

PREFACE

'Abhorrent, green, slippery city,' D. H. Lawrence called it. Venice has never been loved by those who want to change the world. Prophets, moralists, people with missions and ambitions, tend to be impatient of its endless windings and quietly reflective surfaces. Its obsession with the past offends their sense of purpose. At once shabby and narcissistic, it attracts admirers of a different kind. 'The deposed, the defeated, the disenchanting, the wounded, or even only the bored,' observed Henry James, 'have seemed to find there something that no other place could give.'

Writers, many of them, they have served Venice well, and she has returned the compliment by remaining much as they described her. Plenty of cities have been preserved for us in literature; the eerie charm of Venice is that it has also, to a large extent, been preserved in reality. If James could again settle into his gondola, he would have no trouble in finding the polished steps of 'a little empty *campo* . . . with an old well in the middle, an old church on one side and tall Venetian windows looking down.' The shadowy buildings whose outlines were known to the young Casanova still rise around us as we walk by night through the Campo Sant'Angelo. Thomas Coryate, standing once more on the Rialto bridge, would recognize quite enough to bring back memories of his stay in 1608. Even a pilgrim like Felix Fabri would be able to renew acquaintance with churches he visited on his way to the Holy Land at the end of the fifteenth century.

For us, on the edge of a different millennium, it is still possible to sit outside a café in Venice, read their words, look up and nod in recognition. In this extravagant theatre we can

with equal ease find settings for the murder of a Renaissance prince or the seduction of an eighteenth-century nun, the execution of a dissolute friar or the melancholy thoughts of a Victorian poet.

The range of material is vast. 'A man to visit Italy and not to write a book about it,' remarked Landor. 'Was ever such a thing heard of?' Not often, it seems. Readers will no doubt be dismayed by many omissions. Detailed accounts of processions, festivals and ceremonies have been kept to a minimum, as have descriptions of buildings. I have usually preferred byways to highways: there will be no tour of the Doge's Palace, no guide to the mosaics of St Mark's, no helpful words on the paintings in the Frari.

This is a guide-book, but it is only in part about the familiar city of churches, palaces and canals. From certain kinds of writing, often by the sort of people James had in mind, another Venice emerges – elusive, unwholesome, perhaps a little unsafe. This other Venice owes more to myth than to brick and stone. Tainted with past iniquity, sluttish under her regal garb, she invites a kind of surrender that can tempt even the most respectable. Today we scarcely notice, for the place is ill-adapted to the urgency of modern tourism; its first requirement is time. Only to those who linger here after they have seen the sights, knowing that they should have left, does it reveal itself. In putting the book together, I have tried to recover something of this ambiguous appeal.

The chapters are arranged in the form of six walks which will take the determined reader into every part of the city. The final chapter touches on a few of the neighbouring islands. For those who would like to follow the suggested routes, maps are provided. Alternatively, and delightfully, one can trust to luck. Anyone who stays in Venice long enough or goes back often enough will sooner or later stumble upon everything mentioned in these pages.

CAMPIELLO BARBARO

From the Salute we can walk past the church and campo of San Gregorio and then on to the Ponte San Gregorio mentioned by Symonds. A short way beyond the bridge, ivy spills over the walls of the ancient Palazzo Dario, where Henri de Régnier lived in 1899 and 1901. In the beautiful little Campiello Barbaro, with its picture shops and its three gaunt trees, there is a plaque to his memory on the wall beside the curving bridge. Behind are the dark red walls of the palace. The inscription tells us that he wrote '*venezianamente*', 'Venetianly'. It is an apt expression. Certainly his novel *L'Altana* and the *Esquisses vénitiennes* are penetrated by the atmosphere of the place:

As I write these words, the evening light thickens over the Grand Canal, the bells sound under a grey November sky. From my table by the window I see the gondolas glide over the water with their black Harlequins at the stern. Here and there a light goes up in the façade of a palace.⁶

Another time he will look out at the silent waters of the little canal that runs alongside the Campiello Barbaro and note the gondolas, stripped of their cushions and *felzi*, waiting idly for the spring to come again. Venice in general and the Palazzo Dario in particular offered a perfect context for the seductive mixture of melancholy and nostalgia which was his characteristic vein. When he catches sight through his window of a group of strangers, Baedekers in hand, asking directions of a policeman, he merely hopes that they won't seek out, through this tangle of streets, the *traghetto* San Gregorio; for it is here, 'in this district so melancholy and so solitary . . . that the house stands in which I live – happier than a Doge.'⁷

An earlier inhabitant of the Palazzo Dario, from 1838–1842,

was Ruskin's friend Rawdon Brown, a later one, in the 1970s, Kit Lambert, manager of the rock group The Who. Between the scrupulous antiquarian and the flamboyant, dope-ravaged Lambert there could scarcely have been a wider gap. But they were both lonely men to whom happiness did not come easily, and both of them were happy in Venice. While Florence was a natural resort in the nineteenth century for exiled couples, Venice became increasingly the haven of individuals. A string of writers and artists from the late nineteenth century onwards – men as different as Symonds, Brown, James, Proust, Corvo – seemed to find in its passivity and its decadence and its ambiguous femininity an atmosphere that allowed them to breathe more freely. Often, in spite of their sociability, they were solitary figures, often homosexual. Whereas other writers passed through Venice and admired what is to be admired, these were caught in her toils. And they wrote of the city with corresponding intensity – about the beauties she displays, but more particularly about the less familiar beauties that she half-conceals.

