courtesy, it habitually pits the scandalous against the socially conventional.

For most of his long life Douglas used travel as a way of staying beyond the reach of the law without abandoning his sexual preferences. His declared policy when things got awkward was to 'hop it'. The countries of the Mediterranean afforded him a sexual freedom that was part of the wider freedom from the 'murk' of England. Returning to Sant'Agata in 1920, he wrote to Edward Hutton: 'What a relief to come to a place, a green oasis, with views over the sea on both sides, where everybody smiles at you and where you can eat and drink till you bust, and where all the boys look like angels, and mostly are! Yes; I shall be needing cricket belts very soon . . .'* It was an article of faith for Douglas, intimately related to the fact of his exile, that the conventional pieties of English domestic life – pieties about sexual morality, family values, childhood innocence, etc. – were a denial of life, joy and colour. English values needed to be replaced by Mediterranean ones, and the sexual freedom he could enjoy abroad was both a personal motive for his travels and a weapon of offence against these values.

Douglas is unusual among English travellers in admitting the role that sex plays in his response to foreign countries. His schooling in Germany was supplemented during his last two

* Of the need for cricket belts, Douglas's biographer Mark Holloway notes, 'These peculiarly English articles of dress played an almost ritualistic part as tokens of Douglas' esteem for his young friends'. (Holloway, 271).

years as a gymnasium student by regular visits to the town brothel, from which he graduated to a 'harem' of local girls. 'A sound education for boys of eighteen to twenty,' he concludes. 'If some of my young English friends could enjoy its advantages, they would not grow up to be the flabby nincompoops they are, in the matter of sex.' His dealings with a variety of pimps and procuresses in a variety of countries are chronicled with urbane relish, whether he's subscribing in advance for a girl in Russia (as Rousseau had done a hundred and fifty years earlier in Venice) or making arrangements to acquire a girl in Naples (only to find that he has acquired her brother as well). 'Why are such delectable places not commoner?' he asks of an agreeable café-brothel that cheered his stay in Smyrna in 1895.

Indignation at Douglas's behaviour, if that is what we feel, should not blind us to the ordinariness of what he describes. He merely recalls the facilities that were available to any traveller with the relatively small amount of money required to pay for them. In his recollections of the ageing Raffaele Amoroso, who 'pimped for the nobility and gentry, and also, on occasion, for royalty', there is a sense of the unexplored continents of desire to which the pimp gives access: 'Once you begin to indulge in certain caprices, he used to say, there are no limits to what can be done; *la libidine non ha fine*; and he made it his business to cater genially, and unscrupulously, and successfully, and rapaciously, for every taste'. Maupassant was one of those who, 'like other intelligent tourists', made use of Amoroso, a man '*dont les relations sont fort utiles aux voyageurs*', and in *Les Soeurs Rondoli* he wrote of the stupefying propositions such pimps would make: '*tout un programme de plaisirs sensuels compliqués d'articles vraiment inattendus: pour peu que vous aviez envie, ces gens-lá vous offriraient le Vésuve!*' Anything is available, anything. On foreign soil, in the company of men like Amoroso, the horizons of desire, at home so clearly defined and anxiously policed, are boundless.

Amoroso is a type familiar to tourists the world over, a man whose every word and gesture seem to erase the moral

certainties the traveller brings from home. Evelyn Waugh described him in the figure of Mr Bergebedgian, an Armenian hotelier encountered in Harar: 'I do not think I have ever met a more tolerant man; he had no prejudice or scruples of race, creed, or morals of any kind whatever; there were in his mind none of those opaque patches of principle; it was a single translucent pool of placid doubt; whatever splashes of precept had disturbed its surface from time to time had left no ripple; reflections flitted to and fro and left it unchanged.' For those who are anyway of subversive temper, such men, or sometimes women, are irresistible. Their very existence is a serene comment on the provisional nature of our moral structures. With disarming candour they acknowledge the raw material of human diversity and go about their business, offering a perspective from which moral distinctions become mere differences of taste and presentation. They have the uncomplicated outlook of the dressmaker who supplied Douglas with girls in Naples: 'a woman full of gaiety who took a fancy to me; like many others of her sex she did it for sport, for the fun of the thing. No doubt she earned a small commission; I have known English society ladies earn dreadfully big ones for performing the same service.'