Rawdon Brown had come here in the summer of 1833 to look for the burial place of Thomas Mowbray (see p. 114), and for the next fifty years, until his death, he stayed:

I scarcely wake in the morning but I thank God that he has let me spend my days in Venice; and sometimes of an evening, when I go to the Piazzetta, I am afraid to shut my eyes, lest when I open them I should find it had all been a dream.⁸

In the 'Sonnet to Rawdon Brown' Browning pictures him about to return to England for a last sight of it before he dies. On the point of leaving, he looks back at Venice: 'What a sky, / A sea, this morning! One last look! Good-by, / Cà Pesaro . . .'
He never leaves.

SAN LORENZO

The bridge in front of the Scuola leads across to the Fondamenta di San Giorgio degli Schiavoni. A short way down this a calle to the left takes us round to the church of San Lorenzo, set in a plain and peaceful campo with five trees and five benches. Today the church, closed for restoration, presents a façade of crazed brick ridges which in its decrepitude can look oddly appealing. It was here, four and a half centuries ago, that Marco Polo was buried.

In a city notorious for the laxity of its convents, San Lorenzo already enjoyed a reputation more colourful than most. Since upper-class women were frequently dispatched to a convent for financial reasons rather than to answer any vocation, it is unsurprising that chastity to many seemed tiresome. It was often the case that younger sons who might have made husbands for them were being firmly directed to the brothel rather than the marriage bed, in order to avoid any dispersal of the family's estate. As the sixteenth-century scholar Roger Ascham noted in *The Scholemaster*: 'I learned, when I was at Venice that there it is counted good pollicie, when there be foure or five brethren of one familie, one onelie to marie: and all the rest to waulter with as little shame in open lecherie, as Swyne do here in the common myre.'²³ The result was inevitable. By the fourteenth century the Council had already started passing laws to discourage the fornications of libertine nuns and their partners, pleasantly called *monachini*. Convent chaplains had to be fifty years old or more, while confessors, by a nice distinction, had to be at least sixty.

The effects of these measures seem to have been disappointing. For successive centuries Venetian convents remained a byword for dissolute living. To get some idea of their atmosphere, we need only look at Francesco Guardi's painting in the Ca' Rezzonico of a convent *parlatorio*. It catches precisely the

tone that delighted Charles de Brosses when he visited the city in the eighteenth century. Having briefly described the squabble that was going on between three convents as to which should provide a mistress for the Papal nuncio who was soon to arrive, he adds:

In truth, it would be to the nuns that I should most readily turn if I had to make a long stay here. All those I have seen through the grate at mass, chatting and laughing together as long as the service lasted, have struck me as good-looking and habited in such a way as to highlight their beauty. They have a charming little *coiffure* and a simple dress, but one that is of course perfectly white, revealing their shoulders and breasts to just the same degree as the dresses in the Roman style worn by our actresses.²⁴

Across something over four centuries the convent of San Lorenzo recurs in the Venetian archives in one disreputable context after another. Its most famous graduate was probably Maria Da Riva, a patrician nun whose passionate affair with the French ambassador, Froulay, caused a diplomatic incident. Disguised only by a mask, Maria would leave San Lorenzo at night, accompany Froulay to the casinos, and then return to her convent with the dawn. When the State Inquisitors took exception to this and forbade her to meet the ambassador, Froulay ignored the prohibition and indignantly complained to Paris about his treatment. In the end, it was only by transferring Maria from San Lorenzo to a convent in Ferrara that the Inquisitors managed to resolve the situation – temporarily. Before long the incorrigible nun fell in love with an Italian colonel, fled to Bologna, and there got married.

In spite of everything, there was one event in its history which San Lorenzo could look back on with some complacency.

The summer of 1360 had not been a happy time for the convent. In June three men were imprisoned and fined for sleeping with some of the nuns, and then a month later another group of nuns was caught receiving love letters smuggled in by five women who were publicly whipped. It is a measure of divine tolerance that in the same year one of Venice's most

celebrated miracles should have been staged on the convent's doorstep.

If you stand on the bridge at the far end of the campo, you will still be able to recognize enough of the surrounding architecture to identify the site of the *Miracle of the Holy Cross* from Gentile Bellini's painting in the Accademia. (In particular, the tall building which rises behind the house at the end of the fondamenta is unmistakable.) The Cross in question had fallen into the canal and then miraculously floated to the surface again so that it could be recovered. Bellini depicts the episode at the moment when a swimming prelate triumphantly holds up the Cross to the watching crowds on the Fondamenta di San Lorenzo.

To readers of the modern thriller the fondamenta will be familiar for other reasons, for it is here, just behind Bellini's line of spectators, that we find the entrance to police headquarters. Among the weary heroes and frightened villains who have passed this way, there are few who leave much impression on the mind. With its twisting alleys and sunless courtyards Venice seems to offer a perfect setting for the business of the crime-writer, but it has on the whole produced a disappointing crop.