The atmosphere that fosters such moral neutrality has an obvious appeal to those defined by their own society as morally unacceptable. Of his restlessness between the wars J.R. Ackerley wrote, 'This obsession with sex was already taking me, of course, to foreign countries, France, Italy, Denmark, where civilised laws prevailed and one was not in danger of arrest and imprisonment for the colour of one's hair. Many anxieties and strains were therefore lessened abroad.' It was a continuing refrain; a diary entry for June 1950 muses on whether, if his dog* were to die, he should 'pack up this life

* This was his beloved bitch, Queenie, who shared Ackerley's domestic life and from whom he was only parted during his occasional infidelities abroad.

and go to some Mediterranean country, where friendship is easy, and pick up a boy'. In England, as he grew older, he no longer thought much about sex, but 'whenever I went abroad I found myself pursuing it again. I did not go abroad much, I preferred to spend my holidays with my bitch, but on the few occasions that I left her, when she was getting old and inactive, and went to France, Italy, Greece and Japan, I looked for sexual adventure and found it.' The trip to Japan in 1960, of which we get glimpses in his letters to Forster and others, took him through the gay bars of Kyoto, where boys, 'sometimes in kimonos', were on offer in the tiny bar-rooms: '1 small bedroom at the back to which you can take one if you fancy him. 25/- about the lowest tariff.' To the traveller, kimonos, of course, make a difference.

Throughout the first half of the century, excursions of this kind, albeit on a more modest scale, were a standard reaction to the legal situation at home, but in one way their relative safety diminished the challenge they represented to orthodox behaviour. From this point of view, danger could be a necessary part of the experience – what Wilde called 'feasting with panthers'. Ackerley records an episode when he was having lunch with his father on a train to Liverpool. Towards the end of the meal a good-looking young waiter gave him a meaning look and a backward glance. Without more ado, Ackerley excused himself to his father and made for the lavatory in the wake of the boy: 'We entered together, quickly unbuttoned and pleasured each other. Then I returned to finish my coffee.' The brazenness that brings illicit sex to within inches of the ordinary world is a sexual strategy that both intensifies the thrill of the participants and mocks the blithe unawareness of everyone else. In this respect it must be rather like spying – as a number of our home-grown spies could probably have confirmed.

What drives the episode is a form of excitement, not necessarily homosexual, associated especially with the curious

blend of intimacy and anonymity that belongs to travel. We have only to think of the heroes of Victorian pornography grappling their way through bumpy coach rides and feverish train journeys, or the long tradition of shipboard romance, or the persistent legends of a 'mile-high club'. When John Osborne manages to have sex with his girlfriend on the coach back to Brighton, or John Updike patiently masturbates the woman next to him on a car journey back from New Hampshire, or Emmanuelle melts under a stranger's hands on the plane to Bangkok, or Erica Jong's heroine fantasises the zipless fuck on a speeding train, they are in one sense testifying to the basic affinity between travel and sex that is inscribed in our sexual vocabulary of roving eyes and wandering hands, of exploring, mounting, entering, penetrating, riding, galloping, coming, going all the way and so on; in another, they are linking this to the equally basic affinity between travel and rebellion. The moment of illicit sexual satisfaction is a brief erotic victory over the rest of the world, a successful raid on the kingdom of propriety.

This dangerous edge is not to everyone's taste. Ackerley's preference for finding sex abroad was common during a period when fear and repression among homosexuals were widespread. For those who could not move permanently abroad, or did not want to, there was the option of occasional forays such as those made by Ackerley himself and countless numbers of his contemporaries. At the time, this sort of tourism wore a different public face which obscured its motives, with the result that its importance to the history of twentieth-century travel has been underrated. In his influential book on the period between the wars, *The Auden Generation* (1976), Samuel Hynes explains the preoccupation with travel during the 1930s in terms of three factors: first, popular fashion; second, its appeal as a metaphor of a journey into the unknown; and third, the possibility of adventure. These are valid considerations, but they quite ignore what was

often the most pressing reason of all: the perilous sexuality of the traveller. Indeed, it is Valentine Cunningham's claim in *British Writers of the Thirties* (1988) that 'the British homosexuals and their boyfriends – Isherwood and Heinz, Howard and Toni, Spender and Tony Hyndman, John Lehmann – perpetually on the go, always *déraciné*, forever moving on and moved on . . . can be considered to stand as representatives of an extraordinarily restless era'. Homosexuals were one group of travellers whose motivation was indisputably sexual, and this perception of them as representative figures of the period suggests just how big a gap Hynes has left.